

# Why Children are Not Little Adults

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## *What Must Managed Behavioral Health Care Consider in order to Deliver Appropriate Services for Children and Youth*

As a natural result of the process of growing up, all children are in a constant state of change. Every child is just a little bit different every day. Very young children grow rapidly and noticeably. Change in school-age children is less obvious but, nevertheless, there are big differences over the course of a year. At adolescence, some of the physical and emotional changes are dramatic. Families continually and automatically adjust their parenting and lifestyle to suit the evolving abilities and needs of their children. It is this dynamic quality that makes children so very different from adults and creates their extended need for adult support and guidance. Family and child serving systems, including managed care, must have the flexibility to respond rapidly and appropriately to the changing physical, emotional, mental, and social development of infants, toddlers, children and youth.

Quality child and family serving systems, including managed care systems, therefore:

- Systematically and frequently assess the child's situation and progress using what they learn to fine tune and improve services and supports;
- Emphasize screening, prevention, and early intervention;
- Attend to developmental stages and transition points that are critical for the child;
- Understand and respond quickly to developmental changes in the child and family; and
- Understand that family is the most important placement and support for a child.

All children, including those with mental, emotional, or behavioral problems, continually require the support of their parents, siblings, and other family members. The family's culture and values provide the context in which the child develops and influences the way the child thinks, feels, acts, and responds to the world. The family, broadly defined is the most constant element in a child's life. Psychological ties to a family are maintained even when children leave home or the physical or legal bonds no longer exist. What families know about their children is more comprehensive than information gathered by an evaluation team at a specific point in time. Families have a longitudinal perspective on their child's development, behavioral patterns, characteristic responses to various environmental factors, preferences and idiosyncrasies, and reactions to previous interventions. Child and family serving systems, including managed care systems, need to respect and incorporate what families know, think, feel, and believe about their children and the services and supports they are receiving. Serving a child means sharing responsibility for the child's care with a family. Services and supports, such as respite care, that enhance the quality of family life are necessary and legitimate uses of resources designated to serve a child.

Therefore, quality child and family serving systems, including managed care systems, deliver services:

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- In accordance with the family's culture and values;
- With the assistance of a Parent Support Provider to support the parents in making informed decisions about residential and outpatient services;
- To ensure that primary caregivers have the skills and resources they need to nurture the child;
- In a manner that sustains the strength of the family as a functional unit; and
- In a manner consistent with the family-driven and youth-guided approach.

The physical health of a child impacts his or her emotional health, and inversely the resiliency skills of the child may prevent physical illness. Health requires adequate food, shelter, clothing, protection, education, and guidance. This places families with children in contact with a variety of systems, agencies, programs and services. When the family lacks adequate resources, navigational skills or empowerment, the helping child-serving systems intervene. However, the interventions often create dependency, separation, and diminishing hope in the child and the family member. To avert the use of highly intrusive and costly interventions such as child protection, juvenile justice and residential treatment, child and family serving systems must meet the needs of the family in one coordinated, efficient, and cost-effective effort.

Quality child and family serving systems, including managed care systems, therefore:

- Provide the child's family with the support of a Parent Support Provider for assisting the family to choose services and supports across systems;
- Ensure that design, implementation, and evaluation of services include the family members and decisions are family-driven and youth-guided;
- Offer access to services and supports as quickly as needed and wanted by the family; and
- Ensure that interventions are strengths-based and goals teach family members how to adapt and self-manage.



Modified from:  
Trina W. Osher. *Why Children Are Not Little Adults*. National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, 1996.