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## ***Early Detection of Psychological Disorders***

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ARTIFICIAL  
INTELLIGENCE

& SUSTAINABLE  
EDUCATIONAL  
TOOLS

FOR THE  
PREVENTION OF

TEENAGERS'  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
DISORDERS.

AN ERASMUS+  
PROJECT

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MENTAL  
HEALTH

TRAINING

TECHNOLOGY

EDUCATION



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# Actions and Referrals

## Risk & Protective Factors

Identifying adolescents who may be experiencing mental health problems is crucial for early intervention and the prevention of long-term consequences. Mental health issues are complex and multifactorial, influenced by a wide range of factors that can be categorized into two main groups: **risk factors**, which increase vulnerability to developing a mental disorder; and **protective factors**, which strengthen resilience and promote well-being. For a comprehensive and effective approach to mental health, it is essential to focus on identifying and mitigating risk factors while actively fostering protective factors. Importantly, many of these factors are shared across different mental disorders, emphasizing the need for a holistic perspective on mental health promotion.



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# Actions and Referrals

## Risk & Protective Factors

While some risk and protective factors are beyond our control—such as genetic predisposition to certain conditions—it remains crucial to acknowledge their presence and pay close attention to the adolescent’s behavior. At the same time, we can strengthen those aspects that are within our reach. For instance, while we cannot change an individual’s genetic vulnerability, we can encourage physical activity, which is a key protective factor for maintaining both physical and mental health. By understanding these influences, we can better support adolescents in building resilience and navigating challenges, ultimately fostering their overall well-being. Below, we present a list of risk and protective factors to help identify potential areas for intervention and support.



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## Risk Factors

- Low self-esteem
- Anxiety
- Poor social skills (e.g. shyness)
- Extreme need for approval
- Emotional problems in childhood
- Positive attitude towards drugs
- Poor parenting
- Marital conflict and family conflict
- Parents with mental health problems
- Peer rejection, loneliness
- Poor academic commitment
- School/community/family violence
- Traumatic event
- Overly permissive or authoritarian families



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## Protective Factors

- Positive physical development
- Academic development
- High self-esteem
- Emotional self-regulation
- Good coping skills
- Family provides structure
- Supportive relationships with family
- Clear expectations for behavior and values
- Presence of mentors
- Support for development of skills and interests
- Opportunities for engagement within school and community

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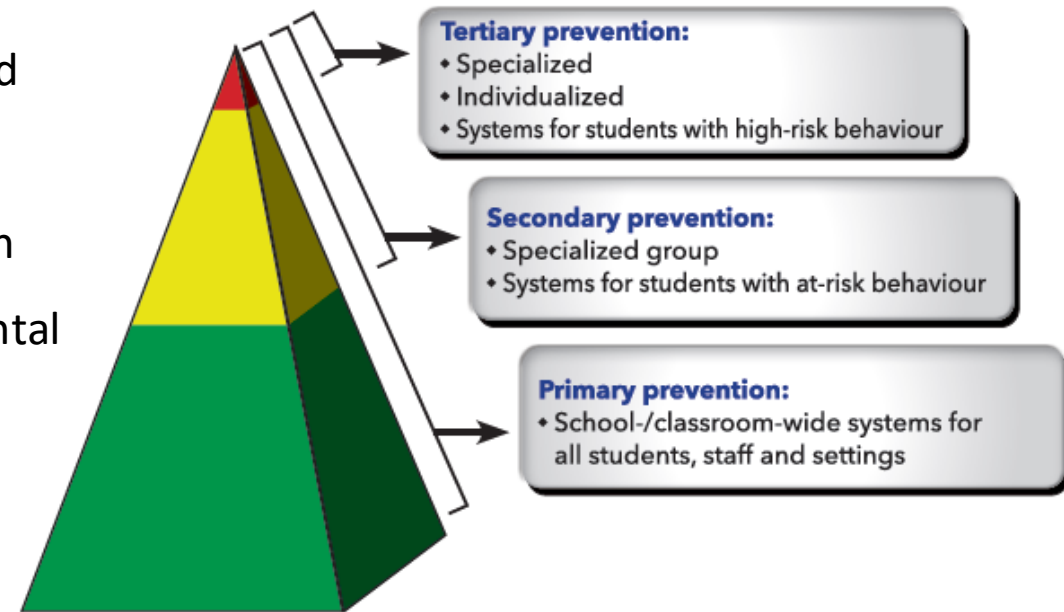


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## Levels of prevention

It is not necessary for teachers to determine whether a child has a mental disorder, nor to diagnose a child with a mental disorder.

