



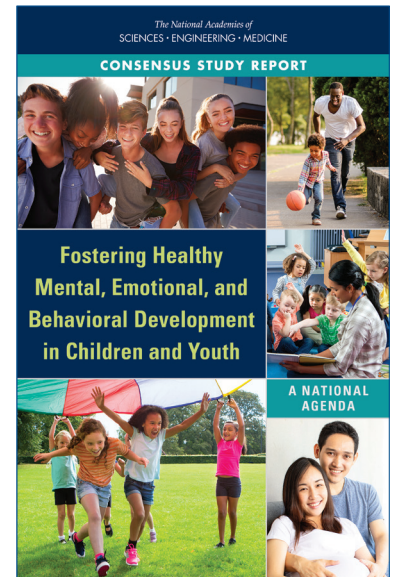
September 2019

## Fostering Healthy Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Development in Children and Youth: A National Agenda

In the past decade, research has strengthened understanding of influences on mental, emotional, and behavioral (MEB) development in young people and how healthy development can be fostered. But the United States has not taken full advantage of this knowledge base. Children and youth and their families still struggle with a range of MEB challenges and rates of disorder remain high despite a decade of efforts to intervene. In fact, rates of depression, suicide, and self-harm have been increasing.

MEB disorders not only impose suffering on individuals and their families, they are also costly to society, contributing to rates of school dropout, incarceration, and homelessness. Young people who grow into healthy and productive adults are ready to thrive as individuals and contribute as family members, workers, and citizens. Investing in supports for healthy development strengthens families and communities but also promises economic savings and benefits.

The report *Fostering Healthy Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Development in Children and Youth: A National Agenda* (2019) from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine urges the creation of a broad-based effort to improve MEB health for children and youth, organized under the rubric Decade of Children and Youth, led by the Department of Health and Human Services. The initiative would build awareness of the social and economic gains associated with healthy child development and engage multiple sectors of society in working toward that goal.



### FOSTERING MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT

MEB development is the product of complex neurobiological processes that interact with characteristics of the physical and social environment, beginning before conception and continuing through and beyond adolescence. Children's social and physical environment literally shapes their brains, and consequently also shapes their behaviors and emotions.

Growing evidence of this interplay among biological, social, and environmental influences has profound implications for the design of interventions to promote healthy development. Researchers have documented evidence for strategies that lower risk factors and support protective factors in order to influence outcomes for young people.

Effective approaches include:

**Strategies designed to support the mental health of parents and affect the behavior and attitudes of parents and other caregivers.** These strategies promote positive outcomes for children and youth both by enhancing parenting skills and by promoting caregivers' own health and well-being. Examples of these strategies include:

- screening caregivers for risks and offering programs to promote healthy parenting and family bonding;
- screening women of reproductive age, pregnant women, and mothers for depression and providing treatment;
- providing substance use counseling and treatment for parents; and
- providing parent education programs, such as for building awareness of sexual abuse risks.

**Programs delivered in school settings.** Examples are programs to:

- teach children in preschool through grades K-12 social and emotional skills, including mindfulness;
- promote a positive school environment;
- promote access to services for low-resource populations and communities; and
- help young people develop resilience to manage risks such as bullying, substance use, and suicidal thoughts.

**Use of primary health care settings to promote healthy MEB development for children and prevent risks for disorders.** Examples include:

- preconception and prenatal care that mitigates risks for unhealthy fetal development, such as exposure to tobacco and alcohol;
- parenting education and guidance and screening for signs of risks to mental, emotional, and behavioral development;
- multidisciplinary care, in which nurses and nurse practitioners, social workers, and behaviorally trained practitioners collaborate with physicians to provide care in a single setting; and
- preventive and therapeutic attention to the behavioral needs of children with serious chronic disorders.

These findings build on an existing base of knowledge about effective interventions but researchers have also significantly advanced understanding of how to implement effective interventions so they can have meaningful effects at the population level. Successful implementation is a process that depends on an interactive system with the capacity to support, track the outcomes of, and continuously improve an intervention. Key elements of a system include:

- active engagement of stakeholders (community members, service providers, funders, policy makers, purveyors, and researchers);
- a well-trained community workforce that is provided with ongoing professional development opportunities;
- active leadership within organizations responsible for delivering the intervention;
- the development of strong community coalitions that can muster sustained support for the intervention and provide community-level leadership; and
- a system for monitoring the quality and outcomes of implementation efforts, barriers to successful implementation, trends in risk and protective factors and other influences on mental, emotional, and behavioral development, and other relevant data.

