

Is it Bipolar Disorder or Normal Development??

This is a question that parents ask therapists, psychiatrists, and psychologists all the time. Are you sure that my child has Bipolar Disorder, couldn't it just be he is having some behavioral problems? When are mood swings, temper tantrums, racing thoughts, and aggressive behaviors normal development and when is it Bipolar Disorder? How is a parent or caregiver able to find the right expert to help him/her find out what exactly is going on with their child? There are several steps that a parent can take in order to assist mental health professionals to determine if their child has a mental illness.

1. Always keep a log or journal of your child's behaviors. Keep track of what they are going through socially, behaviorally, emotionally, and keep track of specific behaviors that they are exhibiting and how often. Chart their behaviors at home and at school to see if there is a difference in their behavior between the two places. Chart specific behavioral or emotional problems
2. Complete a thorough family mental health history as well as your child's developmental history. Specifically a therapist is looking at when your child first walked, talked, and any developmental delays that he or she may have had.
3. Chart the times that your child seems to be having the most emotional or behavioral difficulties, any school problems, problems sleeping, specific stressors that may be going in their life, and any medications that they may be taking. All of this information will be helpful to the mental health professional in trying to make an accurate diagnosis.
4. Rule out if a physical or medical condition exists. Start the process of making an accurate diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder by taking your child to his/her pediatrician in order to determine if a medical problem could possibly be causing the symptoms.
5. Rule out any other co-existing conditions. Bipolar Disorder often occurs with other mental health disorders but also can occur with a learning disability or other mental health conditions that may be causing your child undue distress that affects their behavior and their emotional status at home as well as at school.
6. After you have the information you need about your child and you have met with your child's pediatrician to rule out if a medical condition exists, then meet with a qualified mental health professional. Make sure that you meet with a child psychiatrist that has experience with diagnosing Bipolar Disorder.

7. Have your child receive a psychiatric evaluation to determine if Bipolar Disorder is present. This is done through a diagnostic interview, behavioral observations, and you as the parent bringing in all of the necessary background information to help the psychiatrist make an accurate diagnosis. A complete psychiatric evaluation will look at your child's behaviors in all settings, how he/she relates to others, if your child has racing thoughts, mood swings, and other symptoms of mania and depression. Most comprehensive evaluations include parents filling out a checklist on their child's symptoms.
8. Be patient in obtaining a diagnosis. Sometimes, especially in younger children, a diagnosis will need to be clarified or changed to match your child's symptoms, which may change. As a parent, you always have the option to get a second opinion to be more certain before treatment options are discussed.
9. Go over with the psychiatrist the treatment options and what can be done. The goal of obtaining a diagnosis in the first place is in order to obtain interventions in order to help your child in whatever way you can.
10. Lastly, after obtaining an accurate diagnosis, finding out the treatment options, you have to work with your child's school to ensure that their needs will be met at school. Your child's psychiatrist will most likely refer you to a therapist in order to work with you and your child in family and/or individual therapy. The purpose of this is to obtain specific coping skills and identify strategies that your child can use at home and at school to ensure academic success, good peer interactions, and the ability to acquire more positive behaviors.

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