

MINDFUL MINUTE

The Importance of Mental Health Screening

According to the American Psychiatric Association, half of all chronic mental illnesses begin by age 14, and three-fourths of all mental illnesses begin by age 24 ("What Is Mental Illness," 2025). These facts, coupled with the associated risks of not receiving help soon enough, are among the many reasons mental health screenings are important. They can be used to identify early signs of emotional or psychological distress before they lead to long-term complications, provide a bridge to necessary mental health services for conditions that may otherwise go unrecognized, and allow treatment to begin much sooner.

Although online mental health screenings are available, they typically consist of self-assessments that can be misleading. Therefore, in-person screenings with your child's primary care physician would likely provide the greatest benefit. These screenings allow your child's physician to spend more time gathering information, conduct a physical examination, have you and/or your child complete a questionnaire to assess symptoms, and order blood tests to rule out physical conditions that may be contributing to mental health symptoms.

If you have noticed mood swings, changes in eating or sleeping habits, personality changes, irritability, excessive worry or fear, lack of energy, trouble concentrating, social avoidance, isolation, feelings of worthlessness, or any other changes in your child's behavior, it may be a good idea to advocate for your child to receive a mental health screening from their primary care physician.

There are plenty of resources available, including TCHAT services provided through the Department of Psychiatry at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center. However, the first step is asking for help.

VOCABULARY BANK

TCHAT - Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine

Clinician - A healthcare professional typically employed at a skilled nursing facility or clinic

Referral - The act of sending or directing someone to a different person, place, or professional for help, information, or services



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The Appeal/Temptation of Risky Behaviors

Risky behavior, by definition, is an action or choice that increases the risk of physical, emotional, psychological, or social harm to oneself or others. Why, then, do children and adolescents find themselves so tempted by risky behaviors? The common belief is that they want to cause trouble, be rebellious, or experiment, but biological and neurological factors are often responsible.

During adolescence, the emotional center of the brain, which plays a role in fear, threat detection, emotional processing and memory, social judgment, mood, fundamental behaviors, and bodily functions, develops faster than the parts of the brain responsible for impulse control, problem-solving, emotional regulation, and self-control. This imbalance creates the perfect storm: a situation in which risk-taking can thrive because sound decision-making is often overshadowed by the desire for an immediate reward, such as peer approval, social acceptance, excitement, stress or pain relief, or a general sense of belonging.

However, not all risky behavior is negative. Examples of positive risk-taking include joining a club or sports team, getting a job, taking more challenging classes, standing up for those who cannot defend themselves, trying out for a play, learning to express one's opinions, or even trying to make new friends.

It is important to distinguish between negative and positive risk-taking, but it is equally important to understand your child's development so that you have the tools to guide them through any challenges along the way.



Parenting in Action

Children who engage in risky behaviors need intentional, consistent parenting. This does not mean parents have to be overly restrictive, but clear boundaries and rules should be established. Facilitating meaningful conversations about risky behaviors is important, as is helping children understand that their actions have consequences. Furthermore, ensuring that your child understands what constitutes acceptable behavior allows you to establish appropriate rules that encourage them to think before they act. Consistently communicating, clarifying, and reinforcing your expectations will help establish a foundation for the future.

Substance Use Awareness/Prevention

There are many behaviors that pose risks to youth; however, one that has become increasingly prevalent in recent years is exposure to and use of substances. Substance use refers to the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, nicotine (including vaping products), prescription medications, and illicit drugs through methods such as drinking, vaping, inhaling, and smoking, among others.

Parenting children who are exposed to these risks can be difficult. However, educating yourself, becoming familiar with the substances present in your community, and maintaining open communication with your child are some of the ways you can ensure that you are prepared to intervene when needed.

Some signs to look for include, but are not limited to, changes in sleeping or eating patterns, increased secrecy, decreased attention to personal grooming or appearance, unexplained health concerns, and changes in school performance or social behavior. If you notice any of these changes in your child, or any significant shifts in their behavior, it may be a good idea to initiate a conversation about what may be contributing to these changes in their physical or mental well-being.

Conversation Starters: How to Talk to Your Child About Risky Behaviors

Talking to your child about risky behaviors may feel uncomfortable, but it is necessary to create a safe space where they can discuss worries, fears, and questions that may arise as they navigate life. **Here are some tips to help reduce pressure and tension during these conversations:**

1. Use low-pressure opening lines

- *"I'm curious about something."*
- *"I read something today."*
- *"Help me figure this out."*

2. Discuss exit plans

- *"If you found yourself in a tough situation, what are some things you could do?"*

3. Ask what-if questions

- *"What if a stranger asks you to help them look for something they lost?"*
- *"What if someone asks you to keep a secret from your parents?"*
- *"What if someone has been drinking but is supposed to drive you home?"*
- *"What if someone pressures you to do something that makes you uncomfortable?"*

4. Reassure your child that they will have your support, even when they make mistakes

- *"I'm always here to talk."*
 - *"Growing up is hard, but I'm here if you need me."*
 - *"Never be afraid to call me."*
 - *"I will always be in your corner."*
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PARENT RESOURCES

How to Enroll Your Child in TCHAT

1. Contact your child's school counselor
2. Ask the school counselor to submit a referral on behalf of your child
3. Reach out to the TTUHSC TCHAT office via tchat@ttuhsc.edu for general questions about the referral process
4. Complete required parent/guardian consent forms
5. A TCHAT clinician will contact you to schedule a virtual assessment

Helpful Websites

- **How Regular Mental Health Screenings for Children Can Make A Difference:**
<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/how-regular-mental-health-screenings-for-children-can-make-a-difference.aspx>
- **Q&A: Understanding Risk-Taking Behaviors in Teens:**
<https://www.childrenscolorado.org/just-ask-childrens/articles/risky-behaviors-kids/>
- **Starting the Conversation with Kids:**
<https://www.kidsmentalhealthfoundation.org/mental-health-resources/starting-conversations/starting-conversations>
 - **Conversation Starters:**
<https://www.kidsmentalhealthfoundation.org/-/media/onoursleeves/documents/conversation-starters.pdf?forcedownload=0>

Back-to-School Mental Health Videos

- **Mental Health Screenings For Kids:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TNZAASqafk>
- **How the Teenage Brain Works:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFgYR204xXE>

Book Recommendations

- **How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk** by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish
 - **Parenting Teens with Confidence** by Jean-Michel Etienne
 - **No-Drama Discipline** by Daniel J. Deigel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.
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