Supporting Emerging Adolescence: Addressing Post-Pandemic Mental Health in 6th – 8th Grade Classrooms

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Objective

Combine strategies from education and health fields to deliver mental health information to individuals supporting at-risk students through a trauma-informed lens.

Background

• Students and teachers are experiencing new challenges in and out of the classroom in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic
• 6th-8th graders face unique challenges due to their age range and developmental stage
• Teachers could use more resources to effectively support the mental health needs of their students
• The number of emerging adolescents reporting poor mental health is increasing
• Mental health problems increase risk of other health and behavior problems
• Schools and educators can be an important protective factor

Developmental Significance

• Onset of mental health problems usually occurs in childhood or adolescence, with 6th through 8th graders being particularly impacted
• Emerging adolescents are affected, but lack the psychological resiliency and development of adults
• Health behaviors formed in adolescence carry over into adulthood

Post-Pandemic Mental Health Trends in Students

• 42% of students felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 weeks that they stopped doing their usual activities
• 29% experienced poor mental health over a 30-day period
• 22% seriously considered attempting suicide
• Young adolescents experienced higher rates of exposure to violence, substance abuse, unstable housing, and other adverse or traumatic experiences that are risk factors for mental health issues
• Female, LGBTQ+, and BIPOC students face more significant challenges
• Young adolescents display measurable changes in brain development in areas that regulate fear and stress post-pandemic

Classroom Interventions

Promotion
1. Utilize Universal Design for Learning practices.
2. Keep and teach books on mental health topics to reduce stigma.

Prevention:
1. Watch for warning signs and student behaviors.
2. Create opportunities for support and connection.

Treatment:
1. Understand professional treatment plans in use.
2. Recognize warning signs to support early intervention.

Maintenance:
1. Normalize conversations around mental health.
2. Encourage active use of promotion and prevention methods.

Resource Book

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Table. Mental health statistics for at-risk groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female Students</td>
<td>Nearly 60% experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness</td>
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<tr>
<td>LGBTQ+ Students</td>
<td>70% reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic and Multiracial Students</td>
<td>Are more likely than Black, white, and BIPOC students to experience persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness</td>
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Depression and Anxiety Disorders by Age

Discussions about mental health in classrooms often focus solely on student needs

Providing information to educators about how to support themselves facilitates healthy classrooms and relationships, sustainable programs, and ongoing participation

References
1. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory - Scientific Figure on Simply Psychology. Simply Psychology. Published November 14, 2024. Accessed April 10, 2024. https://www.simplypsychology.org/bronfenbrenner.html
4. Going upstream: A framework for promoting the mental health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people - Scientific Figure on ResearchGate. Accessed April 10, 2024. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Spectrum-for-interventions-in-mental-health-fig3_271019701