

# Centene Advanced Behavioral Health

*White Paper*

## Safeguarding Mental Wellbeing In Children



Protecting the mental wellbeing of children is vital to reduce the negative impact on the health, quality of life, and potential opportunities of future generations. While this has always been the case, COVID-19 has shined increased light on the effect societal and individualized trauma and social determinants of health (SDoH) have on children and their mental health. COVID-19 has had a significant influence on the overall wellness of individuals, but for children, the impact has the potential to extend years after its end. The pandemic caused – and continues to cause – disruptions in routines, learning, and social isolation for children, which can lead to anxiety and depression and have implications on mental health later in life.<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of contributing factors that can influence trauma exposure, such as race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender identity. Aspects such as developmental level, cultural influences, previous trauma exposure, and preexisting family difficulties can further influence a child’s reaction to this trauma.<sup>2</sup> In the case of COVID-19, children living in households experiencing job disruption, food or housing insecurity, illness, or the loss of a loved one are at higher risk of emotional distress.<sup>3</sup> For some children, being secluded at home in an environment where they may have endured abuse, witnessed addiction, or experienced other traumatic events could have a lasting impact on their mental wellbeing. In low-income communities and communities of color, SDoH factors are a substantial contributor to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), furthering risk factors such as chronic stress and poor overall health outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

COVID-19 also has resulted in mental distress for parents and caregivers, disproportionately so in vulnerable groups such as those with previous or current mental health difficulties and low-income households. A recent study stated that 31% of adults experienced a decline in mental health as a result of the pandemic, with 48% of parents reporting increased levels of stress.<sup>5</sup>

Mental distress experienced by parents and caregivers can lead to a host of coping decisions that can influence the emotional resilience and development of children. During times of high pressure and stress, especially as experienced with the recent challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, many have turned to alcohol or substances to cope. The stigma around seeking mental health assistance, the inability to identify resources to help those they are caring for, or disruption in access to healthcare and household resources can have implications of long-term mental and physical health effects on both parents and children.

Approximately 1 out of 5 children in the US experience a mental disorder, which equates to an estimated yearly spend of nearly \$247 billion for treatment.<sup>6</sup> Across all 50 states, 38.7 million children enrolled in CHIP or Medicaid represents nearly half of the total population served by these programs.<sup>7</sup> According to the CDC, among



In the US, an estimated **\$247 billion** is spent annually for treatment of **mental disorders in children**



children living below 100% of the federal poverty level, more than 22% have a mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder.<sup>8</sup> Payers are uniquely positioned to make great impact on the trajectory of mental health as children age.

Payer support of legislation that addresses early intervention, education, and access to care is essential to mitigate long-term physical and mental health conditions as children age. Additionally, the implementation of targeted, culturally sensitive programs across environments and in support of caregivers are needed. The following are recommendations for payers in this pursuit.

## Recommendations

The environment in which a child lives, how they are cared for, and the accessibility to daily necessities and educational and health services all contribute to mental wellbeing. The lasting effects of a mental health condition if not acknowledged and treated can continue through one's lifespan resulting in difficulties in school, forming relationships, and the ability to gain and keep employment later in life. Supporting the mental health of children should include monitoring developmental milestones, supporting parents and caregivers, improving access to care, and addressing environmental factors. Payers have the ability to impact more than just the medical health of those they serve, by providing targeted interventions that improve the many aspects that affect whole health.

### CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS

Strong correlations exist between various ACEs and depressive symptoms, antisocial behavior, and drug use during the early transition to adulthood.<sup>9</sup> ACEs can be especially detrimental to development by influencing how children learn, respond to stress, and make decisions later in life. Childhood trauma is known to lead to additional health challenges in adulthood including a number of chronic diseases, mental illness, and substance misuse.<sup>10</sup>

- » To engage and educate adolescents about the negative effects of drug misuse, Centene Institute for Advanced Health Education created the OpiEnd® Youth Challenge, a targeted curriculum for adolescents to raise awareness about opioid misuse and prevention. As part of the challenge, teachers and students discussed significant attributes of addiction and opioid misuse, and students then showed their understanding by developing and submitting posters that depict ways to prevent misuse. The Educator Guide and reproducible learning activities introduced students to basic information and facts about opioids and encouraged them to use the knowledge they acquired to affect change.

For many children and teens, social distancing and school closures have resulted in increased feelings of isolation. Early indications show that more than one-third of adolescents experienced significant loneliness.<sup>11</sup> For some, the return to school becomes a source of concern and can increase feelings of anxiety, fear, and social discomfort. Interventions focused on the emotional development and wellbeing of children and teens are crucial investments toward early education about the importance of taking care of one's mental health and reducing stigma.

