



Severely troubled children and youth

What everyone needs to know

- An estimated 6,000 children and youth in Ramsey County have severe, long-term difficulties that make it very hard for them to function at home, at school, and in the community.
- The suffering and hardship for these children and youth is severe. The harm also extends beyond the youth themselves, affecting their families, their schools, their neighborhoods, and all of us.
- Without help, severely troubled youth tend to become severely troubled adults.
- It's not easy to help them, but it is possible. These children are not doomed.
- Three best ways to protect youth from severe, entrenched problems: Reduce their risks, build up their resilience (ability to cope and bounce back) and act early to head off problems.
- Complex, long-term problems need to be treated with approaches that are backed up by solid evidence of effectiveness.

Many of us have known a young person whom we would consider “severely troubled.” They’re not just going through a difficult phase, but having serious, prolonged difficulties that disrupt their own lives and those around them. They have the kind of troubles that put them and their families through great distress and cast doubt on their prospects for stability and well-being as adults.

The Wilder Foundation has a strong interest in these youth and their families. We want to continue to learn more about what works for them, share that information, and be part of a community where youth find help and hope.

What do we mean by “severely troubled”?

Consider these examples:

- The fourth-grader who consistently disrupts the classroom, sometimes violently.
- The young boy who has become a familiar face to police and firefighters as he has vandalized property, started fires, and been in other trouble with the law.
- The junior high student from an extremely chaotic home who barely attends school, has started using drugs and alcohol, and seems drawn to risky situations and peers.
- The depressed, suicidal high school girl whose concerned parents are at wit’s end.
- The child who is hearing voices, obviously distressed and “out of it.”

All of these young people probably have a severe emotional disturbance. Most have had contact with formal programs or services intended to help them. For some, the system works. For others, it does not.

We don’t want to attach a label or stigma to these youth, yet we need some terminology in order to talk about their situation and what can be done. We are using “severely troubled” in this way:

Definition: Severely troubled youth, in this report, are those who have an emotional disturbance that significantly disrupts their everyday life at home, school, or in the community for an extended time (a year or more).

These are young people who disrupt classrooms, act aggressively toward others, commit crimes, endanger themselves through chronic drug or alcohol use, or engage in other behaviors that put themselves or others in harm’s way.

A child or teenager with a diagnosed condition or mental illness does not automatically fall into this group if their condition is being adequately managed and they are able to function fairly well. Nor is a specific diagnosis required for a youth to be “severely troubled” in the way we are discussing here.

Troubles rarely come alone

Severely troubled youth typically have a constellation of problems. This creates a complexity that is very important to recognize when working with them.

For example, research tells us that teenage substance use (drinking, drugs, smoking) is often linked with delinquent behavior, conduct disorder, depression, adjustment problems, learning difficulties, and attention problems. Another example is the strong connection between discipline problems in school and getting into trouble with the law.

Recent research has shown the importance of approaching these problems in combination, rather than treating each issue separately.

Problems exceed normal growing pains

It is important to distinguish between normal exploration and growth, and behavior that signals serious problems. This is especially true during adolescence. Many adolescents have problem behavior, sometimes serious. However, it's a different story when they have long-term difficulty with basic functioning at home, school, and/or in their community.

For instance, teenagers who have an occasional heated argument with their parents but who are generally functioning well would not be considered severely troubled. Another example would be experimenting with drinking, which itself can have serious risks and consequences, but is not necessarily part of a constellation of serious difficulties.

Why focus on severely troubled youth?

Three compelling reasons motivate us to understand and address the needs of severely troubled youth.

1. Severely troubled youth often become severely troubled adults.

Left alone, the problems of these youth are likely to worsen and to cause continued disruptions in adulthood. For instance, if a troubled child fails in school, that limits his or her chance for higher education, stable employment, strong community ties, and other life opportunities. There is also a much higher likelihood of involvement with the corrections system.

