Guest Editorial

Improving Children's Mental Health in Pakistan: Building Bridges Between Paediatrics & Psychiatry

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Introduction

Child and adolescent mental health is a critical issue worldwide because of the increasing challenges of modern life. Young people are facing a multitude of stressors including academic pressures, social media influences, family conflicts and socio-economic disparities.[1] Estimates suggest that the peak age of onset of any mental health disorder is 14.5 years and in 48.4% of people, mental health problems begin by the time they are 18 years old.[2] Therefore, early detection and intervention is paramount to minimise potentially long-term adverse effects. Although this is a global concern, the situation is amplified in developing countries where there is a scarcity of trained mental health professionals and limited facilities dedicated to child mental health resulting in difficulties accessing services.[3] The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 10-20% of children globally experience mental health difficulties, however only a fraction of this are able to receive adequate care.[4]

In recent decades there has been vast improvements in children's healthcare in Pakistan, however mental health remains a neglected area despite it being a growing concern. Existing services are limited in both quantity and quality because of a lack of both human and infrastructural resources.[5] Stigma and socio-cultural factors exacerbate challenges leaving many without the support they need.[5] This often results in delayed help seeking, delayed diagnosis and delayed management. It has been suggested that mental health disorders in low and middle income countries like Pakistan often go undiagnosed.[3] Despite the rapid escalation in need, it is highly unlikely that sufficient financial, human, and infrastructural resources will be made available in the near future.[6] In addition, a lack of comprehensive data and validated research tools makes it difficult to understand the true nature of the difficulties that children in Pakistan are facing. Therefore, initiatives and interventions to overcome this are required to work towards meeting the needs of the children of Pakistan.[7]

The current situation regarding children's psychological wellbeing in Pakistan needs much improvement and is of paramount importance. An initial attempt to begin to face some of these difficulties may be to involve and empower paediatricians. In this article we call for collaborative work between paediatricians and psychiatrists to break barriers and build bridges to overcome the considerable challenge ahead.

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Building Bridges between Paediatrics & Psychiatry

Paediatricians are often the first point of contact for parents in Pakistan which places them in prime position to play a pivotal role in advocating for children's optimum psychological development and wellbeing. Given the unique position that paediatricians have in the child's wider network, their input and involvement provides a prime opportunity within the paediatric setting.[3]

There are several ways in which paediatricians can advocate for children's psychological wellbeing including encouraging conscious and positive parenting principles which lead to supportive, responsive interactions between parents and their children. This is vital in promoting resilience and emotional well-being in children.[8] In addition, improving education and mental health literacy will help contribute to early identification and intervention.[9] The impact of socio-cultural stigma around openly and honestly discussing mental health should not be under-estimated. Paediatricians are valued members of society and are in an optimal position to help reduce stigma surrounding mental health. Public health campaigns can help normalise conversations around mental health.[9] Paediatricians can play an active role by providing educational materials during visits and engaging with community groups and schools. Targeting programs to increase awareness should be tailored to the diverse linguistic communities in Pakistan to help broaden their reach. Encouraging participation in community support groups will also promote children sharing their experiences and aim to reduce stigma by having open conversations about mental health.[9]

Parenting is undoubtedly challenging and teaching parents stress management strategies can directly and indirectly benefit children by providing coping strategies for both children and parents.[10] It can also be helpful to incorporate mental health screening into routine paediatric visits to further help identify difficulties sooner rather than later to ensure timely intervention and optimum management.[11]

There are several barriers that paediatricians may face including receiving limited formal training in children's mental health, leaving them feeling less well equipped to recognise and manage such young people.[3] Continued efforts should be made towards mental health training and professional development within paediatrics at both an undergraduate and postgraduate level.[12] A range of topics should be covered including recognising symptoms, risk factors, management, basic skills in psychoeducation, teaching communication skills and counselling techniques to support conversations with young people and parents.[12] Equipping paediatricians in such manner with the knowledge and skills they need will empower them to provide good quality holistic patient care.

Alongside improving awareness, openness and education around child mental health, more effort is required to improve research opportunities to gain a better understanding of the current situation in Pakistan.[7] Research is also crucial in developing a deeper understanding of socio-cultural stigma, community mental health literacy and overall attitudes towards mental health in society.[7] Such efforts would highlight and identify gaps which can help inform future policies as well guide the implementation of culturally appropriate interventions.[8]

Psychological wellbeing is an integral component of overall child health and bridging the gap in such manner forms an innovative perspective which will contribute to providing an enhanced, holistic and comprehensive healthcare provision. Building bridges between paediatricians and psychiatrists may prove to be a doable, beneficial, cost-effective and scalable approach. Both paediatricians and psychiatrists have the knowledge base and skill set to work systemically with families and to promote children's wellbeing.[8] This would aid the early detection of behavioural or emotional issues before they escalate into larger problems.[9] It is imperative that more funding is allocated to this important area, not just for short term benefits but also for longer term gains such as reducing the potential economic burden and improving the trajectory of children's lives and helping them to develop into productive members of society.

Improving children's mental health in Pakistan

requires a multifaceted approach with paediatrician's playing a key central role. Despite the clear and undisputed need for change, there are still significant barriers to overcome and targeted strategies must be implemented. Building bridges, empowering paediatricians, addressing barriers, increased funding and open dialogue about mental health will ignite and initiate bigger changes in the future.

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