

Winchester parent has personal stake in week of Mental Health ...

On Monday night, the McCall Middle School hosted a "Caregiver's Night Out," in recognition of Children's Mental Health Awareness Week, which extends from May 3 to May 9.

Every year, the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, a national organization, dedicates a week to combating the stigma associated with mental illness.

Winchester resident Cara Falconi, Director of Programming for Children and adolescents for the National Alliance for Mental Illness, has been intimately involved in mental health awareness for the past decade as both a special education counselor and a mother of a child with mental health disorders.

About four years ago Falconi adopted her 9-year-old son Ian, who suffers from bi-polar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and reactive attachment disorder.

"Unlike most parents who don't know what they're getting into, I adopted my son," she said. "It definitely comes with a lot of challenges."

Since she adopted Ian, Falconi said he has made significant progress. He won two gold medals in the N.H. Ski Special Olympics this winter, plays on a Winchester baseball team and swims at the local YMCA.

"We still have our ups and downs and will forever, I imagine, but nothing will stop him from discovering life," she said.

Falconi discussed some of the key issues families have to deal with regarding mental health problems, and the importance of acknowledging the existence of mental health issues in children.

A: Extremely important. There is a growing need and concern for advancing awareness of children's mental health needs. A lot of people do not realize that children and adolescents have social, emotional, and behavioral disabilities that are real, painful, and costly. These disorders are a huge stress for children and their families, schools, and the community. The number of youth who are affected by mental illness is significant; it is estimated that as many as one in every five children and adolescents may have a mental health disorder that can be identified and require treatment. Diagnosis and treatment are just as crucial for youth with mental illness as it is for youth with medical issues.

A: In the past, the evidence base for treatment of children with mental health problems has been limited, but recently, that evidence base has expanded. For example, new clinical trials of children on psychotropic drugs are happening more often and resources have been devoted to developing and testing new psychotherapeutic and psychosocial interventions. The improvement of the evidence-based treatments has made it easier and more socially acceptable to treat children. Also, with these new interventions, fewer children are getting "stuck" in inpatient care. Historically, inpatient hospital stays and residential treatment were used as a treatment modality for months, even years at a time, but now, instead of using those services as a treatment modality, they are more frequently used today for crisis intervention and respite; this allows children to be returned to their families quicker and with effective community and home based services already in place.

A: That is a great question because mental illness not only affects the child, but the entire family. There are lots of things a family can do to cope, but I always tell family members the three things I wish I had learned sooner in parenting my son who has mental illness: (1) You can not cure a mental illness, (2) it is not the child's fault or the parent's fault and (3) do not be ashamed of the child's diagnosis. Stay attuned to the current trends in the field and do your own research on your child's illness and treatment options; talk to other parents who have gone through it. Parents should become the best advocate for their child in school and in the community and have high, but realistic expectation for your child. Take advantage of social supports for your child and family, whether that means joining a support group, going to educational/support programs or using a respite service. Do things as a family and do not isolate the identified child.

A: Well, I do not work in Winchester so I can not speak for them, but what I do know from being involved with the town's Special Education PAC, is that the schools are looking much more closely now at accommodating school-age children with mental illness, to help prevent those students from having to be placed out of district. Also, the PAC has sponsored several different events that address a variety of disabilities, including mental illness. The Recreation Department, Kidstock and some programs at the YMCA are very willing to accommodate children's mental health needs in order for them to be successful in the community. Right up the street in Woburn is the National Alliance of Mental Illness Massachusetts, which provides education, advocacy and support for families, professionals and school staff dealing with youth who have mental illness.

A: People need to share their stories, reach out to their community and get involved in making a difference so that awareness will spread and the stigma of mental illness will fade away.

About the Author

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