

SPOTLIGHT: Early Childhood & Family Mental Health

Mental health is a crucial part of a person's overall health and well-being. Early childhood mental health refers to the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of young children and their families, including the capacity to experience, regulate, and express emotion, form close, secure relationships, and explore the environment and learn. Optimal mental health allows children to develop the resilience to cope with whatever life throws at them and grow into well-rounded, healthy adults. For children, mental health challenges can impact their ability to access school or child care, develop peer relationships, and can have lifelong impacts. Over time, Vermont's mental health system has seen a consistent increase in young children accessing many types of services from Designated Agencies, and a striking growth in the use of crisis services (see Figures 24 and 25).

For this reason, in addition to reports of increased acuity from practitioners, BBF's State Advisory Council made early childhood and family mental health a top priority for 2019. The Council's recommendations to improve systems and supports for families can be found in the Recommendations section of this report.

FIGURE 24: CRISIS SERVICES

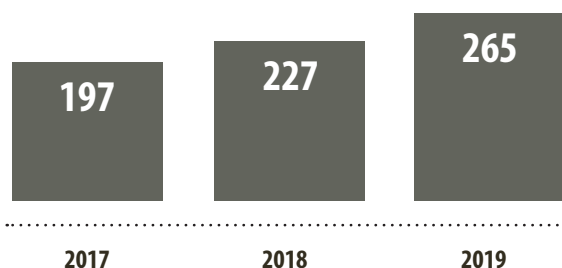
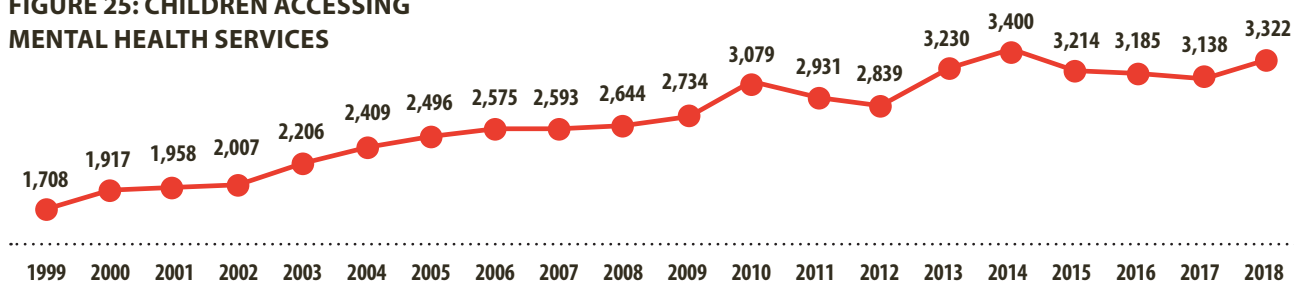


FIGURE 25: CHILDREN ACCESSING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

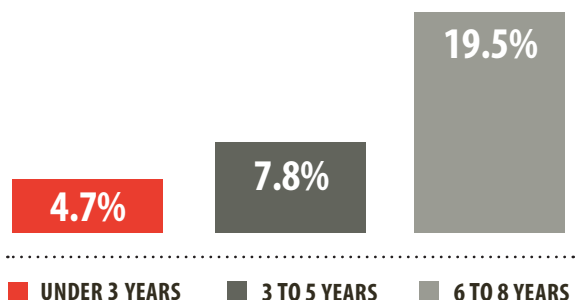


Learn more about our recommendations around early childhood and family mental health at <https://buildingbrightfutures.org/what-we-do/projects-pilots/ecfmh-task-force>

The Need for Services

Children's mental health problems are real, common, and treatable. They include depression, anxiety, and attention and behavioral concerns. One in five children between the ages of 6 and 8 has a social, emotional, or behavioral health condition.²⁷

FIGURE 26: SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND BEHAVIORAL CONDITIONS



While the need for residential care is uncommon for young children, for some, programming aimed at behavioral change administered by qualified staff in a 24-hour residential setting is necessary. **In 2019, thirty-five children ages 5-10 were placed in residential care.**²⁸

Assessing Children's Needs and Strengths

Children exposed to trauma may develop mental health challenges. When a child's ability to cope with trauma is overwhelmed and social-emotional difficulties emerge, practitioners will assess their situation using the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) tool. **Of children assessed in Vermont, 89% have a history of trauma. Just over half report having a stable caregiver in their lives. Also, only 40% report having a connection to their community.**²⁹