



The Institute of Family Living

“I Wish Someone Had Noticed”

Let's Hold On To Our Youth!

“I wish someone had noticed, or when they did notice, that they would have connected the dots...” — a reflection made by a young client who spent many years addressing mental health issues that first presented in childhood.

As IFL therapists, we are often consulted by families whose children or youth are suffering from anxiety and depression or some other form of mental health concern. The parents are struggling to know how to best support their family member and to be a nurturing parent.

Approximately 70 percent of young adults living with mental health problems report that their symptoms started in childhood (Canadian Mental Health Association [CMA], 2013). The CMA notes that “mental illness is increasingly threatening the lives of our children,” with the youth suicide rate in Canada being the third highest in the industrialized world. Next to accidents, suicide is the second leading cause of death in Canada for youth ages 15 to 24 (Health Canada, 2002). Given these sobering statistics, it is important that we seriously consider the issues of youth mental health in our communities.

With cell phones, tablets, laptops, and iPads, our youth live complicated lives, navigating not only a deluge of information from the internet, but also increasing peer and societal pressures. In addition, Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., author of *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*, argues, “we now know that what adolescents experience is primarily the result of changes in the development of the brain.”*

Siegel notes that the amount of growth and maturing in a person during adolescence (ages 14 to 24) far exceeds other developmental stages. Important brain circuits are wired to set up youth for adulthood. This extensive amount of development complicates the life of a teenager, as well as being confusing to the adults who seek to parent, educate, care for, and understand them.

It is crucial during this important and vulnerable stage that youth are connected securely to safe adults, who can both support them in their accelerated biological development and also be attuned to note and attend to any concerns in their behaviour which may arise.

Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté, authors of *Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers*, identify the need for parents to be a safe base for growing children, thus providing both a secure connection and home environment.

Youth need to be able to be authentic and vulnerable with their parents, siblings, and safe adults. Such connection serves as a preventative factor against “psychological harm” for youth who may engage in destructive or self-harm behaviour and as a defence to mitigate their vulnerable feelings.

The CMA notes that symptoms of youth mental health problems can include: abuse of drugs and/or alcohol, changes in school performance, falling grades, an inability to cope with daily problems and activities, changes in sleeping and/or eating habits, or low self-esteem and negative body image.

To clarify whether these behaviours may be indicating a mental health issue, parents or concerned adults should both seek to understand the experiences of youth, through non-judgmental and caring conversations, and to consult with a physician, therapist, psychologist, guidance counsellor, or teacher with their concerns, to determine whether therapy or treatment may be required.

The young client quoted above also remarked that:

“I wish someone had actually taken the time to listen to me and seen that there were some serious underlying issues. Maybe then, decades later, I wouldn’t be struggling to deal with the long-term mental health issues I carry with me every day.”

His experience emphasizes the importance of parents and caring adults to engage and connect with the youth in our lives. Understanding youth in their context allows parents, teachers, physicians, therapists, pastors, guidance counsellors, or youth leaders to provide care, support, and/or interventions, facilitating healing therapy or treatment.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada offers a seminar titled Mental Health First Aid for Youth, a helpful resource for youth workers, teachers, therapists, and faith communities.

Neufeld and Maté argue for the need for “attachment villages,” communities of adults providing safe people and spaces, in order to counter societal influences and to be a preventative factor for young people. Schools, community centres, faith communities, and service agencies can act as attachment villages, serving to support and care for vulnerable youth and preventing possible dangerous or tragic behaviours and events.

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*Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain. 2013, p. 2.

Suggested Websites

Canadian Mental Health Association: www.cmha.ca
Mental Health Commission of Canada www.mentalhealthcommission.ca
Children’s Mental Health Ontario www.kidsmentalhealth.ca
Kids Help Phone www.kidshelpphone.ca
Youth Unlimited, Youth Culture www.paulrobertson.ca

Suggested Books

Chap Clark & Steve Rabey. When Kids Hurt: Navigating the Adolescent Maze. 2009.
Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. Parenting from the Inside Out: How a Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive. 2003.
Gordon Neufeld, Ph.D., & Gabor Maté, M.D. Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers. 2004.



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