

A Parent's Guide to Mental Health in the Media



By Emma Martin LaPlant, MA, LAMFT

Children, preteens, and adolescents consume the media's messages and stereotypes about mental health and use what they see to form their own ideas and attitudes about mental health. Unfortunately, mass media portrayal of mental health is not always accurate. As adults, we can guide the younger generation in engaging critically with the media to determine fact versus fiction, to develop empathy and compassion, and to work toward eliminating stigma against mental health.

Myths and Facts

First, it's important to separate myths from facts. Here are several myths often perpetuated in the media.

Myth: People with mental illnesses are violent and criminals.

Fact: The media tends to show those with mental health concerns as violent and acting out, but studies actually show that individuals with mental health concerns are more likely to be victims of violence rather than perpetrators of crimes.

Myth: People with mental illness look different than everyone else.

Fact: The media often shows individuals with mental health concerns as disheveled and with wild eyes. In fact, people with mental illness look no different than anyone else.

Myth: Mental illnesses are all severe and all alike.

Fact: Mental illness is a complex spectrum. An individual with depression may look and act completely different than someone diagnosed with schizophrenia. Someone with severe anxiety may have difficulty leaving their house, while someone diagnosed with anxiety may be functioning well in their life, utilizing the tools and strategies they've learned to manage their anxiety.

Media Resources

While some media advance false and negative stereotypes about mental health, sometimes using TV shows or movies can be a great way to start a conversation about mental health with children. Here are some recommendations:

- *Inside Out* (Movie, 2015) explores emotions and their complexity.
- *Minions* (Movie, 2015) can spark a conversation about focus and attention.
- *Frozen* (Movie, 2013) may encourage conversation about sadness and lack of connection.

- *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Movie, 2012) explores trauma and connection to others.
- *Atypical* (TV Show, 2017) portrays a high schooler with autism and family dynamics.
- *A Beautiful Mind* (Movie, 2001) depicts a successful mathematician with schizophrenia.

Media Guidelines for Younger Children

1. **Watch shows together.** By watching shows and movies together, parents and teachers can guide children in determining what messages they receive. Adults can help children identify unhealthy relationships or name emotions that characters are feeling on-screen.
2. **Limit screen time and encourage other activities.** Parents and teachers can model appropriate amounts of screen time by disengaging in their screens at the dinner table, during class work time, etc. Encourage and engage in other activities with your kids.
3. **Don't make screens the reward or consequence.** By using screens as rewards or consequences, we make them even more desirable to children, risking that they overvalue screens even more.
4. **Be prepared for your child to discover porn.** Kids can stumble onto pornography very easily, even if they're not looking for it. Be prepared to have developmentally appropriate conversations about sex with children.
5. **Remember that social media is a tool.** It's meant to work for you and your child, not against you.

Media Guidelines for Adolescents

1. **Model good tech behavior.** As much as adolescents seem to push their adults away as they move toward independence, they still watch their parents and teachers for cues on what is appropriate. Limit the time you're on your devices and engage with adolescents.
2. **Encourage privacy settings.** Talk with tweens and teens about the importance of privacy settings on their social media. Explore the consequences of having strong or poor privacy settings.

3. **Engage in critical thinking.** Read an article online together with your teen and have a conversation about it. Explore how to determine if a source is reputable and support your child as they develop their own opinion about the content of the article.
4. **Be prepared for your student to discover porn.** Kids can stumble onto pornography very easily, even if they're not looking for it. Be prepared to have developmentally appropriate conversations about sex with children.
5. **Remember that social media is a tool.** It's meant to work for you and your child, not against you.

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