



School Mental Health Screening, Assessment, and Treatment

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Mental health challenges among students in Iowa schools have become increasingly prominent, reflecting broader national trends. These conditions can affect individuals across all demographics and may impact a student's ability to learn, behave, manage emotions, and engage with others.¹ Data from the 2023 National Survey of Children's Health indicates that 1 in 5 children are diagnosed with a current mental or

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behavioral health disorder. These issues encompass a range of mental health concerns, including anxiety and depression, and behavioral disorders like attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Among adolescents, substance use and disordered eating are additional areas of concern, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including trauma, contribute to the complexity of the situation.

Importantly, suicide remains the second leading cause of death among young people ages 15-24. Data indicates that 20% of teens reported that they “seriously considered” attempting suicide in the past year, and 9% reported having attempted suicide in the past year.²

A significant concern is the shortage of mental health professionals specializing in child and adolescent care. As of April 2025, 89 of Iowa’s 99 counties were designated as mental health professional shortage areas.³ For psychiatric care, Iowa ranks near the bottom nationally; 85 Iowa counties lack any practicing child and adolescent psychiatrists, leading to limited access to necessary care, especially in rural areas.⁴

The same pattern holds true within Iowa’s school districts. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a ratio of one counselor per 250 students. In Iowa, the overall ratio is 1 to 348, though several districts report ratios exceeding 1 to 500. Likewise, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends one school psychologist per 500 students. In Iowa, the ratio is 1 to 1,700.

In response to these challenges, initiatives like the University of Iowa Scanlan Center for School Mental Health (SCSMH) have expanded access to mental health services to students statewide. The goal of the SCSMH Clinic is to bridge the gap created by the shortage of mental health professionals and overcome common barriers to care, including financial, transportation, and geographic. Services include individual counseling, group counseling, child psychiatry, eating disorder evaluation and outpatient therapy, intellectual disability evaluation, and school-based postcrisis support. For students, most services can be initiated by either the student’s legal guardian or by the school district on the SCSMH website. For school-initiated referrals, the SCSMH Clinic coordinates directly with school staff (with parental consent) so the student can participate in telehealth services from school. SCSMH clinical services are fee-based; most major insurances are accepted, including Medicaid, and financial aid may be available to qualifying

families. More information about SCSMH clinical services is available at: <https://scsmh.education.uiowa.edu/clinical-services>.

Screening and Assessment

The National Center for School Mental Health advocates for the use of universal screening — a practice that involves assessing all students for social, emotional, or behavioral health needs — as an effective way to proactively identify students at risk for mental health challenges in order to connect them with needed interventions or resources. While widely recommended as a best practice, universal screening is not commonly implemented in Iowa schools. In Iowa, universal screening is only permitted under specific conditions. Iowa law requires written parental consent to conduct behavioral health screenings or assessments. When schools contract with outside mental health professionals or agencies to conduct these assessments, only screening tools approved by the Department of Education are allowed.⁵

Area Education Agencies (AEAs) may be involved in school-based mental health screening and support, particularly when the child demonstrates behaviors that are disruptive or substantially impact their academic progress, or otherwise fall under the umbrella of special education. Iowa school districts may contract with AEAs to access services, including training, assessment, and intervention support, from school mental health professionals.⁶

School districts vary on social, emotional, and behavioral health screening and assessment practices. Iowa law does mandate that school districts adopt suicide prevention policies. Iowa code (291-14.4) requires school staff to complete annual, evidence-based trainings on suicide prevention and postvention, identifying adverse childhood experiences, and strategies for mitigating toxic stress response. School counselors are typically responsible for conducting suicide risk assessments and taking precautions to ensure student safety.

As a non-categorical state, diagnostic evaluations for mental health conditions are beyond the scope of Iowa’s K-12 school system. Therefore, families seeking this service typically access community-based resources to meet this need.

