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Unleashing the Power of Prevention

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Prevention is the best investment we can make in behavioral health—and the time to make it is now.

Over the past 30 years, a large body of scientific evidence has shown that behavioral health problems can be prevented. We have proof that prevention works: longitudinal studies have identified malleable individual and environmental risk factors that predict wide-ranging behavioral health problems, including anxiety and depression; autism; self-inflicted injury; risky sexual behaviors; unwanted pregnancies; obesity; risky driving; alcohol, tobacco and other drug use; delinquent behavior, violence and aggressive behavior; and dropping out of school. Research has also identified personal attributes and protective environmental influences that buffer or minimize the adverse effects of exposure to risk. These discoveries laid the foundation for developing and testing new preventive interventions. Over the past three decades, more than 50 programs have been found effective in controlled studies of interventions aimed at preventing behavioral health problems in children, adolescents, and young adults.

Now that we know that preventive interventions are effective, the challenge is to scale up, expanding them in order to achieve population-wide reductions in behavioral health problems. Reducing risk and enhancing protection among all young people will reduce the rates of behavioral health problems. Preventing problems before they occur reduces human suffering and obviates costly punitive responses to these problems from law enforcement, child welfare, mental health, or juvenile justice systems.

Example of effective prevention

Progress has been made in preventing early conduct problems and aggression through effective prevention programs.

The Incredible Years is a proven selective intervention designed to reduce child conduct problems by improving parenting skills and increasing parent involvement in school.

A controlled trial has shown that group parent training provided in pediatric clinics reduced negative parenting, child disruptive behaviors, and negative parent-child interactions.

Perrin E.C., Sheldrick R.C., McMenamy J.M., Henson B.S., & Carter A.S. (2014). Improving parenting skills for families of young children in pediatric settings: A randomized clinical trial. *JAMA Pediatrics*. 168(1):16-24.

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MISSION of SDRG

To understand and promote healthy behaviors and positive social development among diverse populations, we:

- ◆ Conduct research on factors that influence development
- ◆ Develop and test the effectiveness of interventions
- ◆ Study service systems and work to improve them
- ◆ Advocate for science-based solutions to health and behavior problems
- ◆ Disseminate knowledge, tools, and expertise produced by this research

THE NEXT TEN YEARS: DESIRED PREVENTION OUTCOMES

1. Develop and increase public awareness of the advances and cost savings of effective preventive interventions that promote healthy behaviors for all.
2. Ensure that 10% of all public funds spent on young people support effective prevention programs.
3. Implement community-assessment and capacity-building tools that guide communities to systematically assess and prioritize risk and protective factors, and select and implement evidence-based prevention programs that target prioritized factors.
4. Establish and implement criteria for preventive interventions that are effective, sustainable, equity enhancing, and cost beneficial.
5. Increase infrastructure to support the high-quality implementation of preventive interventions.
6. Monitor and increase access of children, youth, and young adults to effective preventive interventions.
7. Create workforce development strategies to prepare practitioners in health and human service professions for new roles in promotion and preventive interventions.

It is imperative that strategies to bring preventive interventions to scale pursue the dual objectives of overall population health and health equity for the most vulnerable and underserved populations. The health and human service professions can play a transformative role in promoting a focus on prevention in health care and education. The emphasis on prevention in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) creates a major new opportunity to address this emerging grand challenge over the next decade. The ACA's focus on prevention and early intervention could save as much as \$1 trillion every year.

We lay down the goal of reducing the incidence and prevalence of behavioral health problems in the

population of young people from birth through age 24 by 20% from current levels and to reduce racial and socioeconomic disparities in behavioral health problems by 20% over the next decade. To achieve this, we set forth seven desired prevention outcomes (see insert above). These outcomes are meaningful, measurable, and achievable through a new era of interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration.

It is time to unleash the power of prevention by creating programs, training, and infrastructures that put prevention to work nationwide for all young people, resulting in healthier lives, families, communities, and economies. The time for a new age of prevention is now.

For additional information on this topic, please refer to the original publications:

Hawkins, J. David, Jenson, Jeffrey M., Catalano, Richard F., Fraser, Mark W., Botvin, Gilbert J., Shapiro, Valerie B., Brown, C. Hendricks, Beardslee, William, Brent, David, Leslie, Laurel K., Rotheram Borus, Mary Jane, Shea, Pat, Shih, Andy, Anthony, Elizabeth, Haggerty, Kevin P., Bender, Kimberly, Gorman-Smith, Deborah, Casey, Erin, Stone, Susan (2015). [Unleashing the power of prevention \(Discussion Paper\)](#). Washington, DC: Institute of Medicine and National Research Council.

Hawkins, J. David, Jenson, Jeffrey M., Catalano, Richard F., Fraser, Mark W., Botvin, Gilbert J., Shapiro, Valerie B., Brown, C. Hendricks, Beardslee, William, Brent, David, Leslie, Laurel K., Rotheram Borus, Mary Jane, Shea, Pat, Shih, Andy, Anthony, Elizabeth, Haggerty, Kevin P., Bender, Kimberly, Gorman-Smith, Deborah, Casey, Erin, Stone, Susan (2015). [A challenge to unleash the power of prevention \(Commentary\)](#). Washington, DC: Institute of Medicine and National Research Council.