Children's Mental Health Awareness Day 2020

Introduction to the Toolkit

What this toolkit is about and why we created this

At the Milwaukee Coalition for Children's Mental Health (CCMH), we believe strongly that every person who crosses the life of a child or their caregiver(s) has an opportunity to make a positive impact. We wanted to create something to share with our community for this day to help them do just that. At CCMH, we chose to focus our efforts on early childhood, where we have the best chance of promoting optimal child development – those early building blocks – and helping parents and providers reframe behaviors and identify potential delays that can lead to larger problems later in childhood, and even adulthood.

Why: The earliest years of a child's life lay the foundation for all of the development that comes afterward. These experiences, good or bad, can impact children throughout their entire lives. More neural connections are created in the first 1000 days of a child's life than at any other time. In fact, the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard recently found that more than ***one million*** of these connections form ***every second***.

We know that children (even very young children!) experience mental health disorders at the same rate as any other age group including adults. And we also know that there is a two- to four year window between the onset of symptoms and development into a full-blown, diagnosable mental illness. These are the times where we can step in and make a difference. This toolkit helps us understand a few of the ways we can do that.

This year's toolkit shines a light on how we typically react to children with challenging behaviors, which are often a sign of underlying developmental or mental health concerns. Too many children (and their families) experience significant disruption because of exclusionary discipline, starting in preschool. Often this is due to externalizing behaviors and our cultural norms in addressing them. Expulsions from early childhood education settings and suspensions from elementary school classrooms upend a child's rhythm and security and can plunge families into difficulty, finding child care while also caring for other children while maintaining employment. This is an injustice in our society, as it disproportionately impacts children of color, especially African American boys. This is why it is so important that we share the messages of how all of us have a stake and a responsibility in making sure all kids have positive experiences early in life. We all can make a difference.

Who: This toolkit is aimed at the people who are most involved in early care and education: the teachers, caregivers, administrators, and funders. These years are the most critical time to intervene to ensure we are building healthy brains for all of our children. As parents, caregivers, childcare workers, and others who intersect with young children and their families, we have a duty to do what we can to support healthy development. Our aim is to help us unlearn these current norms and adapt to the

changing narratives around exclusionary in early childhood education settings. It also helps to reframe how we think about disruptive behavior and how we react to it.

Early preschool expulsion and suspension leads to different health outcomes for different population types and can lead to gaps like lack of access to early learning educational experiences which affects the mental health as well as future career opportunities of the children as well as their families.

When: May 7th is Children's Mental Health Awareness Day. Started in 2005 by SAMHSA (the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), it is a day to raise awareness about children's mental health and how we can support our children who are facing serious mental health issues and their families. It is also a day to highlight where we can intervene in a child's life to prevent serious mental illness and to identify and intervene as early as possible in providing care.

How to use this toolkit and make a difference

This Toolkit combines research on early childhood development, children's mental health, early childhood education, discipline, parenting, communications, and nonprofit administration. We know what works to prevent exclusionary discipline.

This toolkit puts it all together in a way that these messages can motivate action. The messages use values and metaphors that research has shown are effective at getting through to people, avoiding traps in thinking and filling in gaps of knowledge.

If you are a teacher, caregiver, administrator, or funder of early childhood education, then the first place to check out are the fact sheets specific to you. The back side of each fact sheet has tangible action steps you can do now and steps you can plan to do in order to have an impact for families and early childhood providers.

Otherwise, you can start by sharing messages to your social media pages, especially Facebook, using our suggested calendar of messages that starts April 30th and runs May 9th. This toolkit is suggestive not prescriptive, so use your own resources, pictures, timeline, etc.

For everyone, take time to read the stories from Coalition members. These are parents as well as wellness specialists, community workers, and early childhood leaders sharing stories of working with kids, emotions, and behaviors. You can see the importance of talking openly, practicing patience, and support because all parents needs support.

If you are unsure about a term, then check out the glossary, or useful words to know section. If you want to dive deeper in a topic, then check out the resources or the research behind it in the references. You can find more useful tools, tips, and tricks on our website at www.mkekids.org. Spread the word. Kids (and adults) do well if they can. All of us can support them.