Importantly, primary care providers often play a critical role in identifying mental health needs in youth. This can be done through evidence-based screening measures



Treatment

Treatment opportunities available to Iowa's youth vary by school district, community, and county. Iowa code requires each school district to have one qualified school counselor, with a goal of having one counselor per 350 students in each district. While school counselors are trained to offer academic, career, social-emotional instruction, and limited social-emotional support within the educational setting, the provision of psychotherapy — defined as the diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders — requires

administered as part of annual well-child visits and/or initiating conversations with youth and their families about their social, emotional, and behavioral well-being. Through their professional interactions with youth, primary care providers and school nurses may observe one or more of the following signs that a student may be experiencing anxiety or depression and would benefit from additional assessment or support:

- Withdrawal from family, friends, or preferred activities
- Increased irritability or mood swings
- Changes in sleep
- Unexplained changes in weight or appetite
- Frequent physical complaints without a medical cause, like headaches or stomachaches
- Excessive worry, fear, or nervousness
- Restlessness or difficulty concentrating
- Low self-esteem or negative self-talk
- Decline in academic performance or motivation
- Expressions of hopelessness
- Talk or evidence of self-harm
- Preoccupation with death
- Suicidal thoughts or behaviors

licensure as a mental health professional, such as a licensed mental health counselor (LMHC), licensed independent social worker (LISW), or licensed psychologist.^{7,8}

In addition to school counselors, some school districts employ or contract with licensed mental health clinicians, such as social workers or mental health counselors, to provide individual therapy services at school to students who are identified as having mental health needs. Tanager Place, Four Oaks, and Seasons Center for Behavioral Health are a few of the agencies that offer on-site school-based therapy services. Access to services may be geographically limited and less accessible to certain communities. However, there are also some Iowa-based agencies that work directly with schools to deliver mental health services to students via telehealth, including the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health Clinic and Classroom Clinic.

Iowa's AEAs also play a role in supporting student mental health. They provide training for educators on identifying and addressing behavioral health issues, contract with schools to provide access to AEA mental health professionals, and offer direct support to schools in crisis situations.

Many students and families seek mental health services through community-based providers. These include hospitals, community mental health centers, university-based clinics, and private practices among others. Community-based providers may offer in-person services at their clinic or allow clients to attend telehealth



general hospital and is typically used for individuals needing intensive, 24/7 care and stabilization due to a mental health crisis or severe disorder.

Interventions

When psychotherapy is recommended for a student, families often have questions about how to select the right provider for their child. Encourage families to look for professionals who specialize in child and adolescent mental health and use evidence-based treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), parent-child interaction therapy (PCIT), or interpersonal therapy for adolescents (IPT-A), depending on the child's

appointments from home. For individuals requiring more intensive care, one or more of the following types of programs may be recommended:

Intensive outpatient program: Provides structured, part-time mental health services, often for individuals who need more support than traditional therapy but not 24/7 care.

Partial hospitalization: Offers full-day mental health care, often for those who have completed inpatient treatment but need a bridge to outpatient care.

Residential treatment center: Specialized facilities where individuals can live and receive intensive mental health treatment.

Eating disorder clinic: Offers specialized care for individuals with eating disorders, including therapy, nutrition counseling, and psychiatric consultation.

Dual diagnosis clinic: Specializes in treatment of individuals with both a mental health disorder and a substance use disorder.

Inpatient psychiatric care: This involves a stay in a mental health hospital or a psychiatric unit within a

needs. Equally important is the quality of the client-therapist relationship — children are more likely to engage in and benefit from therapy when they feel understood, safe, and supported by the therapist. Families should not hesitate to ask potential therapists about their approach, experience, and how they involve parents or caregivers in treatment. A strong therapeutic alliance, combined with a structured, evidence-based approach, lays the foundation for meaningful progress and lasting emotional well-being.

Parents may start the process of identifying a mental health provider by asking their child's primary care provider for recommendations. Additional resources include asking for recommendations from the school mental health provider or resource coordinator for their school district or checking with their insurance provider for in-network mental health providers in their area.

In Iowa, families can create a free profile on [Welltrack Connect](#) to identify therapists and psychiatric providers who practice in Iowa. They may also search for providers through professional organization directories, e.g., the [Iowa Psychological Association](#) or in [Psychology Today](#).

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Mental health is as important as physical health

Learn the difference: stress, distress, crisis



Taking care of our mental health is just as important as our physical health. Developing coping skills, practicing mindfulness, and knowing when and where to get help are essential in nurturing our mental well-being.

We encourage parents and caregivers to have open communication with their children about their emotional well-being and be aware of signs their child may be struggling and the available resources and tools to help them.

Decoding Stress: Is It Normal or Something More?

It can be challenging to gauge the extent of the mental health stress your child may be experiencing. Let's work together to distinguish between typical everyday stress and emotions, and the signs of distress or a crisis.



