

Preschool Mental Health – has the time come

Avinash De Sousa¹

¹Founder Trustee and Consultant Psychiatrist – Desousa Foundation, Mumbai.
E-mail – avinashdes888@gmail.com

Today we live in an era where education starts early. There are children who are attending playschools at the age of 1.5-2 years and preschool at 2.5 years. Upto a decade ago, school did not start till the age of 3-3.5 years. There has been a mushrooming of early child development and early child schooling centres across various cities along with mother toddler groups to help parents and children bond better. Mental health in the first 5 years of life is vital for child development and mental health between the age of 6-10 years. The science of child development shows that the foundation for sound mental health is built early in life and children's relationships with parents and caregivers shape neuronal architecture and growth of the developing brain. Disruptions in development at these stages impair a child in his ability to learn new things and relate socially to others. These early disruptions may have lifelong ramifications for the mental health of children. Many school mental health problems like academic difficulties, conduct traits, failure to finish school, aggression and depression are due to impoverished environments and relationships early in life [1-2].

Preschool mental health is part of early childhood mental health. Research indicates that the preschool years (ages 2–5) are critical in the development of emotional, behavioral and cognitive skills. In fact, studies indicate that one-fifth of preschool children may have a mental health problem such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional behavior, separation anxiety, early childhood depression and fears or sleep problems. Until recently, we have adopted a 'wait and watch' attitude when problems were identified at this age. This was done as in the preschool period, there is a difficulty of distinguishing between common, transient mental health problems and those that may be persistent and lead to clinical disorders. Another reason for deferring diagnosis is the sensitivity of labelling young children with a psychiatric disorder, a label that very often stays for a long time to come [3].

The emotional well-being of preschool children is directly related to functioning of their caregivers and families in which they are reared. When basic parent child relationships are abusive and chronically neglectful, they are a potent risk factor for the development of early mental health problems. In contrast, when the same relationships are supportive and nurturing, they can actually buffer young children from the adverse effects of other stress. The emotional needs of toddlers, and preschoolers are best met through coordinated mental health services that focus on their relationships, including parents, extended family members and providers of early care and education. Physicians and paediatricians as well as providers of early care and education should be better equipped to understand and manage the emotional and behavioral problems of young children. They would need appropriate professional training and easier access to child mental health professionals when they needed in such settings. Sound coordination of resources in mental health services for young children and their parents would provide an efficient method for assuring access to effective mental health treatment programs [4].

Another issue that often worries clinicians is the thin line between normal and deviant child development at this stage. Even normal child development between the age of 2-5 years has so many variants that we are often vary of diagnosing and assessing children at that age. Many lifelong child and adolescent psychological problems like the autistic spectrum disorders, intellectual impairment and speech or hearing deficits and visual abnormalities may be detected by vigilant parents and preschool teachers at this stage and intervention for the same can start early in child development. We all are aware that early intervention works best in child and adolescent mental health and at a preschool stage,