



Navigating Adolescence: Addressing Mental Health Challenges through Social Work Practice and Policy

Tiffany Howard¹, Cierra Mahone¹, Majesty Capehart¹, Opeyemi Akinade¹, and Tabitha Brookins^{2*}

¹Graduate student, Master of Social Work, Alabama State University, United States.

²Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Alabama State University, United States.

Article Details

Article Type: Research Article

Received date: 12th November, 2023

Accepted date: 12th February, 2024

Published date: 26th February, 2024

***Corresponding Author:** Tabitha Brookins, Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Alabama State University, United States.

Citation: Howard, T., Mahone, C., Capehart, M., Akinade, O., & Brookins, T., (2024). Navigating Adolescence: Addressing Mental Health Challenges through Social Work Practice and Policy. *J Soci Work Welf Policy*, 2(1): 108. doi: <https://doi.org/10.33790/jswwp1100108>.

Copyright: ©2024, This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Abstract

Adolescent mental health is a critical aspect of overall well-being, particularly during the tumultuous period of adolescence. Despite increased awareness, depression and anxiety disorders remain prevalent among adolescents, necessitating early intervention. This paper examines the interaction of adolescent mental health, social work practice, and social welfare policy. It explores the challenges adolescents face, including the impact of social media and various risk factors, and the role of social workers in addressing these challenges within the framework of social welfare policies. Additionally, it discusses preventative measures such as mindfulness programs in schools and community support initiatives, as well as challenges and barriers to effective intervention. Overall, this paper underscores the importance of comprehensive and collaborative approaches to promoting adolescent mental health and well-being.

Keywords: Adolescent, Mental Health, Protective Factors, Risk Factors, Anxiety, Depression, Intervention, and Prevention

Introduction

Mental health is vital for an individual's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral well-being, particularly during adolescence, a period marked by significant developmental challenges. Despite increased awareness, adolescents often grapple with depression and anxiety disorders, necessitating early intervention [1]. Various risk factors contribute to adolescents' vulnerability to mental health challenges, encompassing depressive symptoms, anxiety disorder, peer victimization, and familial criticism [2]. Social work and social welfare policy play crucial roles in addressing these challenges, offering avenues for intervention and support. This examination delves into the nexus of adolescents' mental health and social work practice within the broader framework of social welfare policy.

Understanding Adolescent Mental Health

Adolescence presents a myriad of challenges as individuals navigate through a pivotal phase of emotional and psychological

growth. Factors such as alcohol and substance use, poverty, bullying, cyberbullying, and peer pressure can significantly exacerbate mental health issues [3]. However, the pervasive influence of social media introduces a complex dynamic, offering both opportunities and risks. Studies have linked excessive social media usage to heightened symptoms of depression and anxiety, including low self-esteem and psychological distress [4]. In this landscape, social workers emerge as vital agents of support armed with a profound understanding of human development and behavior. Social workers play a pivotal role in recognizing and addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by adolescents within the context of social welfare policies aimed at promoting mental well-being. Their experience enables them to identify underlying issues, intervene effectively, and advocate for policies that address the root cause of mental health concerns. By comprehensively understanding adolescents' unique circumstances and stressors, social workers can tailor interventions that meet their specific needs.

Acknowledging and addressing adolescents' diverse challenges is paramount for implementing interventions that effectively support their mental well-being. Social workers, with their specialized knowledge and skills, are well-positioned to play a central role in this endeavor, collaborating with stakeholders to promote policies that foster resilience and empower adolescents to thrive emotionally and psychologically.

Early Warning Signs

Identifying early warning signs of depression and anxiety is crucial for timely intervention and prevention of severe mental illness. Adolescents may exhibit a range of symptoms, including apathy, physical complaints, difficulty concentrating, feelings of guilt or hopelessness, changes in appetite or weight, social withdrawal, and risky behaviors [5]. Anxiety disorders may manifest through excessive fear, persistent restlessness, and avoidance behaviors, impacting adolescents' social interactions and academic performance [6]. Often embedded in schools and communities, social workers

are well-positioned to identify these signs and connect adolescents with appropriate support services provided through social welfare policies, such as mental health screenings and counseling programs.

