

What is Paediatric Psychology?

A widely used definition of the field of Paediatric Psychology describes it as 'a field of research and practice that has been concerned with a wide variety of topics in the relationship between the psychological and physical well-being of children, including behavioural and emotional concomitants of disease and illness, the role of psychology in paediatric medicine, and the promotion of health and prevention of illness among healthy children' (Roberts, Maddux & Wright, 1984). The challenge for psychosocial professionals working in paediatrics is to "maximize health outcomes, minimize the emotional consequences of living with chronic disease and improve the quality of life for children, young people and their relatives" (Duff and Bryon, 2005).

Paediatric Clinical Psychology is a well-established and expanding area of Clinical Psychology for children and young people with medical conditions and physical health needs. It is increasingly an integral part of paediatric health service provision and strategic development of services. There are some similarities in theory and practice with the field of Clinical Health Psychology for adults but inevitably also differences due to the different needs of children and their families.

Between 10 and 30% of children are affected in some way by chronic illness or physical health problems. These conditions often have consequences for the emotional, educational and social development of the young person as well as impacting their families and schools. Whilst many children and families cope well with the demands of a physical illness, children with a chronic illness are known to be at increased risk of developing psychological problems when compared to healthy children, with estimates of psychological difficulty ranging from 10% to 37%.

The importance of psychological input for children with chronic illness or disability is recognised in Government guidelines on the development of services for children with physical health problems, for example the National Service Framework for Children in Hospital (DoH, 2004: Standard 6):

"Much can be done to help children and young people with long term conditions experience an ordinary life. A key element of this support should be good mental health input to maximise emotional well-being and prevent or minimise problems."

In "Making Every Young Person with Diabetes Matter" (DOH, 2005), the report notes:

"Routine psychological support should be part of normal provision, rather than restricted to crisis management... services should consider the impact on families of diagnosis and adapting to life with diabetes and (staff) should be able to refer directly to specialist psychology that form part of the team"

Psychological services are increasingly considered as an integral part of children's medical health care. This is because it is recognised that psychological input can have a direct impact on health outcomes by addressing problems such as adherence to treatment, as well as reducing psychological distress. Psychological interventions can often lead to a shorter stay in hospital and fewer medical appointments. In addition, addressing the child's and family's emotional needs alongside their physical health needs helps increase satisfaction with care.