- » Developed by the nonprofit organization Beyond Differences, *No One Eats Alone Day* is an annual event that empowers tweens and teenagers to change the culture in their schools through special presentations, classroom activities, brainstorming sessions, and student leadership training. Historically supported at in-person events, for 2021 community representatives from Centene's health plans worked with local schools to organize virtual *No One Eats Alone Day* assemblies, reaching more than 23,500 children in 47 schools. School-wide presentations outline the concept of social isolation, including how it can affect all aspects of a child's life emphasizing the importance of friendship, connection, and inclusion.

- » Strong Youth Strong Communities (SYSC) is an initiative focused on today's youth with the goal of positively impacting current and future communities. Led by the Centene Corporation, in partnership with the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and several national organizations including National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and National Council for Mental Wellbeing, SYSC events bring together a diverse group of partners to address the academic and social challenges confronting teens including bullying, drug abuse, suicide, teen pregnancy and gun violence. The SYSC website and app provide additional resources and tools tailored to this age group to further promote self-confidence, educational development, and leadership.

Children in foster care are especially vulnerable to mental health conditions due to high rates of complex trauma from ACEs both prior to and during foster care. Of youth covered under Medicaid, those in foster care have a higher rate of diagnosed mental health disorders.<sup>12</sup> “Children in foster care are prescribed psychotropic medications at a rate four times higher than the general Medicaid child population.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, 10% of these children are prescribed three or more of these medications.<sup>14</sup> Antipsychotics are used to medicate one in nine children in foster care with nearly one-third not being provided supplemental psychosocial interventions.<sup>15</sup> Often medication is prescribed to these uniquely vulnerable youth in order to assist in managing behavioral and emotional challenges that frequently occur within this population. However, if left unmanaged, the continued use and overprescribing of these medications can effect both physical and behavioral development. Given these possible serious side effects, including altering a child's metabolic composition and neurochemistry, careful monitoring and a clear treatment plan are vital. While progress has been made in both state policy and prescribing patterns, payers should ensure medication monitoring programs are implemented to promote prescribing and treatment that aligns with clinical best practice guidelines.

- » When prescribing psychotropic medications, there is an additional concern of side effects and co-occurring medical complications that need to be taken into consideration. In Centene's foster care population, it has been found that these children are prescribed multiple medications resulting in high rates of polypharmacy, which can have a lasting impact on their overall health. Centene Advanced Behavioral Health's Behavioral Health Medication Monitoring (BHMM) program promotes psychotropic medication prescribing and treatment that aligns with clinical best practice guidelines. Our BHMM program includes review of metabolic labs and assessments for members to enable early identification for potential comorbidities. Metabolic side effects of psychotropic medication, especially antipsychotics, can include weight gain, dyslipidemia and increased susceptibility to diabetes, making lab reviews an essential component to maintaining overall health. Our highly trained clinicians perform a comprehensive behavioral health service review, identify alternative therapeutic options, recommend additional care practices, and refer members to case management for further interventions. In 2020, 41% of members enrolled in the program experienced a decrease in prescribed medications.



Members experienced a **41% decrease in prescribed medications** after undergoing a behavioral health medication review



Research indicates the pandemic has **increased suicide among teens**



- » Youth in foster care often face unique challenges in comparison to their peers. Research suggests online technology can assist children in foster care with learning and gaining educational skills that may be lacking due to frequent school and home disruptions.<sup>16</sup> Centene along with partners AT&T, Connected Nation, Dell Technologies, and Intel have come together under the K-12 Digital Divide Program to bridge the Digital Divide among youth in foster care by enabling greater internet access. Within this initiative, more than 1,000 laptops and 2,200 hotspots will be donated to foster care agencies across Florida and Missouri. The foster care agencies will then work to distribute the devices to youth identified as having the greatest need. These technologies will facilitate greater ease of access to the internet for schoolwork, telehealth, behavioral health services, online tutoring, job searches, and other daily activities enabling the use of resources and tools to promote positive learning and development.

Even prior to the pandemic, suicide rates among teens were increasing. With surges in social isolation, reduced access to care, and additional stressors from instability with school, routine, and home life, the COVID pandemic has worsened the problem. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), emergency department utilization from suicidal behavior for those aged 12 to 17 increased 22% in 2020, and 39% in 2021 compared to 2019, likely due to the pandemic's impact.<sup>17</sup> Payers can support this increased risk through targeted prevention programs that take into account cultural and environmental factors.