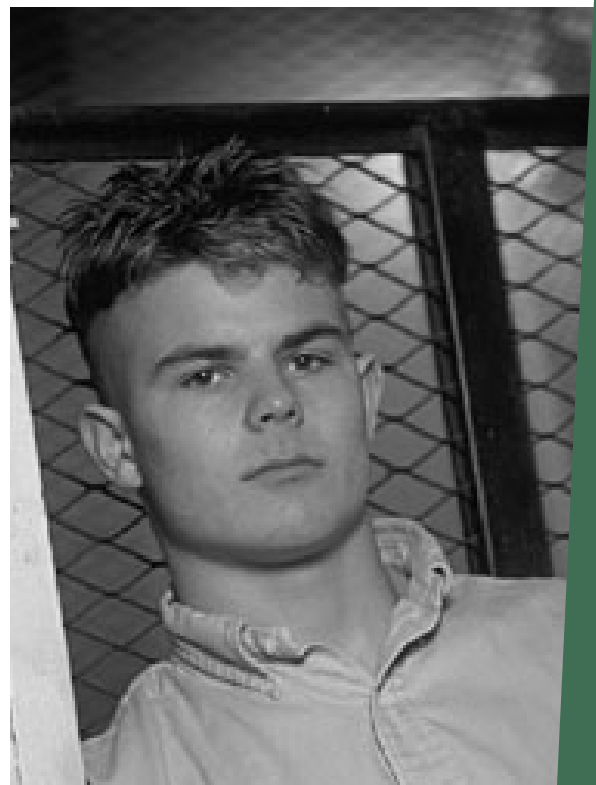
2. Failing to overcome these severe difficulties takes a heavy toll.

The suffering and hardship for these children and youth is severe. Their troubles also have serious effects on others. For the immediate

family, the effects can be devastating. Peers, classmates, teachers, and schools are affected. Neighborhoods and communities are affected. The public bears many direct and indirect financial costs, such as increased security costs in schools and other public facilities, costs associated with the criminal justice system, medical and substance abuse treatment, out-of-home placement for some of these youth, and in general the higher costs of later help if early intervention did not occur or was not effective.

3. Effective and timely intervention produces good results for many.

No cure-all exists. No "one-size-fits-all" program has high effectiveness across the board. However, the good results of certain programs show that it is worthwhile to address the needs of severely troubled youth and thereby reduce the burdens on themselves, their families, communities, and society.



How many youth are we talking about?

No reliable numbers exist for severely troubled youth. We know more about the prevalence of specific problems that can be part of being severely troubled, such as delinquency, persistent substance abuse, youth homelessness, or serious school problems. But none of these specific issues mean that a youth has severe and long-term problems with daily life.

The number of youth referred to as “severely emotionally disturbed” in the school system probably comes closest to estimating the number of severely troubled youth in our community.

Some trends indicate that the numbers in Saint Paul may have increased in the past five years – increases of about 20 percent in children receiving special education services for emotional-behavioral disorders and increases in out-of-home placement. However, the number of youth arrested for serious crimes in Saint Paul declined by 20 percent during the most recent five years of statistics.

Ramsey County experts estimate that about 6,000 children age 5 to 17 have severe, long-term difficulties.

What are the causes?

Whatever brings a young person into this situation probably involves a combination of individual characteristics, life experiences, and influences from people around them.

We also know that the growth of minor problems into a more serious, long-term condition may be prevented, reduced – or, unfortunately, worsened – by the actions of individuals, families, groups, organizations, or society in general.

It is important to realize that no single factor, or combination of factors, always leads to severe and long-term difficulties. However, research shows that the probability does increase in certain circumstances. These so-called risk factors may be part of the children’s own personality or genetic makeup (such as temperament); their early experiences (such as exposure to violence); the parenting they receive (such as lack of early, strong attachment to a loving caregiver); their parents’ own difficulties (such as mental health or substance abuse problems); broader family issues (such as conflict or instability); their peers (such as rejection); or their school experience (such as unsafe conditions or low expectations of success).

Research suggests, but is not yet conclusive, that community factors such as high levels of poverty and lack of safe, positive activities can contribute to severe troubles in childhood and youth.

What protects against serious problems?

We also know that some things seem to boost the ability of children to cope with hardships and bounce back from difficult experiences.

