

What's wrong, and how do we help? Getting children the right mental-health support.

By **Valerie Strauss** March 5, 2018 *The Washington Post*



One in every 5 young people between the ages of 13 and 18 live with a mental-health condition — yet the average delay between the onset of symptoms and intervention is between eight and 10 years. Those statistics come from the National Institute of Mental Health, and they underscore the problems facing parents as well as educators who are raising and/or teaching children who have untreated mental illnesses.

A new study in the [March issue](#) of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* found that more than half of the children in the United States who receive mental-health care now get it in school settings, and that if school-based personnel are properly trained and supported, such services can be effective. But many schools in high-poverty communities don't have the resources to hire, train and support people who can provide these services to kids.

This post is a primer for parents about how they could approach finding help for a child with a mental illness. It was written by Rosalind Wiseman, a parenting educator and best-selling author of books including [“Queen Bees and Wannabes,”](#) a look at high school social cliques that became the basis for the Tina Fey-written movie “Mean Girls.

She has written a number of other books, including [“Queen Bee Moms and Kingpin Dads,”](#) and a novel for young adults titled [“Boys, Girls and Other Hazardous Materials.”](#) She created the [Owning Up Curriculum](#), a program that teaches children and adults to take responsibility for unethical behavior whether they are bystanders, perpetrators or victims, and she runs an organization she founded called Cultures of Dignity, which works with communities to direct conversations about the physical and emotional well-being of young people.

By Rosalind Wiseman

We used to think that only “at-risk” kids had mental-health problems. But if you are raising or educating children today, it’s understandable to worry about their emotional and psychological well being. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control report what many parents and people in education already know: “At risk” kids can be any kid, in any neighborhood, in any family. I work with children and teens around the country, and our children are remarkably resilient. But just think for a moment about what many of them are experiencing. Middle school students in Dallas shared with me last week that they think about school shootings every day. High school students in every state where I work say they are crushed with anxiety trying to “keep up.”

[The National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) shows that 56 percent more teens experienced a major depressive episode in 2015 than 2010. Forty-six percent more 15-to-19-year-olds committed suicide in 2015 than in 2007 — and 2½ times as many 12-to-14-year-olds killed themselves.

These are terrifying statistics for any parent. Yet it’s complicated. Kids will tell you “I’m fine” when they’re not. Or they can be inconsolable one day and then put it behind them the next. The process can make you feel as if you’re losing your mind.

And no one can prepare you when you really worry about your kids, including those times when you can’t sleep at night because you know what the problem is but you don’t know how to help them, or they’re miserable but won’t tell you why. You can be so torn between love, anger and frustration that it’s hard to know how to get the help they need.

You need a road map to help you and your child through the process.

Here are four fundamental principles to always keep in mind:

- 1 Model that asking for help is a strength and something you respect.
- 2 Give them as much control of the process as possible.
- 3 Control your natural urge to “fix” the problem.
- 4 Have faith in your child.

These principles also mean letting go — probably during a time you want to hold on as tight as you can. You have a special relationship with your child; that means when your child is upset, angry, frustrated or sad, they shouldn't be dealing with your emotional reactions to their problems.

Your anger, anxiety or advice to fix the problem can be a distraction or even exacerbate the problem, and that's why you are sometimes not the best person to give them advice. Ironically, the fact that we are parents sometimes stops us from being the best resource for our children. Our love and anxiety blind us to the most effective course of action.

Finding a professional

Choosing a mental-health professional takes a lot of effort. When you find one, you can be so grateful that you immediately sign your child up — whether or not the person is a good fit for them. As desperate to fix the problem as you may be, slow down. How you approach finding the right person and including your child in the process will go a long way in making your child feel that seeking help is worthwhile.

What if your child doesn't want to see anyone?

Many young people I work with don't want to be seen going into a counselor's office at school. Likewise, many are reluctant to see a therapist. It's scary to ask for help, in part because mental-health problems are still often seen as a character weakness. Some of the high-achieving young people I work with tell me they don't want to get professional help because it will hurt their chances of being considered for leadership positions in school. No matter what the reason, if you are facing a wall of resistance, here's what you can say:

Everyone goes through times in life where problems or feelings are just too big to handle on your own. It's not weak to ask for help. It actually takes a tremendous amount of courage. You're going through a tough time, and you need to talk to someone who knows more about how to handle these problems that we do. I know I can't force you to talk to someone, and I know some therapists aren't good at their jobs. I am asking you to do this: I'll do some research and find a few people in the area who work with people your age. I'll give you a list of people to choose from and you make the choice of who you want to see. You don't need to see them forever. Just check it out a few times and see if you can find someone you think is worth your time. We will just take this one step at a time.

How do you find an expert your child will connect with?

- 1 Research therapists who specialize in children and adolescent mental health. Check online whether they're listed in [Psychology Today's](#) therapist network. It's a great resource because you can read what the therapist says about their approach.
- 2 Contact each one of them to ask whether they will have a short conversation on the phone with your child — more than 10 minutes — to see whether it's a good fit.

- 3 Don't assume you have to find a therapist that looks like your child. If at all possible, include in your list men and women, an older person and a younger person. You never know who your child will connect with.
- 4 Ask your child to prepare their own questions so that they have a voice in the process. But just in case they don't want to do that, here are a few they can use:
 - How would the therapist describe their style?
 - How does the therapist see their role between parent and child? For example, at what point will they notify a parent about something that has come up in a session? How do they understand mandatory reporting? You want someone who has a clear understanding of the boundaries between therapist, parent and child.
 - What are the therapist's areas of specialization?
 - Why do they work with teens? What do they find most rewarding? What do they find most challenging?

In addition, here are some guidelines to help you:

Be aware of where you are. Even if you're only there to pick up your child, don't wait in the outside office area. Your child will think you are eavesdropping on their conversation — even if you aren't. It's also possible that you aren't the first thing your child wants to see after a session, so just wait outside or in the car. If you have to talk to the therapist, inform your child when you're doing it and ask them how you should so they feel respected.

Respect their privacy. Assure your child that while you would like to know how the process is working for them, you won't ask them a "million" questions after a session. If your child wants to tell you something, that's awesome. And whatever they do say, don't take it personally. That's hard, but remember that listening is being prepared to be changed by what you hear. You may learn a lot. Our children are often our greatest teachers.

Find resources and support for yourself. Taking care of yourself and having a place to process your own feelings is critical. You're not just doing this for your child's welfare, you're doing it for your own as well.

None of this takes away how scary this experience can be, but be assured that you are making it better by getting them the help they need, how they need it. Remember that these are the moments when your child needs you to be by their side (maybe giving them a little bit of space) as they walk down this difficult path, knowing that they are loved, listened to and supported.

Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog. She writes and researches pieces for the blog that often reflect the changes underway in the American public education system. Follow [@valeriestrauss](https://twitter.com/valeriestrauss)