Attempting to diagnose children risks inappropriately labelling a child, alienating children and their parents, and requires specialized training. Rather, it is important for teachers to understand how to support the mental health of all students in the classroom, including those with mental health problems and disorders, and to determine when mental health problems are severe enough to require additional help from family members and/or a mental health specialist.



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## Behavioural management strategies for schools

Discipline is a key part of school life, ensuring a structured and respectful environment. Various strategies are used to manage behavior, but it is crucial to prioritize methods that support students' development. Negative discipline techniques, such as corporal punishment, harsh criticism, or threats, should never be used, as they can increase aggression, lower self-esteem, and negatively impact emotional well-being. Instead, positive discipline techniques are far more effective in promoting good behavior. Setting clear expectations, reinforcing positive actions, and applying fair consequences encourage students to develop self-regulation and respect for others. A supportive approach not only improves behavior but also fosters a safe and motivating learning atmosphere, helping students grow both academically and emotionally.

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## Tips to manage disruptive behaviours

- The most effective approach is to focus on prevention by establishing a structured classroom routine that reduces opportunities for misbehavior.
- Setting clear, reasonable, and consistent boundaries is essential, as unpredictable or constantly changing rules can lead to confusion and frustration.
- In some cases, ignoring minor inappropriate behaviors may be effective, but only when they do not involve harm to the child, others, or property. It is important to note that initially, ignoring may cause an increase in the behavior as the child seeks attention before it eventually decreases.
- When possible, redirecting or distracting the student can be a useful strategy. For instance, if a student begins to disrupt the class, engaging them by asking a question, having them read aloud, or involving another student in the discussion can shift their focus and discourage further misbehavior.

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## Tips to manage disruptive behaviours

- Let children experience natural consequences of their actions when safe to do so, as this teaches valuable lessons. For instance, if a child is mean to a classmate who then avoids them, discuss the situation instead of forcing interaction. This helps them understand the impact of their behavior and motivates them to find better ways to interact.
- Guide students in developing decision-making skills by offering simple choices and discussing how their decisions affect both themselves and others.
- When disruptive behavior occurs, teach alternative responses such as engaging in productive tasks, taking short breaks to regroup within the classroom, or helping with other activities in the building. If a student becomes too upset, allow them time and space to calm down before rejoining activities.

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## Tips to manage disruptive behaviours

- Work collaboratively with students to establish detailed waiting procedures, such as counting to ten followed by raising their hand and making eye contact with the teacher.
- Focus on teaching and reinforcing constructive behaviors including sharing, negotiating, and working together with peers.
- To facilitate smooth transitions between activities, implement a countdown system where you announce remaining time at regular intervals, such as every minute for the last five minutes.
- Make a conscious effort to provide specific praise throughout the day, recognizing students' accomplishments and positive behaviors. Pay particular attention to acknowledging when they successfully regulate their emotions after experiencing disruption, and ensure they receive positive reinforcement for appropriate conduct. This targeted praise helps reinforce desired behaviors and creates a supportive learning environment.

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## Tips to manage disruptive behaviours

- When facing resistance to instructions, reframe the situation around student choice and consequences. For example, explain that choosing not to complete work now means either additional homework or staying after school.
- Establish clear boundaries regarding aggressive behavior at the start of the academic year, when students are receptive and calm. Set explicit expectations about personal space (like maintaining specific distances in line), communication etiquette (waiting for others to finish speaking), physical boundaries (keeping hands to oneself), and respectful interaction with peers. These guidelines should be communicated clearly and specifically, with concrete examples that students can easily understand and follow.
- Importantly, maintain consistency, predictability, and fairness in your disciplinary approach to ensure students understand and respect the established behavioral framework.

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## Tips to manage disruptive behaviours

- Educate students about anger management by helping them understand how anger develops and what specifically triggers their emotional responses. Guide them to express their feelings through words rather than aggressive actions.
- When students show signs of frustration or opposition, begin by acknowledging their emotional state and validating their feelings - for instance, recognizing their disappointment when following correct steps still leads to incorrect answers. Then, guide them toward constructive alternatives by presenting choices. For example, offer them the option to either attempt a new problem using the same method or revisit the current problem together, carefully examining each step to identify where the error occurred. This approach combines emotional awareness with practical problem-solving strategies.



