

Mental Health Problems in Young Children

INTRODUCTION

The state of knowledge about pre-school mental health problems is quite uneven. A good deal is known about disruptive behaviour, particularly oppositional problems, and somewhat less so for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In contrast, little is known about preschool emotional problems. Although a substantial percentage of children will “outgrow” these problems, 50–60% of children with problems at age 3–4 will continue to show these problems at school age.¹

Many young children will experience an impairment in their mental health or emotional wellbeing at some point. One study showed that the prevalence for three-year-old children was 10% with 66% of parents having one or more concerns about their child. A further study showed that 7% of children aged 3–4 years exhibited serious behaviour problems.²

Severe adversities and maltreatment in infancy and the early years can have a lifelong impact on a child’s brain development, physiological reactions to stress and later mental and physical health. Devoting resources to supporting families can potentially benefit both the individual children and avoid financial and other costs for society.²

[Expert reviewer’s comment: I agree. For this age-group, think about the child in the context of its family and avoid locating the problem solely within the child. Parents of these children can influence positively (and negatively) the outcomes for their child – which can be good news for them.]

This module will study the diagnosis and management of mental health problems in this age-group in Primary Care. Where most of the management occurs in Secondary Care the management will not be discussed, though the detection/diagnosis (often occurring in Primary Care) will be described, including what might be “normal” behaviour - or “abnormal” behaviour needing referral.

This module is one of a pair of modules which deal with this topic. This module studies conditions which mainly occur in younger pre-school children. The accompanying module “Mental Health Problems in Older Children and Adolescents” covers the later years, but obviously there is a lot of overlap between the modules and groups should be aware of this – for example one case in **this** module is aged 12. The authors have attempted to avoid repeating information in both modules, except where this was unavoidable.