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CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS DAY MAY 7 PROMOTES WELLNESS

National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day, held May 7, raises awareness regarding the importance of mental wellness for children and young people. The plain truth is that for our citizens, our communities and state to prosper, we must have healthy brains; and, that process for ensuring brain health begins early in life, when our brains are developing.

Emotional and mental health is important because it's a vital part of life and impacts thoughts, behaviors and emotions. Being emotionally healthy can promote productivity and effectiveness in activities such as work, school or caregiving.

The first few years of a baby or child's life affects the health of their mind and body. Their brain begins to grow and learn how to act, behave, think and feel. This early childhood time can be the start of good mental health and well-being for the rest of their lives.

"Half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14," said Carrie Slatton-Hodges, commissioner of the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. "If we can intervene early, it is possible to lessen the negative effects that can occur later in life. We don't let other illnesses in youth progress and worsen. Mental health problems must be considered just as important as physical health problems."

Youth with mental health disorders are more likely to be unhappy at school, be absent, or be suspended or expelled. Their learning is negatively impacted because of poor concentration, distractibility, inability to retain information, poor peer relationships, and aggressive behavior. How can we expect a child to develop, to learn and grow into a healthy adult, if we don't ensure their mental wellness?

In the US, 7.1% of children ages 3-17 experience anxiety, and 3.2% experience depression. These are numbers that have consistently risen over the past two decades.

The National Institute of Mental Health notes at least half of mental illnesses begin by age 14 and 75 percent by age 24. The median age of onset for anxiety disorders and/or impulse-control disorders is age 11.

We must do something about this, and we all have a role to play, said Slatton-Hodges.

"Addressing the mental health needs of children is the responsibility of all community members," she said. "Children and youth learn from their parents, caregivers, family members, teachers, doctors – the adults they are taught to respect and rely on. In these roles, we impact how children and youth think about and care for their own mental health and how they treat others who have mental health challenges.

“We have our work cut out for us,” she added. “Now is the time to shape a brighter, healthier future for the next generation.”

Early diagnosis and appropriate services for children and their families can make a difference. Access to providers who can offer services, including screening, referrals, and treatment, are things that all parents and caregivers should know how to access.

If you are unsure of where to start, remember 211 ... a great resource to link to behavioral health services across the state. Also, in partnership with the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, they answer the statewide youth mobile crisis line...833-885-CARE (2273).

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