

Mental Health Screening in Schools

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An increasingly large number of medical and mental health associations, state and federal agencies, and advocacy groups support mental health screening for students.

- The evidence for the value of screening for depression and suicide is overwhelming.
- Universal screening for depression and other behavioral health problems in youth is considered best practice.
- Universal screening for students at risk for academic problems is already a part of the response-to-intervention (RTI) process. Integrating social, emotional, and behavioral screening in this process is an efficient use of resources.

KEY MESSAGES ABOUT SCREENING

- Screening will not occur without the consent of parents and assent of students.
- Screening can identify students at risk for emotional and behavioral problems that can have lifelong implications if left untreated.
- Mental health problems do not simply go away by themselves.
- School mental health professionals can implement interventions that improve student outcomes.
- In the case of depression and its close link to suicide, screening can even save lives.
- Screening and talking about depression and suicide do not cause distress among students.
- Some version of universal screening for depression and other mental disorders should be established in each school district.

A MENTAL HEALTH SCREENING ACTION PLAN

- Establish a collaborative team comprising key family–school–community stakeholders to investigate, develop, and implement a mental health screening process for the school or district. Plan screening as part of a comprehensive, coordinated continuum of support for the social, emotional, and behavioral development of students.
- Begin to incorporate universal screening for mental health problems into the school’s RTI process.
- Decide what you want to screen for: protective or risk factors, depression alone, depression plus suicide, or a broader array of mental health risks.
- Choose an appropriate screening procedure on the basis of affordability, feasibility, and acceptance.
- Consider legal and ethical issues and consult with the district’s attorney to ensure that any procedures developed meet legal requirements.
- Provide professional development for school personnel on risk factors, signs, symptoms, outcomes, and methods of referral for students exhibiting depressive symptoms.
- Dispel any misunderstandings about mental health screening and promote buy-in among teachers and administrative staff.
- Conduct parent education sessions on risk factors, signs, symptoms, outcomes, and methods of referral for students exhibiting depressed behavior. Discuss the benefits of mental health screening, how it is to be conducted, and how the results are to be used. Dispel any misunderstandings about mental health screening.
- Implement the screening process and use the results to plan individual and school-wide interventions.