Preventing Measures

Implementing preventative measures is crucial for mitigating the risk of depression and anxiety among adolescents. Family-based programs, coping skills training, and cognitive-behavioral interventions have been shown to promote reducing depressive symptoms and enhancing resilience in adolescents [7]. Additionally, art therapy emerges as a creative and effective intervention for adolescents, providing a non-verbal outlet for expression and promoting emotional healing [8].

Mindfulness in School and Policy Implications

Integrating mindfulness programs into school curricula represents a significant opportunity to enhance policies promoting adolescent mental health. Mindfulness practices, which involve cultivating present-moment awareness and non-judgmental acceptance, have shown promising results in reducing stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among adolescents [9]. By incorporating mindfulness into educational settings, schools address students' immediate mental health needs and foster a culture of well-being that can have long-term implications for academic success and personal development.

One of the key aspects of the effectiveness of mindfulness programs in schools lies in their potential to equip students with essential coping mechanisms and resilience-building skills. Adolescence is a period marked by numerous stressors, including academic pressures, social challenges, and family dynamics. Mindfulness practices provide students with tools to manage this stressor more effectively, promoting emotional regulation and adaptive coping strategies [10]. Mindfulness programs enhance students' ability to navigate challenges and contribute to a positive school environment conducive to learning and personal growth.

Furthermore, implementing school mindfulness programs aligns with broader policy goals for holistic education and student well-being. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of addressing the social-emotional needs of students alongside academic instruction. Social welfare policies advocating for a comprehensive approach to education recognize the interconnectedness of academic achievement and mental health [11]. By incorporating mindfulness into school policies, policymakers demonstrate a commitment to supporting the holistic development of students and fostering a positive school climate.

Moreover, mindfulness programs in schools have the potential to address disparities in access to mental health resources among different demographic groups. Adolescents from marginalized communities often face greater barriers to accessing mental health services due to factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural stigma, and lack of awareness [12]. By offering mindfulness practices within the school setting, where all students have equal access, policymakers can help bridge the gap in mental health support and promote equity in education.

Community support

Community support plays a crucial role in promoting adolescent mental health and well-being. Adolescents are deeply influenced by their social environments, including families, schools, and neighborhoods. Supportive communities provide adolescents with a sense of belonging, connectedness, and social capital, which are essential protective factors against mental health issues [11]. By fostering supportive communities, policymakers and social welfare advocates can create environments that promote resilience and reduce the risk of mental health problems among adolescents.

An indispensable component of community support is providing accessible and culturally sensitive mental health services. Adolescents

may face barriers to accessing mental health care due to factors such as stigma, lack of transportation, and financial constraints. Community-based mental health programs should offer a range of services tailored to the needs of adolescents, including counseling, support groups, and outreach initiatives [11]. By offering these services within the community, policymakers can ensure that adolescents have access to the support they need to address mental health issues early and effectively.

Additionally, community support programs often involve collaboration between stakeholders, including schools, healthcare providers, nonprofit organizations, and local government agencies. These partnerships leverage resources and expertise from diverse sectors to comprehensively address adolescents' complex needs. For instance, schools may partner with mental health providers to offer on-site counseling services or implement evidence-based advocacy campaigns to provide opportunities for adolescents to raise awareness about mental health issues, reduce stigma, and promote help-seeking behaviors [11]. By engaging adolescents as active participants in their communities, policymakers can foster a sense of agency and belonging that enhances protective factors against mental health problems.

Challenges and Barriers

Challenges and barriers persist despite the efficacy of prevention interventions aimed at supporting adolescent mental health. Dropout rates and resistance to program participation highlight the importance of tailoring interventions to adolescents' preferences and perspectives [13]. Adolescents may disengage from mental health programs if they perceive them as irrelevant or incompatible with their needs and experiences. Therefore, it is essential for policymakers and practitioners to involve adolescents in the design and implementation of mental health initiatives to ensure they are accessible, acceptable, and effective.

Addressing stigma and misconceptions surrounding mental illness remains a significant challenge in promoting help-seeking behaviors among adolescents [12]. Negative attitudes and beliefs about mental health can deter adolescents from seeking support or disclosing their struggles to others. Consequently, efforts to reduce stigma and increase mental health literacy are crucial for creating environments where adolescents feel comfortable seeking help and accessing support services.