Like the risk factors mentioned above, these “protective factors” can include things in the child’s own makeup, as well as strengths and resources in their parents, extended families,



neighborhoods, schools, and cultural communities. Examples include the child's social skills and intellectual abilities, a sense of purpose and future, a consistent relationship with a caring adult outside of the immediate family, and opportunities for positive activities and meaningful involvement in school or community life.

What works for severely troubled youth?

A great deal of research has been done about what works, and the evidence points to some effective approaches. Certainly more is known than is widely put into practice.

Without going into details on specific programs and approaches, some features are shown to be important for any type of prevention or intervention with troubled youth.

Work on actual behaviors. Focus on changing observable behavior, not just on increasing knowledge or adjusting attitudes.

Focus on both problems and strengths. Address problems directly, and at the same time, tap into the strengths of these children and those around them.

Address more than one dimension. Programs that have more components tend to have greater effect. Example: Addressing not just peer issues but family, peer, and school issues.

Give appropriate "dosage." Match the intensity, frequency, and duration of services to the evidence showing what has worked best in similar situations.

Provide follow-up support. Continue contact with youth after they leave the program in order to sustain the benefits.

As overwhelming and complicated as the behavior problems and even the risk factors can be, these children and youth are not beyond help. Improving their lives may not be easy, but it is possible.

Gear services to the child's developmental stage.

Design programs for the ages and stages of the children and youth who participate. Pay special attention to times of transition – for example, entering the junior high or middle school years.

Include the broader picture. Recognize the influence of the neighborhood, peers, school, justice system, mass media, faith community, and so on – not just individual and family issues.

Plan well and implement well. Effective programs are not only based on proven approaches, but they put those approaches into practice with a high degree of quality, including adequate training and support for staff.

Incorporate the cultural dimension. Continuously seek to gain and expand cultural knowledge, understand the dynamics of cultural differences, and join with cultural communities to design and deliver services.

Be locally appropriate. Just as with cultural differences, local norms and community conditions inform the ways that a program serves children and youth. This does not mean effective programs should never challenge those norms or introduce new ideas, but they must be able to work in the local environment.

Coordinate and collaborate. Understand the need to work together with others in the community to provide a cohesive system of support for children and families.

Make access easier. Identify and reduce barriers that can reduce participation, including time, place, and cost.

Work separately (and differently) with boys and girls. The underlying issues and behavior patterns tend to differ by gender, and separate programs also avoid the complication of boy-girl dynamics, particularly in adolescence.

Promote the well-being of both child and family. Child well-being includes having basic needs met as well as living in an environment that nurtures and stimulates healthy growth and development. Family well-being includes the capacity to care for children and meet their basic developmental, educational, social, cultural, health, and housing needs.

The earlier, the better

Often, troubled youth don't get help until something really big or serious has happened. Research suggests that it is better to provide both prevention and intervention as early as possible, rather than waiting for behaviors to become more entrenched.

In general, this involves working with children and youth who are at substantial risk or who show signs of developing problems. It means working with children in the early elementary school years, or even before they start school.

Younger children respond better to some of the most effective approaches. For example, for children with conduct disorder (a persistent pattern of serious antisocial behaviors that violate others'

basic rights), the most proven approach is family intervention, where caregivers might be coached to provide good discipline and positive reward systems, to develop stronger family problem-solving and communication, and so on. However, the effectiveness of this approach fades with older children.

Costs can be lowered by intervening earlier.

Studies have shown significant net savings in intensive, early intervention with high-risk youth, especially in reduced need for medical and educational services.

Where treatment takes place

Programs to help troubled youth can take place in many settings. These vary greatly in cost, intensity, and the degree to which youth are removed from their usual surroundings and routine.

The most common settings:

- Home
- School
- Outpatient (office, clinic, etc.)
- Partial hospitalization or day treatment
- Residential treatment (live-in treatment)
- Hospital inpatient
- Treatment foster care (with specially trained foster parents)
- Therapeutic group home
- Juvenile corrections facility
- Chemical dependency treatment center

Hallmarks of effective programs for troubled youth

Staff members' skills and training strongly influence the effectiveness of any approach. The goals and nature of the approach also must be carefully matched with the specific youth being served. Often a single approach is not enough to

address severe difficulties – a combination may be more effective. (For example, substance abuse treatment is likely to work better in the long run if the youth's mental illness or chaotic home situation is also addressed.)