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## Tips to manage disruptive behaviours

- Implement time-outs as a behavioral management strategy by temporarily removing students from challenging situations, with duration typically matching their age in minutes.
- Recognize and reinforce positive behavior by communicating successes to parents through encouraging notes sent home. When correction is necessary, maintain a composed demeanor, delivering reprimands without displaying anger or hostility.
- Foster a sense of community and collective responsibility by using inclusive language when giving instructions - for example, emphasizing group membership with phrases like "we need" and "we can." This approach helps students feel part of a larger community while following directions.



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## When to refer to a specialist

- When behaviours/symptoms are getting worse rather than better.
- When behaviours/symptoms are negatively impacting the child's functioning at home or at school.
- When symptoms are severe or distressing.
- When there is risk or danger towards self or others.
- When classroom interventions in the classroom alone are not enough.

**In case of doubt, ask for a professional evaluation!**



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# Actions and Referrals

## **Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**

When an adolescent attends psychological therapy, it is common for the practitioner to use Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This evidence-based approach has the most scientific support for addressing a wide range of psychological difficulties, including anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and behavioural problems. CBT combines strategies from both the cognitive and behavioural models, as its name suggests. The cognitive model focuses on how individuals process and interpret information from their environment. It helps adolescents identify and challenge maladaptive or irrational thoughts that contribute to emotional distress. By learning to reframe these thoughts, they can develop healthier perspectives and improve their emotional well-being.



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## **Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**

The behavioural model, on the other hand, emphasizes modifying behavioural patterns through structured techniques such as exposure therapy, reinforcement strategies, and behavioural activation. These methods help adolescents replace unhelpful habits with more adaptive coping mechanisms.

By integrating both cognitive and behavioural strategies, CBT provides adolescents with practical tools to manage emotions, develop problem-solving skills, and build resilience. Research consistently shows that this approach is highly effective in treating various disorders, making it one of the most recommended therapies for young people struggling with emotional and behavioural challenges.



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# Actions and Referrals

## Other professionals

In some cases, the psychologist may recommend involving a psychiatrist, a medical doctor specializing in mental health. Psychiatrists are the only professionals who can prescribe medication, which should always be complemented by psychological therapy. Effective communication between the psychologist and psychiatrist ensures comprehensive, coordinated care tailored to the adolescent's needs.

When seeking help, you may encounter individuals promoting unscientific methods based on pseudo-therapies or mystical beliefs. It is essential to verify a practitioner's credentials, including their academic degree and registration number, to ensure proper training and regulation. Additionally, the therapist's style and personality influence the therapeutic relationship. If the adolescent does not feel comfortable with a professional, do not be discouraged—finding the right therapist is key to effective treatment.



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# Actions and Referrals

## Skills of a good teacher

- Understands different developmental stages of the adolescent, setting age-appropriate tasks
- Is empathetic: recognizes feelings and reflects these back to students
- Is attuned to both the verbal and non-verbal communications of students
- Communicates effectively and clearly
- Makes student behavioural expectations clear and establishes limits that benefit and provide useful structure for the student
- Arranges the physical and interpersonal environment of the classroom in such a way to optimize teaching and minimize disruptive behaviour



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# Actions and Referrals

## Caring for all

Creating a caring and inclusive environment requires intentional actions that make students feel valued. Recognizing and celebrating each student's unique talents fosters self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Equally important is ensuring fairness and inclusion, where no student faces discrimination, and all are treated with respect and support. A culture of understanding must be nurtured, where students facing difficulties are seen as needing help rather than as a burden. Additionally, a clear mechanism for handling complaints is essential, providing students with a trusted process to voice concerns. By reinforcing these principles, educators can cultivate a safe, supportive environment where all students feel empowered, respected, and secure in their community.



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# Actions and Referrals

## Valuing diversity

Encouraging students to appreciate diversity—whether in ethnicity, religion, or disability status—enhances education by fostering understanding and mutual respect. Teachers play a crucial role in shaping positive attitudes toward children with special needs, helping other students recognize how to support and interact with peers who may seem different. For instance, a student assisting a classmate in a wheelchair promotes empathy and inclusion.

Practical strategies to encourage diversity include implementing a buddy system, which fosters friendships and support networks. Integrating students with special educational needs into mainstream classrooms benefits all students by improving social skills and empathy. Additionally, encouraging students to take pride in their backgrounds, heritage, and culture during school activities helps create an inclusive environment where diversity is celebrated.



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## Building self-esteem

Schools play a fundamental role in students' self-esteem, and staff have a substantial impact on how students see themselves and how they are shaped for the future. Being in situations where they consistently experience failure at school usually has a detrimental impact on self-esteem in students. Similarly, when students have success at school, when they correct their mistakes, when staff have them do tasks (even "chores") that show confidence in the student, it builds self-esteem.

