

# Mental health screening in schools raises controversy

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.17.14

Word Count **847**

Level **1010L**



In this handout photo, Matthew Palma (left) plays with Stephanie Dana-Schmidt during a play therapy session at school in West Palm Beach, Fla. Matthew attended play sessions as part of Primary Project, which screens kindergarten kids and first-graders in Palm Beach County. AP Photo/Handout

**MIAMI** — After his father was diagnosed with cancer, a 15-year-old Illinois teen spun out of control. He skipped school, yelled at teachers and punched holes in walls. Sometimes, he retreated to his room paralyzed by an overwhelming sadness.

When a school administrator suggested he seek help, the student said he didn't need it. Eventually diagnosed with major depression, he agreed to participate in group therapy sessions at his school.

As school violence appears to be on the increase, experts say many teens are struggling with untreated mental illnesses. However, schools are not required to look for early symptoms of mental illness and behavioral problems. This is despite the fact that U.S. health officials recommended this nearly a decade ago. An Associated Press review shows that mental health screenings vary widely from state to state, as well as within school districts. There's no agreement on what to look for, at what age to check, or even if schools should screen at all.

This "doesn't make any sense from a public health perspective," said Mike Dennis. He teaches health care professionals in 49 states how to diagnose and treat people with mental illness and substance abuse. He pointed out that schools screen for all kinds of rare diseases. But they don't screen for common behavioral disorders. When problems are caught early, it's easier to treat them. Waiting can be tremendously costly to the child, the family and society.

### **"I Think It Is A Good Idea"**

The 15-year-old Illinois student was not diagnosed through school. But at his school therapy sessions, he's learning to identify what sets him off and how to calm himself down before he acts out.

"I think it is a good idea because a lot of people think they don't need help but they actually do," said the teen.

It's unknown how many schools offer mental health screenings.

But Baltimore and Chicago have strong screening and treatment programs. Teachers in one South Florida school district screen children as young as kindergarten. They fill out a short questionnaire about each child. In Minnesota, students answer surveys about drug use and depression. In Olympia, Wash., 21,000 students were screened for substance abuse and mental health problems in 2010.

Mental health problems typically start during the teenage years. If left untreated, they can lead to substance abuse, dropping out of school and, in adulthood, difficulty keeping steady jobs and relationships. Yet many people are not diagnosed until later in life. The U.S. Surgeon General reports that 10 percent of children and teenagers suffer from serious emotional and mental disorders. These problems can have a big effect on their daily lives.

### **A Missed Opportunity In One Case**

However, universal mental health screening in schools can raise other complicated issues.

Linda Juszczak is the president of the School-Based Health Alliance. She said that people need to be very cautious when they talk about screening all school children. Some students will be falsely diagnosed with mental illnesses. With others, the screenings will fail to pick up problems. "The consequences to that are big," she said.

Others say school-wide screenings could uncover mental health problems that schools can't treat.

Behavioral Health System Baltimore has developed a system that targets the most at-risk kids. Teams identify children who may need help. They look at factors like whether children have a parent in prison or a parent who struggles with substance abuse. They also look for those struggling with schoolwork and acting out, especially those who repeatedly skip school or get suspended.

In South Florida, a fourth-grader was hospitalized for a week last August after threatening to attack a teacher's face with a pencil. The child was diagnosed with two different mental disorders.

Dr. Seth Bernstein, a psychologist who consulted on the case, called it a missed opportunity. The child was never screened for emotional or behavioral issues. A year earlier, a program that offered

classroom support and family counseling had been cut at his school and 69 other elementary schools in Palm Beach County.

### **Medication Vs. Education Support**

In contrast, Matthew Palma, 10, attended play sessions as a kindergartener as part of a project in Palm Beach County. It screens 3,000 kindergarten kids and first-graders each year for things like having trouble making friends.

Matthew's mother says his confidence improved dramatically. He isn't afraid to talk to adults or raise his hand in class.

However, even when services are offered, some parents are reluctant.

Michelle Anderson said her son's third-grade teacher at an Iowa elementary school referred him for a mental health screening. A psychiatrist diagnosed him with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, commonly known as ADHD, and prescribed medication. She took him off the medicine after he came home from school sobbing and overwhelmed.

The school, though, refused to give him extra support in the classroom. Earlier this year, he was prescribed an antidepressant. But she never filled the prescription after her pharmacist warned of potentially serious side effects.

"It just seems like they want to medicate rather than provide education support," said Anderson, who is now home-schooling her son.

## Quiz

- 1 According to the article, which of these is NOT a possible consequence of not treating teenage mental health issues?
- (A) difficulty keeping a steady job
  - (B) substance abuse
  - (C) teen pregnancy
  - (D) dropping out of school

- 2 According to the article, what is one reason why some people do not support mental health screenings in schools?
- (A) They worry that some children will be given the wrong diagnosis.
  - (B) They predict that mental health screenings will hurt children's self-esteem.
  - (C) They believe mental health screenings will not improve students' behavior.
  - (D) They believe mental health screenings are more appropriately done in private offices.

- 3 Why does the author include the fourth paragraph in the section "A Missed Opportunity In One Case"?

*Behavioral Health System Baltimore has developed a system that targets the most at-risk kids. Teams identify children who may need help. They look at factors like whether children have a parent in prison or a parent who struggles with substance abuse. They also look for those struggling with schoolwork and acting out, especially those who repeatedly skip school or get suspended.*

- (A) to make a prediction about mental health screenings in the future
  - (B) to offer an outcome to mental health screenings
  - (C) to describe the problems at-risk children create at school
  - (D) to give an example of system that identifies at-risk kids
- 4 Read the first paragraph of the article. How does this paragraph contribute to the development of ideas in the article?
- (A) by presenting the problem through an example
  - (B) by identifying the causes of mental illness
  - (C) by hinting at solutions to mental illness
  - (D) by giving a list of important statistics