

Families Need Support:

The Challenges of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

Families are not alone

Although the number of children in America identified as having emotional or behavioral disorders has increased, most children growing up today remain reasonably well-adjusted and successful at home and at school. Parents may take great pride in their children's accomplishments and in their ability to raise successful children. This is as it should be.

A frequent message to families—from schools, grandparents, communities, and other parents—is that “good” families raise “good” children. It's an almost universal belief that parents are responsible for how their children understand and relate to the world.

The problem with this idea, though, is that many perfectly fine parents have children whose behaviors, by any standard, are unacceptable. These parents are often blamed—by other families, teachers, and the professionals who work with their children—for not providing the structure, limits, discipline, or supports that seem to work well for most children. Worse, they often blame themselves for not being able to control their child.

Being a parent is exhausting work, even when children do not have emotional problems. All parents need information, encouragement, training, and support to raise healthy children. No one is born with all the skills necessary to handle every problem, yet too often, when parents do ask for help for their children, they are turned down until the family's problems become too severe to ignore.

Emotional and behavioral disorders and mental illnesses occur across all income ranges, educational levels, and ethnic groups. Children with emotional or behavioral problems may live in single-parent homes or two-parent families; with adoptive or foster families; in suburbs, rural communities, or cities.

Families need support

Despite differences in child-rearing practices,

culture, race, or socio-economic status, most families have a great deal in common. Parents may share similar frustrations in the exhausting and sometimes un-successful search for appropriate and affordable services, as well as the sense of helplessness in knowing that their child's needs are not being met. All parents of children with emotional and behavioral disorders need accurate information about therapeutic and educational services for their child. They also need support and advocacy to help them and their family cope with the impact of raising their child. Families share an enduring love for their children, even (or especially) for those who are rejected by others as unlovable.

Families who are able to locate information, access to services, and providers who respect the families' expertise remain the best source of stability and support for their child. With appropriate support, many families who deeply love their children with mental health issues will be able to maintain them within the family home or community. Undersupported families may have to seek out of home placement to insure the survival of their child and the rest of the family.

Today, in many states, parents of children with emotional disorders or behavioral differences are creating new support networks for sharing information and advice. In these networks, parents find unconditional support for their role and help for their children. Most groups are parent-run; many parents want the opportunity to meet with one another without feeling that they are being “supervised” by professionals. Other groups are organized and run by mental health providers as part of their efforts to provide community support to families.

If parents cannot find a group to their liking, they may want to think about starting one themselves. Assistance in starting and running a support or advocacy group is available from many sources. Parents may call PACER Center for a referral.

Adapted from, A Guidebook for Parents of Children with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders, © 2001 PACER.