

Article: 0322

Topic: EPO03 - e-Poster Oral 03: Oncology and Psychiatry, Pain and treatment options, Women, Gender and Mental Health, Education, Promotion of Mental Health, Ethics and Psychiatry

Children's Beliefs About Mental Disorders

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Introduction. Children's beliefs regarding mental disorders depend on their age, but also on their education and contact with this field.

Objectives. The study aims to explore children's knowledge and views on mental disorders, focusing on the definition and causes of mental illness and the way they perceive people with mental disorders.

Material and method. A sample of 41 children aged 12-14 was analyzed. They completed a questionnaire designed by the authors including demographic data (age, gender), yes/no questions and open-ended questions about mental disorders. Data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Results. Most of the children described mental disorder in terms of thinking or behavioural disturbances, like 'not thinking clearly', 'acting differently or abnormally' or 'a problem affecting the brain'. When asked to give examples of mental disorders, Alzheimer's Disease and Schizophrenia were the most frequently mentioned. The subjects believed that mental disorders can be caused by trauma, stress, environmental factors or family conflicts. Some of them thought that they are congenital or hereditary. 66% of the children do not know any person having a mental disorder. The ones who had contact with someone suffering from a mental illness were more informed about the subject. 69% of them thought that persons with mental disorders are dangerous and 7% that they are contagious.

Conclusions. Many children have little or no information about mental disorders, leading to false beliefs and stigma. Thus, education in this field and mental health promotion need to start at a young age.