



Mott Poll Report

March 21, 2022
Volume 40
Issue 4

Parent Views on Addressing Mental Health Concerns in Adolescents

Even before the added stress and disruption of the pandemic, many adolescents have experienced mental health issues. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health in partnership with the Children's Hospital Association asked a national sample of parents of children age 11-18 about their views and experiences with screening and care for mental health issues.

Almost all parents (95%) felt somewhat or very confident they would recognize a possible mental health issue in their adolescent. Parents report several signs that would prompt their concern, including frequent comments about being worried or anxious (65%), moodiness (64%), decreased interaction with family (63%), drop in grades (61%) or a change in sleep (53%) or eating patterns (49%).

If parents notice a possible mental health issue, most say their first response would be to talk with their adolescent (82%) or keep a closer eye on them (55%). Fewer parents' first response would be to make an appointment with a healthcare provider (43%), check with their adolescent's teacher about a problem at school (25%), or get advice from family or friends (13%).

One in four parents (25%) think their adolescent would *definitely* talk with a parent about a possible mental health issue, and about half (55%) think they would *possibly* do so. Parents report their adolescent's primary care provider (PCP) asks about mental health concerns during all (41%) or some (22%) check-ups; 14% say the PCP never asks about mental health, 19% don't know if the PCP asks, and 4% do not attend check-ups. Parents believe their adolescent would *definitely* (16%) or *probably* (57%) feel comfortable talking with their PCP about mental health concerns. One-third of parents (33%) report their adolescent has completed a mental health screening questionnaire at their PCP office.

More than one-quarter of parents (27%) report their adolescent has ever had a visit with a mental health specialist. Among those parents, 59% say the visit was within the past year. More parents say they decided on their own to have their adolescent see a mental health specialist (55%) than got a referral from their adolescent's PCP (18%) or school (11%). Nearly half (46%) describe difficulties getting their adolescent care with a mental health specialist, including long waits for appointments (26%), finding a provider who took their insurance (15%) or saw children (13%), and knowing where to go (10%).

Warning signs of a mental health issue?

Percent of parents who would be concerned about their adolescent if they noticed the following signs

Frequent comments about being worried or anxious	65%
Moodiness	64%
Decreased interaction with family	63%
Drop in grades	61%
Change in sleep	53%
Change in eating patterns	49%



Report Highlights

Only four in ten parents say their adolescent's primary care provider asks about mental health concerns at all check-ups.

More than one in four parents report their adolescent has ever had a visit or appointment with a mental health specialist.

Nearly half of parents whose adolescent had a mental health visit reported difficulties getting care.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in October 2021 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 1-18 years living in their household (n=2,020). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 61% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 1,201 parents with at least one child age 11-18. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±1 to 6 percentage points.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the University of Michigan Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

Findings from the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health do not represent the opinions of the University of Michigan. The University of Michigan reserves all rights over this material.

C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

Co-Director: Sarah J. Clark, MPH
Co-Director: Gary L. Freed, MD, MPH
Faculty Contributor: Mark Wietecha, MS, MBA
Poll Manager: Dianne C. Singer, MPH
Data Analyst: Acham Gebremariam, MS
Publication Designer: Sara L. Schultz, MPS



**SUSAN B. MEISTER
CHILD HEALTH EVALUATION
AND RESEARCH CENTER**
MICHIGAN MEDICINE

Implications

Even prior to the pandemic, one in five adolescents had a diagnosable mental health disorder, such as depression or anxiety. The stress and social disruption of the pandemic has increased that number and placed a heavier burden on parents to be aware of potential warning signs.

It can be difficult for parents to tell the difference between ups and downs that are just part of being an adolescent, and depression or other mental illnesses. Most adolescents have periods where they are moody and emotional during this time of physical and mental changes. In this Mott Poll parents report several signs that would increase their concern about a possible mental illness in their adolescent. These signs are ones all parents should be aware of, and include excessive worry or anxiety, decreased interactions with family or friends, increased moodiness, drop in grades or a change in sleep or eating patterns. However, not all adolescents show all signs, and some may be easier to recognize than others.

If parents notice a change in their adolescent's behavior or are concerned about mental illness, experts recommend the first step is to talk with them. Most parents in this Mott Poll reported they would do exactly that, and over half would then keep a closer eye on them as well. It is also important for parents to try to determine whether their adolescent can manage their current challenges or if they seem overwhelmed.

Sometimes, the stigma of mental illness can make it hard for parents to seek help—even if they think their adolescent needs it. Parents might delay seeking care for their adolescent as they may think or hope the symptoms will go away on their own, be in denial, or think that mental illness cannot happen to their adolescent. Although parents know rapid and intense mood shifts are a normal part of adolescence, they should not dismiss the potential for more serious problems if they are concerned for their adolescent.

Well-child check-ups are an ideal time for providers to discuss potential mental health concerns. Yet, fewer than half of parents in this Mott Poll reported their adolescent's PCP asks about mental health issues at all check-ups, and one in seven said their PCP never asks about mental health concerns. If parents feel their adolescent's provider is not being proactive in raising mental health issues, they should bring it up with them.

It is important for adolescents to feel comfortable seeking help if they feel they need it. However, only a quarter of parents in this Mott Poll thought their adolescent would definitely talk with a parent about a possible mental health issue, and even fewer thought their adolescent would definitely feel comfortable speaking with their PCP. Before any problems or concerns arise, it is important for adolescents to hear from their parents where they can go for help, and that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. Parents can also help to prepare their adolescent for visits with their PCP and stress the importance of being honest with their provider about any physical or mental health problems and allow them privacy with their PCP.

Some parents also have trouble navigating the pathway to finding a mental healthcare evaluation or treatment options for their adolescent. Around half of parents in this Mott Poll whose adolescent saw a mental healthcare specialist decided on their own to seek mental healthcare, while fewer than one in five got a referral from their adolescent's PCP, and even fewer got a referral from school. Around half of these parents had experienced long waits for appointments, difficulty finding providers who took their insurance or who saw children. These difficulties highlight the strains in our current mental health system and point to the need for significant reform to support parents and their children. In the meantime, parents should reach out to their adolescent's PCP for help in finding a mental health provider.

Parents need to remember they are not alone, but may need to be proactive in seeking support from their adolescent's provider, or their school, or family or friends in dealing with, and caring for, mental health issues.