## **A COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL AGENDA**

Achieving meaningful improvements in MEB health will require a comprehensive, integrated approach that takes advantage of the full range of research findings about salient influences, effective strategies, and what is required for their successful implementation.

MEB health will not become a national priority by happenstance: The will to make it a priority and thoughtful alignment of new and existing efforts at the community, state, and national levels will be needed. A broad-based

effort—which could be organized under the rubric Decade of Children and Youth and led by the Department of Health and Human Services—could build awareness of the social and economic gains associated with healthy child development and engage multiple sectors of society in working toward that goal. The report offers recommendations to support this effort.

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** Relevant federal agencies should lead and collaborate with agencies at the state and local levels, as well as private partners, including national and local foundations and the business community, in coordinating a highly visible national effort to make the promotion of healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral (MEB) development a national priority, such as by designating a Decade of Children and Youth. These agencies should:

- articulate specific national goals and objectives in support of healthy MEB development throughout the life cycle, encompassing health promotion and disorder prevention;
- develop an integrated plan for longitudinal data collection and coordination and analysis of federal surveys, administrative data, and vital statistics that provides a comprehensive approach to measuring and tracking child and adolescent MEB health; and
- encourage and support the integration and coordination of new and existing efforts to pursue those goals and objectives at the federal, state, and local levels, using coordinating and convening capacities, pooling of resources, funding of outcomes analyses, regulatory options, and other powers and incentives.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** Relevant federal agencies should use their program creation, regulatory, and other policy capabilities to promote healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral (MEB) development and mitigate risks to MEB health by, for example:

- developing and disseminating guidance for use by states and local jurisdictions in delivering effective promotion and prevention interventions—including preconception, prenatal, and postnatal care services; two-generation (including parent MEB health and parenting) interventions; preschool and school interventions; and universal screening for risk and protective factors—and in ensuring access to affordable treatment for parents and children to reduce risk;
- developing both guidance and targeted accountability measures for use by states and local jurisdictions to identify effective ways of reducing the exposure of children and families to risks—such as lead and air particulate matter; ineffective and inequitable disciplinary practices; unsafe sex and unintended pregnancies; use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs; traumatic experiences; and negative living conditions, including exposure to violence, unstable housing, food insufficiency, and underemployment—that can contribute to unhealthy MEB development;
- promoting coverage of behavioral health services for children and caregivers, especially those needed during pregnancy and the postpartum period and those offered by parenting programs, in reimbursement for private health insurance and Medicaid, encompassing both behavioral health promotion and risk prevention;
- setting expectations for the adoption and evaluation of programs known to enhance social and emotional development in schools, in health care settings, and in communities;
- supporting consistent polices on accreditation, certification, and licensing requirements for a multidisciplinary workforce oriented toward healthy MEB development in children and youth; and
- supporting and collaborating with local and state initiatives that contribute to healthy MEB development.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** Relevant federal agencies should support rapid progress in the development and dissemination of effective mental, emotional, and behavioral (MEB) interventions for delivery to large populations by providing funding and other resources to, for example:

- support research and demonstration projects to determine the effectiveness of promising interventions for MEB health promotion, prevention of MEB disorders, and population screening at large scales, including the implementation of effective in-person and digital interventions;
- support states and local jurisdictions in developing cross-sector partnerships among schools, employers, the health care system, community-based organizations, and others to advance the scale-up of effective promotion and prevention interventions;

- support states and local jurisdictions in developing innovative funding mechanisms that can be sustained through changes in political leadership or funding shortfalls;
- use economic evaluation tools and other methods to analyze such factors as costs and availability of funding, benefit/cost ratio, level of complexity, and need for supportive infrastructure; and
- document needs and develop strategies for sustainability over time.

The report also recommends an improved national system for the regular collection and coordination of data on indicators of mental, social-emotional, and behavioral development and health at the national, state, and local levels, as well as outcomes data on efforts to promote health and prevent disorders. And it identifies high-priority future research directions, such as research to design and evaluate interventions to promote healthy MEB development for children and families at the population level, and assessments of the effectiveness of school-based interventions.

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**For More Information . . .** This Consensus Study Report Highlights was prepared by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families based on the Consensus Study Report, *Fostering Healthy Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Development in Children and Youth: A National Agenda* (2019). The study was sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Human Development and Disability; the National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse; and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nas.edu/MEB-Health>.

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