Structural barriers such as limited access to mental health services, particularly in underserved communities, pose significant challenges to addressing adolescent mental health needs. Adolescents from marginalized backgrounds may face barriers such as financial constraints, transportation issues, and a shortage of mental health providers [11]. Addressing these structural barriers requires systemic changes, including increased funding for mental health services, workforce development initiatives to train more mental health professionals, and policies to improve access to care in underserved areas.

Conclusion

Adolescent mental health is a multifaceted issue that requires comprehensive and collaborative interventions. By implementing preventative measures fostering resilience and addressing systemic barriers, stakeholders can create supportive environments that promote the mental well-being of adolescents. Through continued research, advocacy, and community engagement, policymakers can work towards building healthier communities where adolescents can thrive.

Competing interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

References

1. Carrion, V.G. (2019). Childhood Trauma and Attentional Bias Toward Emotional Faces in Pediatric Anxiety. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 58(2), 186–195.
2. Michelini, G., Perlman, G., Tian, Y., Mackin, D. M., Nelson, B. D., Klein, D. N., & Kotov, R. (2021). Multiple domains of risk factors for first onset of depression in adolescent girls. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 283, 20–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.01.036>
3. Humensky, J., Kuwabara, S. A., Fogel, J., Wells, C., Goodwin, B., & Voorhees, B. W. (2010). Adolescents with depressive symptoms and their challenges with learning in school. *The Journal of School Nursing*, 26(5), 377–392. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059840510376515>
4. Shannon, H., Bush, K., Villeneuve, P. J., Hellemans, K. G., & Guimond, S. (2022). Problematic social media use in adolescents and young adults: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *JMIR Mental Health*, 9(4). <https://doi.org/10.2196/33450>
5. Fulghum, B., & Brennan, D. (2022). Teen depression. <https://www.webmd.com/depression/teen-depression>
6. American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. (2023). Your adolescent- Anxiety and avoidance psychiatry. https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Anxiety_Disorder_Resource_Center/Your_Adolescent_Anxiety_and_Avoidant_Disorders.aspx
7. Avenevoli, S., & Merikangas, K. R. (2006). Understanding the high comorbidity between childhood attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and anxiety. *Biological Psychiatry*, 59(12), 1361–1363.
8. Sarman, A., & Günay, U. (2023). The Effect of Calligraphy as an Art Therapy Intervention Containing Religious Motifs, on the Anxiety and Depression in Adolescent Psychiatric Patients. *Journal of Religion & Health*, 62(2), 1269–1285. <https://doi.org.lib.lsu.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01479-0>
9. Phan, M. L., Renshaw, T. L., Caramanico, J., Greeson, J. M., MacKenzie, E., Atkinson-Diaz, Z., Doppelt, N., Tai, H., Mandell, D. S., & Nuske, H. J. (2022). Mindfulness-based school interventions: A systematic review of outcome evidence quality by study design. *Mindfulness*, 13(7), 1591–1613. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01885-9>
10. Semchuk, J. C., McCullough, S. L., Lever, N. A., Gotham, H. J., Gonzalez, J. E., & Hoover, S. A. (2022). Educator-Informed Development of a Mental Health Literacy Course for School Staff: Classroom Well-Being Information and Strategies for Educators (Classroom WISE). *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 20(1), 35. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph2001003>
11. Breedvelt, J. J. F., Tiemeier, H., Sharples, E., Galea, S., Niedzwiedz, C., Elliott, I., & Bockting, C. L. (2022, June 1). The effects of neighborhood social cohesion on preventing depression and anxiety among adolescents and Young Adults: Rapid Review. *BJPsych open*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9230698/#:~:text=The%20presence%20of%20a%20positive,longitudinal%20cohort%20study%20in%20Canada>.
12. Corrigan, P. W., & Watson, A. C. (2002). Understanding the impact of stigma on people with mental illness. *World psychiatry: official journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, 1(1), 16–20. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1489832/>
13. Rasing, S., Creemers, D., Stikklebroek, Y., Kuijpers, R., & Engels, R. (2016). Adolescent Depression Prevention Growing Up: Challenges and Future Directions. Research Gate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311327596_Adolescent_Depression_Prevention_Growing_Up_Challenges_and_Future_Directions