SUPPORTING CHILD WELL-BEING THROUGH IMPROVING GIRLS' MENTAL HEALTH

WHY THIS MATTERS

Like other vulnerable groups, including LGBTQ youth, mounting evidence shows young women and girls are facing record high levels of depression, anxiety, violence, and suicidality. A focused effort on improving girls' well-being will help children's mental health throughout the state, and help protect their mental health into adulthood.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Nationally, data show that teen girls are facing significant mental health challenges. While mental health has declined for all teens, girls are faring worse than boys on nearly every measure. Teen girls have reported record high levels of violence, depression, self-harm, and suicide risk, often twice that of boys.[1]

Both male and female adolescents report school as their top stressor. But girls have unique stressors on top of academics.

Early sexualization is a common occurrence in many girls' lives, particularly the adultification of Black girls, which can raise stress levels, and reduce opportunities for wellness activities. The majority of girls using major social media sites say they've been contacted by a stranger who made them feel uncomfortable. They also report seeing content about suicide and eating disorders regularly.[2]

A fixation on young female bodies can lead to poor body image and low self-esteem that can drive eating disorders. Studies find that poor body image starts at a young age: the majority of girls ages 6-8 said their ideal body is thinner than their current body.[4] Nearly all (95%) of people with eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25.

Cyberbullying can also lead to poor self-esteem, problems with body image, anxiety, and depression. Data show that girls experience cyberbullying twice as often as boys.

However, research also shows that quality teen friendships and school belonging can protect kids from mental health concerns throughout their adolescence, extending into adulthood.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN?[4]

Nearly half of Wisconsin's female high school students report feeling sad and hopeless nearly every day, twice the rate of boys.

An alarming percent of Wisconsin girls have considered suicide (25%), made a plan (20%), and attempted suicide (11%) – all twice the rate compared to boys. Native American girls and Black girls in Wisconsin are much more likely to self-harm than girls of other backgrounds.[5] A fifth (22%) of teen girls in the state report being bullied online.

Female high school students, with an average age of 15, report distressing levels of sexual violence. In Wisconsin, 20% of high school girls have experienced sexual assault or coercion. Students who experienced sexual assault or coercion are far more likely to consider and attempt suicide.

WISCONSIN GIRLS IN DISTRESS

66% Anxiety

50% Sad and hopeless nearly every day

32% Self-harm

22% Bullied online

20% Experienced sexual assault or coercion

25% Considered suicide

20% Made a plan for suicide

11% Attempted suicide

WHAT WE CAN DO

➲ YOUTH:

- Build positive relationships. Healthy friendships protect your mental health and help build resilience to overcome life's challenges.

- Curate your social media feeds to be uplifting. Cultivate a positive experience. Do a digital detox when you feel overwhelmed.

- Reduce screen time at night so you can fall and stay asleep. Charge your phone outside of your bedroom while you sleep.

- Commit to healthy habits that improve mental health: get sufficient sleep, exercise, spend time outside, and eat meals with your family.

- Ask for help if you are being bullied, facing violence of any kind, or struggling with your mental health.

- Advocate for **peer-led wellness groups** in your school.

➲ PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:

- Consistently **check-in** with your child about how they're feeling and managing stress.

- Discuss healthy coping skills to manage academic and social stress, and teach your daughter how to build her own resilience.

- Engage in wellness activities that build confidence and healthy habits. Avoid discussing diets, body shape, or size.

- Encourage her to reduce screen time, especially at night, and model healthy tech habits. See **parent guide** on girls and social media.

- Find out what social media she enjoys and engage with her on that content as a way of connecting and monitoring social media use.

- Know the **signs** of kids in mental distress.

➲ SCHOOLS:

- Implement universal mental health screening of all students.

- Create inclusive spaces that help foster connectedness among students, helping them to build positive relationships with peers.

- Teach mental health literacy and digital literacy, with a focus on bullying and cyberbullying.

- Educate staff on trends and how to support youth mental health, particularly among girls and girls of color.

- Make clear the school policies and repercussions for bullying, cyberbullying, and relationship violence.

➲ POLICYMAKERS:

- Expand stable, non-competitive funding of school mental health services for all districts.

- Increase funding for peer support services.

- Require schools to teach mental health literacy and suicide prevention education. Require school staff to take suicide prevention and mental health training.

EXTRA STRESS

Adversity and stress can accelerate the aging process, and early studies reveal that the stress of the pandemic may have thrust many girls into early puberty. Studies show that those who begin puberty early are more likely to have mental health problems, especially depression, than those who don't develop early.

As they grow, many girls' emotions and social behaviors develop faster than the parts of the brain that help control behavior. They may have more pronounced difficulty processing complex feelings and managing stress. Helping adolescents learn to develop coping skills that allow them to manage stress, understand emotions, and foster positive relationships will benefit their mental health – both in the short term and the long term.[6]

REFERENCES:

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