- » Centene Advanced Behavioral Health's comprehensively trained staff use evidence-based practices to screen for suicide risk, develop member-driven safety planning, and monitor members' treatment progress to improve outcomes and prevent suicide. Our suicide prevention program was developed with all members in mind, but was implemented first with our foster care population to intervene as soon as possible with this high-risk population. Choose Tomorrow™, a Zero Suicide Prevention Program, uses predictive modeling to identify suicide risk through data analytics prompting screening and assessment. Care Managers provide personalized care for the individual, employ evidenced-based approaches to risk prevention delivered with compassion and respect, and ensure connections are made more easily to community resources. In addition, as a powerful form of protective communication, Caring Contacts, brief and general messages of hope, are sent to members at regular intervals while engaged in the program.

The manner in which care is delivered and by whom has a significant impact on the quality and effectiveness of treatment. For children, early and consistent interventions are necessary to manage progress toward positive health outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted educational advancements for children, but significantly impacted the delivery of maintenance health appointments and routinely scheduled mental health appointments. Additionally, anxiety, depression, or ACEs need to be identified and treated early to prevent further exacerbation.

- » Primary care providers and pediatricians are increasingly called upon to provide guidance for not only physical health concerns, but mental health as well. Routine screenings that assess behavioral health symptoms, suicide risk, sleep problems, interpersonal violence, and social needs can aid in early identification and intervention. To help providers gain skills in recognizing common behavioral health symptoms, Centene Advanced Behavioral Health maintains a comprehensive library of online screening trainings covering topics such as depression, suicide risks, and substance use. These trainings are made available to providers as part of Centene’s commitment to early identification and coordination of care between physical and mental health providers.
- » School-based interventions provide timely, convenient, and direct care for students in a familiar setting that improves access to quality care for mental health concerns. Centene’s school-based intervention partnership program provides culturally-competent care, enabling virtual access to a variety of clinicians to perform assessments, diagnoses, and treatment. The program also provides students and families with education and coordination with existing providers and enables referrals as needed.
- » Telebehavioral health (TeleBH) has been a valuable care delivery modality during the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to be in the future. Centene has funded startup costs for some BH providers’ telehealth practices, and currently offers tools that members can use either independently or in conjunction with a therapist to ensure ongoing treatment. Using interoperable TeleBH platforms can increase coordination with the entire provider team and better connect members to care that addresses both mental and physical health concerns. For example, Centene has implemented a HIPAA-compliant technology platform that integrates with the population health platform, making it easier for care managers and utilization managers to connect members to behavioral healthcare providers, track member progress, and collaborate with the full provider team. TeleBH has also increased access to specialists such as child psychiatrists and child psychologists that are in high demand.

### PARENT & CAREGIVER SUPPORT

The mental and physical health of parents and caregivers can directly impact that of children. A recent study showed that one in 14 children age 17 and under had a parent who reported poor mental health, and those children were more likely to have a mental, emotional, or developmental disability.<sup>18</sup> SDoH factors play a significant role in the ability of primary caregivers and parents to foster healthy environments for children to grow and develop. Unstable housing, frequent job loss, food insecurity, and transportation are just some of the environmental factors that contribute to the mental stability of primary caregivers. The resulting pressures and stress can lead to depression, violence, neglect, and substance misuse. This cycle has been amplified due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By implementing programs that focus on reducing stigma



**48% of  
parents  
have reported  
increased  
stress**  
since the onset of  
the pandemic





Centene has committed to **1M meals per month** for one year to feed families struggling with food insecurity



for seeking help with parenting challenges, substance misuse, and SDoH factors, payers can support caregivers and decrease long-term adverse impact on children in the household.