Stress: Unsettling feelings in response to challenges that require your attention, i.e. *"I am feeling really stressed out because I have a big project due tomorrow."*



Distress: Excessively challenging feelings OR acutely intense feelings in the moment, i.e. *"No one at school likes me. They bully me. I will never fit in or have friends." Or "I'm so angry right now I could hit someone."*



Crisis: Intensely difficult, sometimes unexpected, emotions or situations where coping is challenging. A crisis could result in disruption of effective functioning or a possible/ actual threat to self or others, i.e. *"I give up. I see no purpose or point. I don't care anymore. I just want the pain to stop."*

When it's everyday stress...

For regular feelings of stress and strong emotions, there are tools parents and caregivers can teach children at home.



Journal writing: Encourage journal writing to express thoughts. Be available to listen or read when they are ready.



Daily exercise: Exercise releases endorphins which help us feel more relaxed.



Challenge negative thoughts together: Continue to have open communication.



Enjoy the little things: We can encourage our children to find things that help bring them joy every day, like listening to a podcast, playing a sport, or cooking a favorite meal.

When it's something more...

Learn more about how to spot signs of growing challenges in your child's mental health and find resources for additional help at nurturinghealthyminds.education.uiowa.edu.

If you suspect your child is an immediate risk for suicide, dial or text 988 to speak with the suicide and crisis lifeline 24/7.

Together, let's reframe the conversation on children's mental health.

Visit nurturinghealthyminds.education.uiowa.edu or scan the QR code to learn more.



IOWA
Scanlan Center for
School Mental Health

CRISIS RESOURCES

The Scanlan Center for School Mental Health aims to positively impact school mental health and well-being across Iowa and beyond through professional development, research, training, and clinical services.



Hotlines

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

- Call 988
- Visit website: 988lifeline.org.
- Español: 988lifeline.org/es/home.
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing, use your preferred relay service, dial 711 then 988, or 988lifeline.org/help-yourself/for-deaf-hard-of-hearing.

The Crisis Text Line

- Text HOME to 741741
- Visit website: crisistextline.org.

Your Life Iowa

- Call 855-581-8111; Text 855-895-8398
- Visit website: yourlifeiowa.org.

National Human Trafficking Hotline

- Call 1-888-373-7888 (TTY: 711); Text 233733
- Visit website: humantraffickinghotline.org.

National Domestic Violence Hotline

- Call 1-800-799-SAFE (7233); Text "START" to 88788
- Visit website: thehotline.org.

National Sexual Assault Hotline

- Call 800-656-HOPE (4673)
- Visit website: rainn.org/resources.

The Trevor Lifeline

- Call 1-866-488-7386; Text START to 678-678
- Visit website: thetrevorproject.org/get-help.

Veteran's Crisis Line

- Call 988 and Dial 1; Text 838255
- Visit website: veteranscrisisline.net.

Childhelp Hotline

- Call 1-800-422-4453; Text 888-422-4453
- Visit website: www.childhelphelpline.org



scsmh.education.uiowa.edu



319-467-45626



scsmh-clinic@uiowa.edu

The Scanlan Center for School Mental Health Clinic is not a 24/7 crisis service.
If this is an emergency or someone is in imminent danger, please call 911 or 988.

School Mental Health Screening, Assessment, and Treatment *(continued from page 4)*

References

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<https://educate.iowa.gov/media/10066/download?inline>. Accessed Oct. 28, 2025.

Resources

Scanlan Center for School Mental Health – Clinic Services
<https://scsmh.education.uiowa.edu/clinical-services>

University of Iowa Healthcare – Pediatric Behavioral Health
<https://uihc.org/childrens/services/pediatric-behavioral-health>

University of Iowa Healthcare – Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics
<https://uihc.org/childrens/services/developmental-and-behavioral-pediatrics>

Unity Point Health – Blank Children's Psychiatry
<https://www.unitypoint.org/locations/unitypoint-health---blank-childrens-psychiatry>

Orchard Place
<https://orchardplace.org>

Childserve – Mental Health Therapy
<https://www.childserve.org/behavioral-health/mental-health-therapy/>

Tanager Place – School-based services
<https://www.tanagerplace.org/treatment/school-based-services/>

Four Oaks – School-based support services
<https://fouroaks.org/education/>

Classroom Clinic
<https://classroomclinic.com>

Welltrack Connect – Find a Therapist
<https://scsmh.org.welltrack-connect.com>

Iowa Psychological Association – Find a Psychologist
<https://iopa.memberclicks.net/find-a-psychologist#/>

Psychology Today - Iowa – Therapists in Iowa
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/iowa>





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