



## EDITORIAL

## Child and adolescent psychiatry: Challenges and Advances in Youth Mental Health



### Psiquiatría infantil: desafíos y avances en la salud mental de los más jóvenes

Azucena Díez Suárez<sup>a,\*</sup>, Pedro Javier Rodríguez Hernández<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Clinica Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain*

<sup>b</sup> *Hospital Universitario Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain*

As coordinators of the virtual special issue “Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: Challenges and Advances in Youth Mental Health,” we are very proud that the place of mental health in pediatrics is being recognized, and that this is expressed in our journal, ANALES DE PEDIATRÍA. This special issue on mental health is the result of the synergy that emerged from our collaborative work as a group of professionals who address issues affecting children and adolescents. It may come as a surprise, but its publication represents a historic milestone, as we have managed to bring together both pediatricians and child psychiatrists (who are not pediatricians) in authoring some of the articles.

For decades, but especially since the COVID pandemic, many pediatricians have been expressing concern about the large number of office and emergency department visits related to mental health, as well as their difficulties in addressing them due to a lack of training. In a survey published in 2023 with participation of 1104 pediatricians,<sup>1</sup> For decades, but especially since the COVID pandemic, many pediatricians have been expressing concern about the large number of office and emergency department visits related

to mental health, as well as their difficulties in addressing them due to a lack of training. In a survey published in 2023 with participation of 1104 pediatricians,<sup>1</sup> more than 95% of them had noticed this deterioration in the mental health of children and adolescents; 85% of them reported not feeling sufficiently trained to provide care for these issues in their patients, and only 37% reported that they found it easy to coordinate care with psychiatry and mental health teams. Training in mental health, starting in undergraduate medical education but more so during the residency in pediatrics, continues to be insufficient. Pediatricians with a special interest in mental health continue to encounter difficulties in coordinating care with child and adolescent psychiatry teams. Some of the possible reasons for these difficulties are the continued stigma surrounding mental health issues, especially when it comes to children; the potential confusion between difficult life situations and actual mental health disorders; the conditions in pediatric primary care settings, where providers do not have enough time or resources; and the lack of resources dedicated to prevention through healthy lifestyles and early detection programs, among others.

We believe that the topics we have covered provide practical guidance for some of the most common or concerning situations that lead families to seek help at pediatric clinics: *the impact of excessive screen use on development and mental and physical health, the role of pediatricians in the*

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [adiezs@unav.es](mailto:adiezs@unav.es) (A. Díez Suárez).

*detection, prevention, and treatment of eating disorders, somatization, and the use of psychotropic drugs in the pediatric population.*

## Impact of screen and social media use on mental health<sup>2</sup>

The current evidence shows that the excessive use of digital devices is associated with difficulties in emotional self-regulation, especially when it interferes with socialization and family interaction, unstructured group play, or sleep. This causes increased anxiety and irritability, which affects emotional and behavioral development. In addition, prolonged exposure to social media increases isolation and has an impact on self-esteem due to negative comparisons.

## Eating disorders: Involvement of pediatricians in their prevention, early detection, evaluation and multidisciplinary management<sup>3</sup>

Eating disorders (EDs) are mental health conditions with a significant impact on physical health, especially in the case of disorders associated with malnutrition. Their complexity requires an interdisciplinary approach; in the vast majority of cases, pediatricians are the professionals in the best position to detect them, and early intervention is key to improve outcomes. Pediatricians also play a key role in the prevention of EDs through the promotion of a healthy relationship with food and body image, as well as in their detection and initial management, ensuring early intervention to stabilize the patient while coordinating the delivery of specialized care.

## Impact of digital media on development and physical health<sup>4</sup>

There is extensive evidence on the impact of excessive screen and social media use on physical health. Links with overweight, obesity, and cardiorespiratory fitness have been established. Poor posture hinders musculoskeletal development, and the interference of certain light spectra with circadian rhythms has been found to be associated with sleep disturbances. Finally, prolonged exposure contributes to visual fatigue and dry eye. Awareness of these effects can allow pediatricians to better counsel families on how to set appropriate limits and detect early signs of emotional distress or physical signs to find an adequate balance between technology and parenting.

## Somatization in childhood and adolescence: a guide to facilitate its understanding<sup>5</sup>

It is estimated that 25% of children frequently complain of pain or other symptoms in the absence of compatible findings in the medical evaluation. Somatization disorders, hypochondria or health anxiety, and conversion disorders are conditions that can severely limit the lives of children, adolescents, and their families. Somatization is associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression over the lifespan. It

commonly leads to the performance of unnecessary tests and significant health care costs, which could be avoided if the nature of these disorders was properly recognized. Myths about somatization are common, and all health care providers who care for children and adolescents should be familiar with them and know how to debunk them.

## Psychotropic medications<sup>6</sup>

The use of psychotropic drugs in children is growing. The most widely used are psychostimulants for treatment of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), atypical antipsychotics, such as risperidone, for treatment of severe behavioral disorders, and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) for treatment of anxiety and mood disorders. When used with caution and while monitoring treatment, they contribute to the symptomatic control of many behavioral and affective disorders and can enhance the effectiveness of other therapeutic modalities, such as psychotherapy.

## Closing comments

We hope that this virtual special issue will contribute, combined with other educational activities, to improve the training of all pediatricians, young or experienced, whether they are particularly interested in this topic or just want to know how to “get through” these situations. We will continue to work on it.

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