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If you think your toddler needs therapy, you're not alone

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Should 2-year-olds be getting mental health counseling? Is it possible for a pre-schooler to need therapy?

You might think the answers to these questions are "no," but some experts disagree. In fact, they say there's a growing need for these kind of services.

That's why one suburban organization has raised almost \$500,000 through community gifts to launch an early childhood program that focuses on kids younger than 6.

"There's lots of services out there for developmental issues," says Christa Beall, development director for Palatine-based The Bridge Youth and Family Services. "But there are no programs that focus on pre-schoolers with behavioral challenges."

Some are quick to argue that all tots under the age of 6 are a challenge, and that it's just part of growing up.

But many doctors, psychiatrists and teachers say young children's mental health is too often ignored.

The Bridge hopes to change that by offering family counseling, play therapy and other services in the suburbs. The money raised was used to hire two full-time therapists to focus on the youngest clients. The program began last month.

Five years ago, The Bridge did a community needs assessment survey. The results: Families needed more help, but there was no one to refer them to.

"We've tried to find other people in the community to do these things, but couldn't find anyone," said associate director Gregg Stockey.

Tots being expelled?

Last year, a study released by Yale University's Child Study Center had a surprising result: Pre-kindergartners are expelled at more than three times the rate of K-12 students because of behavioral problems.

Some saw this report as a wake-up call to the emotional needs of young children.

"Five years ago, people said this was ridiculous. What are you going to do, sit with a baby?" said Beall. "Thankfully, this study came out."

Beall says that in the past couple years, there's been a change in philosophy when it comes

to how young is too young to get involved.

“Now people are very open to the idea,” she said.

Michael Feld, a child psychiatrist with a private practice in Northbrook, says early intervention is key.

“In the past, people just didn’t put as much energy into child psychology,” said Feld, who is also an adolescent and child psychologist with Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital in Hoffman Estates. “Now, there is more information that says the earlier you intervene, the better the long-term outcome is.”

He asks: If your child is troubled or struggling, why would you want to wait until he or she is 6 years old to get help?

The Yale study, released in May 2005, was the first of its kind, so there’s no way to tell if this is a trend or growing problem. For the study, researchers looked at pre-kindergarten programs serving 3- and 4-year-olds.

The study found that more than 5,000 students in state-funded pre-kindergarten classes are expelled each year. The results were based on a random sample of 4,815 classrooms in the country.

Parents cite need

Palatine parent Janet Zajler said she wishes this study was published years ago.

Since 1990, she’s been parenting five foster kids.

“I have always believed in early intervention services being very beneficial to young children,” Zajler says.

Two of her foster children were exposed during pregnancy to drugs and alcohol, which severely impacted their neurological, physical and social development.

They’ve used services at The Bridge and are thankful for what’s been accomplished. But Zajler says her children would have benefited had they started earlier.

“The community has to realize that young children in this age group cannot benefit from traditional talk therapy,” said Zajler. “When a young child’s development in these areas is impacted, it necessitates professionals working with them to help them overcome some of these obstacles.”

Zajler had to travel to Chicago when some of her foster kids needed early intervention because of sexual and physical abuse. The programs there did not relate to living in the suburbs, she said.

“There was no agency locally that could meet my needs,” she said. “The beauty of having a community-based resource like The Bridge is that schools can network with them — everyone works as a team.”

Making it work

Here’s how the new early education program at The Bridge works:

The first step is a phone screening to determine if the service is right for a family. Then an

interview is scheduled for an assessment of the child, parents and parent-child interaction.

After that, a treatment plan is generated.

"If the child is dealing with trauma, we might look into play therapy, where toys are used so children can express themselves," said Stockey. "Young children aren't able to say what is going on with them, so they use toys."

Other issues these youngsters could be dealing with are behavior problems, peer problems, defiance or extreme temper tantrums.

Preschools and other educational facilities can work on a referral basis with The Bridge, which is open to residents of Palatine, Schaumburg, Barrington, Elk Grove, Maine and Hanover townships. The program expects to serve 40 children this year, and officials think the number will grow after that.

Palatine Township Elementary District 15 already has a comprehensive program for both parents and children. But sometimes, there is a limit to the services they can provide.

"There is a real need for families that are looking for extra services beyond the school day and beyond the academic needs that are being addressed here and related to school performance," said Paul Budin, the district's coordinator of school social work services.

District 15 works with children under 6 and their parents for a variety of services, including parenting groups, play groups and social skills groups.

"If parents feel there is a need where a student would need more than can be provided during the school day or beyond parenting groups, we'd refer them to The Bridge," said Budin.

For more information, contact The Bridge at (847)359-7490.

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