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A Community Approach to a Child's Overall Health & Wellbeing when Parents are Struggling with Their Own Mental Health

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Our emotional, psychological, and social health are a components of our overall well-being; Mental health is Health. Being mentally healthy influences caregivers' ability to support children's development and growth toward leading successful, healthy lives. A 2021 study found that 1 in 14 children have a caregiver that has poor mental health. Poor parental mental health during the developmental years of 0-8 years old is a significant predictor of greater distress through adulthood (Kamis, 2020). What does this mean when children and parents are struggling simultaneously and need supports? Access and availability of care can be limited. Locally, many agencies have current waitlists that extend out 6 months to just be able to start services. The mental healthcare system can be very daunting to navigate on your own when your focus is your own wellbeing, but what does that look like when it is the child and the caregiver struggling with their mental health. Implementation of comprehensive community programming to support the growth and development of children while supporting parent and family needs is integral to a societal mental and well-being change.

The American Journal of Psychiatry published a longitudinal study in 2006 that followed children with depressed parents for twenty years to gain perspective around the impact on their development and mental health. Parental poor mental health can be directly related to the struggles with children's overall mental and physical health. The study found that the children were three times more at risk for mental health and substance disorders that children of non-depressed parents. Parents' symptoms can impact their ability to respond and support children to the



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best of their ability. Access to care, lack of natural supports and community resources can have a negative impact on parent's mental health especially when parenting alone can create challenges for caregivers. Additionally, children and parents may share similar risk factors such as but not limited to family history of mental health challenges, community violence, traumatic life experiences, and discrimination. Development of protective factors can improve or support children's well-being; a few examples are a strong relationship with parent, natural supports like family and close friends, good coping and communication skills that support an individual's ability to express themselves and their emotions effectively (Mental Health America, 2023, Weissman, et al, 2006).

An essential component toward improving the system and working to rectify the barriers and challenges in access are programs like Allendale's Community Support Services Program (CSSP). Community programming that works to bridge gaps of siloed supports and establish a community of care that comprehensively wrap around the client(child) and the family. Client centered perspective that focuses on the client within their environments, and how each impact the other. To best support a child who is struggling with their mental health, we all need to look at the systems that support the child's development, familial, social, and societal. CSSP has a team of three that leads the tool building efforts of the client. The therapist provided individual and family therapy to support connection and relational growth within the family unit while supporting skill development in being able to stabilize the presenting mental health challenges. The family support specialist provides peer support with shared similar lived experiences and helps parents gain skills and access to community supports. The community support specialist works directly with the client (child) to support (re)integration into the community providing support in practicing gained skills to living a successful adult



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life. This type of accessing supports needs to be provided at all levels of care so that sustainable system change is attainable, and promotion of the mental health and well-being of the family is at the forefront of providers minds.

Mental health should not be an individual challenge. There should not be stigma or shame that comes with a diagnosis. The adage that it is take a village to raise a child does not change and in fact becomes even more of a needed support when mental health may be challenged. When someone has a sprain, break or physical challenge, people are inclined to seek help, this must become an acceptable norm for those where their emotional, psychological, and social health are challenged. The system must adapt and change to support this and community support programs like CSSP are leading the charge in doing so. Care of the client, parents and family unit are needed to create stabilization and enhance the ability for children to thrive.

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