

Are mental health problems in children being neglected?

Preliminary results from SeeTheChild – Mental Child Health in Uganda

Skylstad V¹, Nalugya J², Ndeezi G⁴, Akol A^{1,3}, Moland KM¹, Nankabirwa V^{1,3}, Tumwine JK⁴, Engebretsen IMS¹

¹ Centre for International Health (CIH), Department of Global Public Health and Primary Care (IGS), University of Bergen, Norway

² Department of Psychiatry, Makerere University College of Health Sciences, Kampala, Uganda

³ School of Public Health, Makerere University College of Health Sciences, Kampala, Uganda

⁴ Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Makerere University College of Health Sciences, Kampala, Uganda

Aim

To explore how caregivers perceived and experienced child mental health, and what influenced their help-seeking behaviour in the social and cultural context of Mbale region, Eastern Uganda.

Methods

Study participants were caregivers of children aged 5-10 years.

Ten caregivers of children with a high symptom load (≥ 16) and 'impact scores' on The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire¹ (SDQ) from the study 'PROMISE Saving Brains'² were selected as key informants for repeat in-depth interviews.

Eight focus group discussions with caregivers selected from the general population in Mbale district.

Data collection: July-October 2014.



Illustration photo, by V. Skylstad

Findings

Help-seeking practices

- Children's emotional health and behaviour were a community responsibility, advice on help-seeking were sought from peers.
- Traditional healers and religious leaders were considered more appropriate than the public health services for seeking help.

“ Mostly we discuss [children's difficulties] with the neighbors, those are the nearest people that you talk to”
- In-depth interview with care-taker

Explanatory factors

- Mental health as a medical concern, including child psychiatric issues, were generally unfamiliar to caregivers.
- Mental health characteristics were seen as inherited from ancestors or caused by malevolent spirits.
- Naming after ancestors was important for inheriting mental health characteristics - renaming was done to change characteristics.

“ There is this cultural practice of giving children names of deceased people, you can give a child a name of someone who was stubborn and the child gets also stubborn.”
- Focus group discussion with fathers

Catalysts for help-seeking in the public health services

- Somatic symptoms, such as hydrocephalus and seizures, activated help-seeking.
- Severe mental health case descriptions, such as alcohol abuse or suicidal attempts, did not activate help-seeking.
- Behavioural characteristics, such as opposition towards parents, were sometimes regarded as 'brightness' or 'self-confidence'.

“ The head of the child was growing big, and the eyes changed and opened widely. Therefore, her friends told her that there is a hospital called CURE”
- In-depth interview with caretaker

Conclusion

Mental health as a medical concern, including child psychiatric issues, completely differed from the care-givers' understanding and interpretation of child mental health. This resulted in delay or absence of mental health help-seeking for children in the public health services, which was perceived as inaccessible or irrelevant.

Correspondance

Vilde Skylstad
University of Bergen
Vilde.skylstad@cih.uib.no

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References

¹www.sdqinfo.com
²ClinicalTrials.gov #NCT01882335

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