

Our Children

HALIFAX'S PARENTING MAGAZINE

The building blocks of mental health

A unique program is delivering mental-health support at home to parents and kids

By Lisa Card



Finding help for mental-health or behavioural problems in children can lead parents down a long and difficult road. The stigma surrounding mental health issues can prevent some parents from seeking treatment for their children.

With serious mental-health issues taking priority for treatment, the wait times for mild to moderate mental-health or behavioural issues can be up to a year at the IWK Health Centre in Halifax.

Traditionally, the only other option for accessing mental-health services for children was private counselling. For many parents, this option is financially out of reach. Eleven years ago, Drs Patrick McGrath and Patricia Lingley-Pottie, and a research team at the IWK, created the program Strongest Families to provide mental-health services to children and parents in a timely and accessible way.

“Strongest Families was designed to target and overcome typical barriers, such as wait times, that families often encounter when they try to access services,” says Lingley-Pottie, president and CEO of the

Strongest Families Institute. “That is the gap in our health-care system that needed to be filled.” Another challenge facing parents is travelling long distances to take their children to appointments at central health-care facilities.

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Lingley-Pottie points out that the program is unique because families receive the counselling at home over the phone at convenient times. “It could be a nine o’clock at night call when the kids are all in bed,” she says. “[Parents] don’t have to travel. They don’t have to take time off work. They don’t have to take the kids out of school.”

The program offers parents and children help with behavioural disorders, anxiety, bed wetting and recurrent headache or abdominal pain. Depending on their location, children are typically referred to the program through their general physicians.

Receiving counselling at home is a benefit of the program. “We send parents evidence-based educational handbooks—written material that is easy to read and is skill focused, so they learn one skill a week,” Lingley-Pottie says. “They also get a complementary video that is skill-based, so they are able to not just read about the skill, but watch it and practice it.” Parents and kids also connect once a week with a telephone coach, providing motivation and support.

A psychologist with the Cape Breton District Health Authority referred Debbie Murphy and her two daughters, 13-year-old Erin and 10-year-old Lauren, to the program. The girls were struggling with anxiety and were seeing a psychologist at their local hospital when scheduling became an issue. “Her case load kind of got crazy and I noticed a difference in the girls when they weren’t having any kind of counselling at all,” Murphy recalls. “Their doctor suggested this program. Now I am noticing a difference. They are starting to recognize their anxieties and [are learning how] to deal with them.”

Strategies for coping with anxiety are an important part of the program. One technique is keeping a worry diary. Each day, the kids write or draw the worries they had and what relaxation skills they used to cope with their anxiety.

The worry diary showed Murphy that her daughters’ physical symptoms were often manifestations of anxiety. “Everyone thinks they know what anxiety is but it is different for everybody,” she says. “For Erin, I didn’t realize her arm gets sore and her tummy gets upset. When you actually see them draw a picture of the pain...you put it all together and you really do get the full picture. That was a huge thing for me.”

Once the program coach helped Erin and Lauren identify their anxiety, they began to learn how to deal with it. The girls found relaxation techniques, such as deep belly breathing and tensing and relaxing their muscles, helped ease their anxiety.

Murphy praises the hands-on nature of the program, finding it more empowering than traditional therapy. “When I take them [to the hospital], I do meet with the counsellor, but it is not the same,” she says. “It is great that I am getting the tools that I need to help them. This is going to be a lifelong thing.”

Strongest Families is now operating in Nova Scotia, Northern Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia. Lingley-

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Pottie plans to expand the program across the rest of Canada and into the U.S. For more information, contact the Strongest Families Institute at (902) 229-0899 or email patricia.pottie@iwk.nshealth.ca or patrick.mcgrath@iwk.nshealth.ca.

Mental health links:

Provincial Mental Health Services, www.gov.ns.ca/health/mhs

- Information on mental-health services available in Nova Scotia.

Parents for Children’s Mental Health, www.pcmh.ca

- Provides education, links, and support for other parents coping with child and youth mental-health issues.

Kid’s Health, kidshealth.org

- Doctor-approved site for parents, educators, kids, and teens, covering all aspects of children’s health, including mental-health issues.

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