- » Across multiple states, Centene health plans have implemented community-integrated social services technology platforms to connect members with community benefit organizations. The platforms enable real-time information sharing and centralized access to community support systems, helping members access resources for improved health and quality of life.
- » For those already struggling to access nutritious food and other necessities, the COVID-19 pandemic caused additional hardship for individuals, families, and communities. In partnership with Feeding America®, Centene committed to donating one million meals per month, for 12 months, to feed communities struggling with food insecurity across the country. Over the years, this partnership has yielded a number of initiatives designed to equip food banks and health plans with best practice guidelines for meeting the needs of individuals experiencing food insecurity, including the development of medically tailored food boxes.
- » As a means of providing members and providers with information and resources surrounding children’s mental health, Centene Advanced Behavioral Health has developed educational materials focused on the importance of mental wellbeing and its effect on overall health. The materials encourage parents and caregivers to take care of their own mental health, how to recognize signs of mental health concerns in children, promote the importance of routine doctor visits, and encourage them to reach out for assistance if needed.
- » Through a collection of proprietary books targeted to adult, teen, or youth audiences, Centene’s My Route to Health series encourages health literacy, provides valuable health education, and supplies parents with resources to promote healthy conversations with their children. The books address a variety of health topics including the importance of healthy eating and exercise, bullying, and condition-specific care management for conditions such as diabetes and sickle cell disease. A dedicated parent/caregiver book accompanies the youth books to help educate caregivers on the topic at hand as well as emotional and developmental milestones, and to foster proactive, positive strategies for engaging the child on the issue. Also within the collection is a caregiver journal developed to provide tools, ideas, and insight for anyone caring for a loved one. It contains information from tips to organizing records to how to stay healthy while coping with the challenges of caregiving. These books, available to all health plan members at no cost, are used by Centene health plan case managers and community health workers when working one-on-one with members and are distributed at community events. The My Route to Health series has delivered over 1,000,000 printed books to children, including those in foster care.

## FEDERAL & STATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Prevention, access, and quality treatments are essential components to achieving improved mental health in children. This is inclusive of educational programs and increased funding for resources to help parents and caregivers address their mental health needs as well as provide stability in the home life of children. As one of the largest Managed Care Organization in the country, serving 1 in 15 individuals, Centene has gained insight and experience with the ongoing needs of populations facing barriers to mental health care. Policies and funding that support vulnerable populations are necessary to the delivery of care required to help our country heal from not only the pandemic's economic impact, but the undeniable influence it has had on the mental and physical health of our nation.

- » The Biden administration recently announced nearly \$85 million in funding for mental health awareness, training, education, and treatment. The funding includes \$10.7 million from the American Rescue Plan for the Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Program, which trains primary care providers to treat and refer children for mental health issues.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, \$74.2 million in grants are to be distributed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to raise awareness about youth mental health concerns and funds trainings for school staff and programs that coordinate treatment for children and adolescents with emotional disorders.<sup>20</sup> Payers can support the initiatives through enhanced provider partnerships and educational programming to increase the healthcare workforce and point-of-care access for mental health.
- » The White House COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force put forth recommendations around several themes including: incentivizing equity through data driven approaches; expanding and diversifying the health care workforce pipeline; encouraging evidence-based solutions; mandating standardized, equitable data collection through research, analysis and reporting; and creating healthcare safety nets to help communities recover from the pandemic. Developing an equity framework of formal metrics and processes to monitor factors such as social determinants of health, quality of care, and trust in the health care system, can effectively decrease health inequities throughout the health care delivery system. Centene is aligned with many of the Task Force's recommendations to improve comprehensive data collection and allow for data-driven analysis to decrease health disparities; achieve better access to quality, affordable healthcare; and improve the patient experience, especially across communities most at risk.
- » The Ensuring Medicaid Continuity for Children in Foster Care Act of 2021 seeks to clarify the intent of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), which includes Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs) as part of the Institution for Mental Diseases (IMD) exclusion. Foster children with behavioral and mental health needs placed in QRTPs are therefore at risk of losing their federal Medicaid coverage during residential treatment. Centene strongly supports legislation to protect foster care children in QRTPs from losing their federal Medicaid benefits to promote continuity of care for this vulnerable population.



**1 in 5**  
children  
experience a  
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disorder**







- » TeleBH can improve member engagement and treatment results, reduce stigma concerns, increase provider access, and reduce social determinant barriers. Primary Care Providers and Pediatricians are the first, and sometimes only, point of care for mental health concerns. The use of TeleBH has the potential to address limited access to mental health specialists, specifically child and adolescent psychiatrists and psychologists; promote integrated care; and encourage appropriate prescribing patterns through physician consultations and virtual care appointments. Centene supports policy efforts that address appropriate long-term sustainability of TeleBH, increase alignment of regulation across state and federal levels, and eliminate regulatory barriers that may impede care delivery.

## Summary

Early intervention, culturally inclusive education, and equitable access to mental healthcare is essential to safeguard the mental health of children and future generations. Payers are uniquely positioned to play a critical role in advancing mental healthcare delivery through continued support of innovative technology, evidence-based clinical programs, educational programming, and community partnerships. Safety, SDoH factors, and the mental and physical health of parents or caregivers has significant bearing on children’s mental wellbeing and emotional development. Centene is supportive of legislation and initiatives that address these factors in order to advance and protect the mental wellbeing of children, families, and communities nationwide.

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