Yet even the most successful programs are not universally successful. Research shows different effects for different places, social conditions, cultural or ethnic groups, and other factors.

Specific approaches or components may focus on:

- The youth himself or herself
- The parents and family
- The school environment
- The community environment

Among programs that work with parents and families, those that are most effective have some clear hallmarks:

- The attitude toward families is supportive rather than punitive.
- Communities support families in providing a safe and nurturing environment. This includes basic supports such as jobs, housing, and safety; as well as easily accessible, community-based family support services.
- Families are actively involved in important decisions about their children and in choosing or designing services to meet the needs of the child and family.
- Different programs or agencies serving the same family coordinate the services and support they offer.

Looking beyond the individual and family

Recent years have seen a growing interest in influences beyond the individual and the family, with the belief that changing these environments can prevent or contain serious problem behavior.

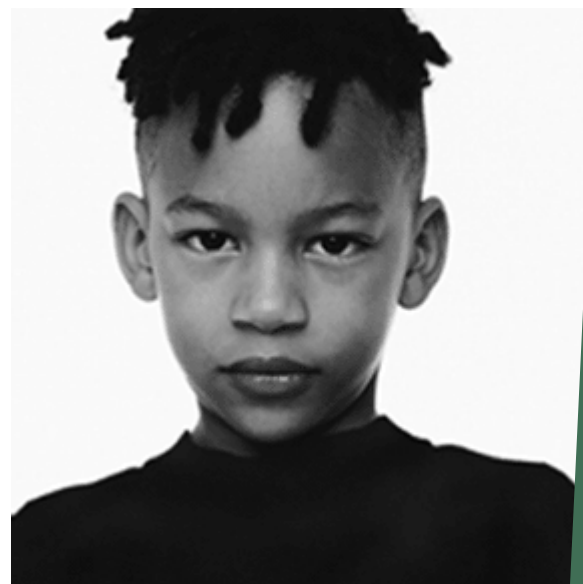
A national research project in the early 1990s urged service providers to more directly address “the settings that so profoundly influence outcomes—families, neighborhoods, schools, health and welfare systems, employment and training, and the justice system.”

These approaches need much more evidence to help us understand their specific impact on severe troubles in childhood and youth.

Moving ahead

The current state of knowledge about severe difficulties in childhood and youth is both sobering and hopeful. Clearly, making an impact on these problems can be frustrating, difficult, complicated, and costly.

But it can be done. There are people and programs out there doing it. Our purpose here is to invite thoughtful, informed discussion about how our community can help children and youth to head off serious difficulties, or to recover from them and get back on track.



COMMUNITY MEMBERS:

Feel free to share this information with others – neighbors, relatives, health care providers, clergy, community leaders, political leaders. Consider ways that you can support and encourage troubled youth and their families – perhaps in your own circle of family and friends, as well as through volunteer work, charitable giving, and speaking out.

PARENTS AND ADVOCATES:

We encourage you to reflect upon, and critique, the contents of this document. Identify what seems to fit from your perspective, what doesn't fit, and where we need more research to answer important questions. Combine your experience-based wisdom with the findings of research summarized here; and use this to strengthen your ability to educate others.

FUNDERS AND POLICY-MAKERS:

We encourage you to think about, debate, and take action on:

- Channeling resources toward services that are effective.
- Testing and developing services to meet the needs of severely troubled youth and families who are currently not well-served.
- Reducing barriers to accessing services for severely troubled youth and their families.
- Seeking the right balance of prevention, early intervention, and crisis intervention.

PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH TROUBLED YOUTH:

We encourage you to reflect on the available evidence for the effectiveness of different approaches. How could you better orient your work to make use of what is known about effectiveness, and to match specific children and youth with the treatment most likely to help them? How do you share the results of your own work and find out what other organizations are learning through their work? How do you build connections between different “systems” that serve the same youth (schools, mental health providers, juvenile corrections, child welfare, and so on)?

RESEARCHERS:

We encourage you to continue to address the gaps in knowledge about what works best with severely troubled youth and their families. The outlines of this document illustrate that there is still much we need to learn.



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FEBRUARY 2004