When students know that staff understand how they felt about something or why an action seemed to make sense, they develop greater self-esteem (e.g. "Yes, I can see how it made sense at that moment to just scream back at that person, it was scary; how do you feel that worked out?")

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## Building self-esteem

### Practical steps

#### For older students:

- Assign responsibilities and leadership roles, such as organizing field trips or rotating classroom chores.
- Prioritize praise over reprimands, aiming for five positive comments for every negative one.
- Encourage cooperation instead of competition, recognizing teamwork and peer support.
- Allow older students to mentor younger ones, helping them with reading or social interactions.

#### For younger students:

- Create activities that help them showcase their skills and build confidence.
- Make a “I Am Special” or “Things I Am Good At” book to highlight their strengths and share with the group.
- Do the “My Hand” activity, where children trace their hands and write a positive trait on each finger.
- Use scripted role plays or puppets to help them navigate emotions like sadness, anger, or worry.
- Make bead bracelets where each bead represents something they like about themselves, then discuss their meaning with the group.



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## Building relationships

Good relationships between students and teachers, as well as among students, are crucial for emotional development, fostering trust and responsibility. Strong relationships are linked to better cognitive and emotional outcomes, while poor relationships can lead to depression and absenteeism for both students and teachers. Identifying each student's strengths helps them feel valued. Teachers model positive relationships, and when these are collaborative, students are more likely to adopt similar behaviors. Parental involvement is key to student success, higher attendance, and a positive school climate. Effective communication with parents, modeled with respect, helps create consistency between school and home, reinforcing skills learned in both environments.



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## Ensuring safety

It is crucial for children to feel physically and emotionally safe at school, especially for those with disabilities. Aggressive behavior, even if not directed at vulnerable students, can lead to withdrawal.

To ensure safety, schools should implement a policy addressing bullying and disruptive behaviors, including cyberbullying. Teach students how to respond to bullying, whether as victims or bystanders, using developmentally appropriate strategies. Younger students can report bullying to adults, while older students may need guidance on how to handle it without fear of social backlash, such as by ignoring, walking away, or seeking help from another adult.

Any threatening behavior must be addressed immediately. Teachers and staff should be approachable, with clear guidelines on how to listen, gather information, and take action to resolve issues swiftly.



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## Encouraging participation

The most effective schools foster a positive atmosphere built on community and shared values.

Student participation is enhanced when school leaders actively consult with students and parents about school matters. Students are more likely to follow rules they helped create.

To improve participation:

- Involve students in school decisions, such as through councils or voting on policies.
- Encourage parental involvement by sharing not only challenges but also students' successes.
- Showcase students' work throughout the school and highlight their contributions, such as improving the school environment or organizing activities.



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# Actions and Referrals

## Fostering independence

An important role of schools is to empower students to become independent. Learning becomes more effective when students are encouraged to think for themselves, as it helps them develop critical thinking skills. The most significant factor influencing academic achievement is the student's ability to monitor and assess their own work, determining how to further develop and apply their skills. In this process, constructive teacher feedback plays a key role, as it helps students gain the independence and responsibility needed to take control of their own learning.

To promote independence:

- Assign age-appropriate responsibilities to students within the classroom and school.
- Provide structured opportunities for students to give feedback and share their opinions.



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# Actions and Referrals

## Early identification and intervention

Identifying and addressing problems early can help prevent more serious mental health issues.

Educators must balance the risk of labeling a child too soon with the benefits of early intervention.

Their role is not to diagnose but to recognize difficulties, provide school support, and refer to specialists if a student's condition worsens despite interventions. Schools should establish clear policies for early identification and intervention, ensuring a structured support system. Defining who teachers should contact, such as a principal or lead teacher, streamlines the process. Additionally, child study teams that regularly meet to discuss struggling students can improve early intervention efforts.



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# Actions and Referrals

## **Support and training for staff**

Working with children who have mental health issues can be challenging and stressful. Teacher workload and student behavior are key predictors of depression, and overwhelmed teachers struggle to support their students effectively. To prevent burnout, schools should encourage open discussions about classroom difficulties and establish teacher support groups for peer or professional consultation. Providing training in behavior management techniques can help teachers handle challenging situations. Schools should foster a positive environment that supports teachers' professional and personal growth while helping them reconnect with their passion for education. Additionally, teachers should be aware that difficult student behavior may mask deeper issues like domestic violence or family problems, making empathy and understanding essential in their approach.