

Community consults on children's mental health

By Tony Pearson

Mental illness is more than a health condition. It can handicap people to the point of rendering them economically and socially disadvantaged. This can begin in childhood. Mental illness ? showing up as learning difficulties or behavioural problems ? can reduce a young person's ability to advance academically. This in turn can hamper job prospects, and make it difficult to earn an independent living.

It's important to making the healthcare system more efficient, the school system more helpful, reducing social costs, and improving community economic health. That's why the regional Child Mental Health service (CMH), a provincial agency, as well as the district school system both provide mental health workers who can assist children and families.

However, these resources tend to get stretched to the breaking point. At the moment, the two CMH mental health workers who normally service North Hastings have had to take leave. The agency has set up floater positions to cover the gap. However, given there was a long time gap even before the vacancies, the situation remains less than fully satisfactory.

The CMH can do assessment and counselling, and offer family and caregiver training and support, as well as in-home emergency intervention. But identifying another obstacle, executive director Susan Sweetman believes that many who might benefit from agency programs don't know of its services, or how to contact it. That's one of the reasons she is co-ordinating a series of community consultations in centres around the county, including Bancroft. The other is to get a feel for the dimensions of unmet need.

She expects these sessions to take place in late March or early April.

One of the key worries is about children falling through the gaps ? failing to come to the attention of the agency best suited to help ? or worse, coming to attention only after a crisis. Untreated mental health issues in a child can wreak havoc on their family, as well as on their school. That's why co-ordination among helping organizations is a key component of any child protection and development strategy.

Children's Mental Health already works with North Hastings Children's Services (NHCS), Children's Aid, and the schools. Such collaboration is central to the recently announced NHCS Family Support Team initiative, part of Bancroft's overall community safety plan. The central concept here is for a large number of agencies ? including the OPP, local family health teams, and municipal governments ? to work together to strengthen families' abilities to develop safe and healthy lives.

NHCS area playgroups teach parents how to recognize and deal with mental health problems in their children. NHCS currently runs training in local schools about harassment and bullying, anger management and conflict mediation.

In addition, the school board provides classroom and small group programs. Schools have set up places where students can learn about dealing with violence, and increasing emotional wellbeing. School board staff participate in monthly meetings with CMS to identify gaps in local services, as well as staff learning needs. They encourage parents with concerns to contact their child's teacher or principal.

One additional focus of the Family Support project will be a reduction in the risks that can lead to domestic violence, whose effect on children can be shattering. As is well known, a major predictor for parental violence is a previous history of domestic violence. And nearly one in three Canadians has reported experiencing abuse before the age of 15.

So a central thrust of the Family Support program will be to increase knowledge of risk factors and awareness of support programs ? for parents and for children. If the number of families under stress and in crisis can be reduced as a result of increased knowledge and use of available services, then mental health problems in children will also decline.

Given what she suspects is a pool of unmet need for information and support in improving children's mental health, Sweetman will be strongly promoting the CMH local community forums as they are scheduled.