



SCREENING AND EARLY DETECTION OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

In his testimony this year before the House Appropriation Subcommittee on Labor/HHS/Ed, Secretary Leavitt stated that the Administration did not support mandatory mental health screening and does not support screening of children without parental consent. There are no federal funds being used to support mandatory screening. Legislation prohibiting the practice is unnecessary.

Putting the Issue of Screening into Context

- Most children in this country do not suffer from mental health problems. Their development from birth through adolescence is normal and healthy. As they grow and develop, children typically become resilient in dealing with multiple challenges. However, for some children and adolescents, mental illnesses are very real. A complex interaction of biological, behavioral, and environmental factors places certain children and youth at greater risk than others for emotional and behavioral disorders that can range from mild to severe, some long lasting. For these children, early detection through screening can help parents identify emotional or behavioral problems and assist them in getting appropriate services and supports before problems worsen and have longer term consequences.
- Neither the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)/DHHS nor the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health recommend mandatory, universal screening. It is SAMHSA's position that parents are the decision-makers in the care for their children – this includes screening as well as treatment – and if screening appears to be an appropriate action, parental consent must be obtained before it occurs. It is important that the issue of screening, particularly as it relates to mental health, be considered within the following context.

Families Are the Decision-Makers

- Parents and families are, and will always be, the first line of prevention and identification of health problems for their children – including emotional and behavioral problems. Parents, in consultation with health care providers and other professionals, are and should remain, the ultimate decision-maker regarding the health and wellbeing of their children. Parents are usually the first to recognize early signs and risk factors for potential problems in children, and often request screening for a child because of their own concerns. Professionals including physicians and educators must respect and listen to parents so that any problems can be identified early and appropriate referrals for assessment and care can be made. Whenever mental health screening is conducted, parental consent must be obtained.

Screening Is an Element of Advancing Public Health

- In this country, as well as in many countries around the world, health and mental health screening has been a well-accepted process for detecting problems early and helping identify individuals who may be at risk for particular problems so that they can receive appropriate care. Screening is an element of a public health approach to assure the best health and mental health outcomes for the nation.
- Screening can take place in a variety of settings for many reasons; blood pressure checks at the grocery store; routine vision and hearing evaluations at schools; colon, prostate and breast cancer assessments at a doctor's office or clinic; or self-screening for depression using web-based technology. Pediatricians, using standardized checklists as part of a routine physical examination, can pick up early warning signs of emotional problems that warrant further assessment and care.
- A growing number of health insurers are adopting the long-standing practice by health maintenance organizations (HMOs) to cover screening and early intervention services because these practices have proven beneficial for both health and economic reasons. Screening has been incorporated into many public programs as well. Since 1965, the Medicaid program has included screening for children for both physical and behavioral health conditions through its Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT) program, helping to reduce risk factors for illness in a particularly vulnerable population. Other Federal programs, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Head Start, for decades, have been screening children to identify developmental, learning, or behavioral concerns. These programs have strong public support and have demonstrated that early identification and intervention help children progress on a positive course for life.

Why Early Detection of Emotional and Behavioral Problems Is Important

- A growing body of research has shown that early identification, assessment, and intervention for emotional and behavioral problems for young children through adolescence can help forestall or prevent more serious problems, such as educational failure, substance abuse, involvement in the criminal justice system, or suicide. The most recent data suggest that, in any given year, between 5 and 9 percent of children and youth experience serious emotional problems that can hinder a child or adolescent's ability to live a full and productive life.
- Early intervention can help reduce the significant impacts that children and adolescents with serious mental health problems may experience. Early intervention can also benefit children and youth with less serious problems by providing appropriate supports and treatment before these conditions worsen. Screening is the first step in early intervention, recognizing emotional and behavioral problems and providing help at an early and effective point; if problems are detected, further assessment and evaluation can determine the appropriate care and services needed.

Principles and Standards Are Essential

- As with screening for any health problem, screening for the early detection of emotional and behavioral disorders must adhere to standards and principles. In whatever setting screening is to occur, communities and providers must address these standards in implementing their early detection programs and activities.
 - The first and foremost important principle is “do no harm”.
 - Screening must be voluntary, and parental consent obtained with clear procedures for notifying parents of the screening to be conducted and of the results.
 - Screening instruments used must be shown to be both valid and reliable in identifying children in need of further assessment.
 - Any person conducting screening must be qualified and appropriately trained.
 - Screening must take into consideration the cultural background of a family and must be age appropriate for the child or youth.
 - Screening must never be used to make a diagnosis or to label children.
 - If problems are detected, screening must be followed by an appropriate, in-depth assessment, conducted by trained personnel, with linkage provided to appropriate services and supports.
 - Always, confidentiality must be ensured.

Positive Results Can Be Realized

- When the principles of appropriate health care practices are followed, screening pays dividends. In mental health care, early intervention and treatment can and do achieve positive results for children and youth - helping children succeed in school, reducing substance abuse, criminal and gang related behavior, preventing suicide, and enabling children to have productive lives as adults.