

Behavioral Health Services: An Introductory Guide for Educators

Children and adolescents can have mental health disorders that interfere with the way they think, feel, and act. When untreated, mental health disorders can lead to school failure, family conflicts, drug abuse, violence, and even suicide. Children with emotional and/or behavioral disorders often need additional supports and services to be successful in their home, school, and community. This guide provides educators and administrators with an overview of information to assist in understanding Pennsylvania's system of behavioral health services for children and their families.



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What are behavioral health services?

A behavioral health service refers to a type of support or clinical intervention designed to address the specific mental health needs or substance abuse issues of a child and his or her family. A service could be provided only one time or repeated over a course of time, as determined by the child, family, and behavioral health professional.

Services are designed to meet the specific needs of each individual child and family and emphasizes building on the strengths of each child and family. Appropriate services are usually provided in the child's home, school, community, or a combination of all three environments. Community resources include not only behavioral health professionals and provider agencies but also social, religious and cultural organizations and other natural community support networks.

What are some common behavioral health services?

Inpatient Psychiatric

Inpatient psychiatric service refers to voluntary or involuntary psychiatric assessment and treatment within a hospital setting. Inpatient hospitalization may be needed when a child has tried to, or is at serious risk of, hurting himself/herself or others. A physician may also refer a child for hospitalization for the purpose of conducting a comprehensive evaluation or for an adjustment of medication that cannot be done safely on an outpatient basis.

Outpatient Services

Outpatient services consist of evaluation, diagnosis, and clinical treatment provided by behavioral health professionals, generally within a clinical setting. Services may include individual, group, and family therapy as well as visits with a psychiatrist to monitor medication.

What are some of the specialized services for children with behavioral health needs?

Behavioral Health Rehabilitation Services (BHRS)

Behavioral Health Rehabilitation Services are primarily for children who are eligible for Medical Assistance. BHRS refers to a set of highly individualized mental health interventions designed to support the child in his/her home, school, and community (e.g., mobile therapy, autism services, behavior specialist consultant, therapeutic staff support, multi systemic therapy (MST), functional family therapy (FFT), after-school programs). The primary goal of these services is to provide the needed supports to maintain a child in his/her own home.

Family-Based Mental Health Services (FBMHS)

Family-based mental health services is an intensive home and community-based, 32-week service for children/adolescents and their families which involves a two-therapist team providing individual and family therapy, family support, casework, and crisis management to youth who suffer from serious emotional/behavioral disturbances and serious mental illness.

Partial Hospitalization

Partial hospitalization services consist of day or evening programs that provide intensive, therapeutic, and rehabilitation services. Services may include, but are not limited to, individual and group therapy, activity-focused therapy, and psychiatric services such as evaluation, diagnosis, and medication management.

Host Home and Therapeutic Family Program

A host home or therapeutic family program refers to services that are conducted in a private residence of a family, other than the home of the child's parents, by individuals who are specifically trained to understand and manage the child's serious emotional and behavioral problems. The goal is to work with the child and the child's family in order for the child to return home.

Residential Treatment Facility (RTF)

Some children may benefit from treatment within a Residential Treatment Facility that provides 24-hour therapeutic care and supervision. Treatment includes medication management; individual, family, and group therapy; and various types of therapeutic, recreational, and skill-building activities.

Respite

Respite is a short-term service, out-of-home placement that provides a break for parents who have a child with a serious emotional disturbance. Trained parents or counselors take care of the child for a brief period of time to give families relief from the strain of caring for the child. This type of care can be provided in the family's home or in another location.

How are services coordinated?

Case management is a service that helps families arrange for appropriate services and supports. A case manager coordinates behavioral health, social work, educational, health, vocational, transportation, advocacy, respite care, and recreational services, as needed. The case manager makes sure that the changing needs of the child and family are met.

In addition, Pennsylvania has a comprehensive system of care approach referred to as the Child and Adolescent Service System Program (CASSP). The foundation of this approach is to ensure that services and treatment for children and adolescents with or at risk of serious emotional disorders are planned collaboratively with the family and all agencies involved in the child's life. Partnerships are critical to the success of any system of care.

CASSP coordinators often work closely with the interagency coordinator at the local Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) office or intermediate unit.

How can services best be coordinated between the child's school and the community?

Coordinating services involves the cooperation of everyone who has a role in serving a child with an emotional or behavioral disorder, including family members, behavioral health workers, social services, health services, the juvenile justice system, community and recreational agencies, and especially educators.

The various techniques for serving children with special needs include: wraparound planning, school-linked services, family support, individualized care, and multiple agency collaboration. All services emphasize the importance of bringing stakeholders together to work towards the common goal of serving the child.

If the behavioral health services will be provided in the school setting, it is strongly recommended that school staff be included as members of the treatment team. If behavioral health services will be provided outside of the school setting, but the child's behaviors impact the child while in the school setting, it is also recommended that school staff be included in the treatment team meetings. For example, for a student with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), the IEP team should invite the behavioral health professional(s) to the IEP team meeting. At the meeting, the identified behavior goals and specially-designed instruction listed on the IEP are coordinated with the treatment goals and interventions listed on the child's treatment plan. This way, the child will receive consistent support from school staff, behavioral health staff, and the family. Progress towards the identified goals can be monitored through planned contact between the identified school staff (e.g., teacher, counselor) and the identified behavioral health professional (e.g., behavior specialist, family based therapist, case manager). It is important that any significant changes be shared with the identified team members so that the child experiences continued success.

For more information about behavioral health services needed to help a child succeed in his/her educational program, contact the interagency coordinator at your local PaTTAN office or intermediate unit, or the local CASSP coordinator. A current list of local CASSP coordinators can be found at www.parecovery.org. Go to Guiding Principles, scroll down, and click on CASSP. A link to the list of coordinators is on that page.

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