Communication Skills for Child Health Care Professionals

Overview

Too many children do not receive the mental health services they need. While children from low income, rural and minority communities are most severely affected, even children from affluent families may not receive essential care, as the tragic events in Newtown, Connecticut demonstrate.

Child health care professionals are uniquely positioned to help children with behavioral and mental health concerns, yet many clinicians do not feel a high level of confidence in their skills for engaging patients and families around these issues. The research evidence and our direct experience indicate that many pediatric primary care clinicians could benefit from further training in assessing, diagnosing, treating and managing children’s mental health issues and providing effective education and support to parents.

Researchers (Wissow, 2008) cite evidence in the literature for the significant prevalence of pediatric mental health conditions. Between 12% and 20% of American children have mental health conditions serious enough to warrant treatment. Virtually all such children are seen in primary care, but very few receive needed mental health services. In addition, many additional children whose mental health problems do not meet the criteria for diagnosable disorders have behavioral problems that may abate with treatment and may progress to mental health disorders if left untreated. Fewer than half of parents or other caregivers of children with psychosocial concerns disclose such concerns to primary care providers. The research evidence shows that such disclosure gaps are wider for children in minority families. Even when parents disclose behavioral health concerns and receive referrals for mental health services, an estimated 40% of such referrals are never completed. Many factors contribute to these disheartening statistics: broadly stated, these gaps reflect pervasive failures of communication and engagement. Training focused specifically on communication skills has been found to exert a profound and positive influence on parental disclosure of children’s behavioral health concerns and on every phase of treatment and management. Many families do not seek needed help because of fear of stigmatization and embarrassment. The literature is clear: providers’ specific, validated communication skills improve parents’ willingness to share concerns with their children’s primary care providers. Even brief training is helpful, and clinicians are hungry for efficient ways to augment their skills.
This communication skills training workshop, developed collaboratively by the REACH Institute and the Institute for Healthcare Communication, is predicated on the significant and acute need among pediatric providers for stronger skills and greater confidence managing children’s mental health issues such as ADHD and other related behavioral-emotional disorders. This one-day communication skills training program will provide pediatric clinicians with hands-on coaching to increase their skills in working with children and families with ADHD and other mental health disorders.

**Audience**

This brief, intense and interactive program is targeted toward active and direct providers of pediatric medical care or mental health care: physicians, nurse practitioners, psychologists, clinical social workers and others in caregiving or counseling professions.

Capacity is limited to 50 learners; the Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation, whose generous support makes this program possible, requires preferential registration for pediatric primary care clinicians from within Foundation's catchment area (Erie and Niagara Counties, NY and Barnstable, Dukes, Essex, and Nantucket Counties, MA).

If registration exceeds capacity, a waiting list will be created.

**Content**

The focus of the program is how to employ core communication skills to more effectively engage child patients with behavioral health needs and their caregivers. These core skills include:

- Active listening,
- Empathic statements,
- Nonverbal communication, and
- Open-ended questions

Faculty will demonstrate role-play exercises based on vignettes drawn from actual patients’ and families’ narratives. Learners will participate in role-plays in small groups, facilitated by a triad of a mental health professional, a primary care professional and a parent. The small group sessions are designed to give learners a safe and supportive environment in which they can practice specific skills, with expert facilitation and group feedback.

Skills practice will encompass the full range of clinical encounters, from initial engagement, through active information-sharing and eventual shared decision-making.
Expectations

Learners are expected to participate in all activities in the workshop, including communication skills practice in small groups, and to participate in the full program (8:00 AM to 5:00 PM). To minimize distraction, REACH and IHC recommend that learners be freed from additional work-related tasks for the duration of the training.

This program is a pilot workshop, and learners’ thorough and thoughtful feedback is essential for making the content and presentation as effective as possible. We expect learners to complete pre- and post-workshop assessments and provide us with their feedback.

Learning Objectives

Learning objectives for participants include their ability to:

1. Cite three common barriers to effective clinician-patient communication around mental health,
2. Describe four communication skills for effective engagement with patients/caregivers, and
3. Describe the process for shared decision-making with patients/caregivers.

Methodology

Participants in this communication skills training conference will learn about, observe, and receive hands-on practice in the essential skills for working with patients and their caregivers. We will employ varied teaching methodologies, with an emphasis on active learning. There will be didactic learning through a plenary panel of experts who will introduce key concepts around pediatric mental health and communication skills, demonstrations of key skills and small group experiential learning opportunities for practicing skills with expert facilitation.

Faculty

Course leadership is shared by Peter Jensen, MD, founder of the REACH Institute, Kathleen Bonvicini, MPH, EdD, Chief Executive Officer of the Institute for Healthcare Communication (IHC), and David L. Kaye, M.D., Medical Director, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry for Primary Care (CAPPC) Program. Presenters and small group facilitators include mental health professionals, primary care professionals and parent partners, all trained by the REACH Institute or the IHC.
CME

The University at Buffalo is accredited by the ACCME to sponsor CME for physicians. The UB School of Medicine & Biomedical Sciences designates this live activity for a maximum of 6.5 *AMA PRA Category 1 Credit(s)™*. Physicians should claim only the credit commensurate with the extent of their participation in the activity.

Works Cited


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