



BIPOLAR DISORDER IN SCHOOLS

Valerie J. Samuel, Ph.D.

WHAT IS IT?

- A Serious Brain Disorder
- Main Features Are Extreme Moods
- Excessive High Energy Levels – Euphoria or Irritability
- Excessive Low Energy Levels – Depression
- It Is a Life Long Disorder, No Cure for It
- Medications and Therapy Can Only Help Ease the Problems

HOW COMMON IS IT IN CHILDREN/ADOLESCENTS?

Clinical research to date clearly supports that most people who have Bipolar Disorder are diagnosed between adolescence and adulthood.

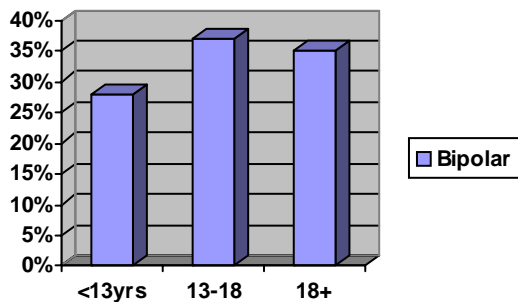


Figure 1 - Perlis 2004

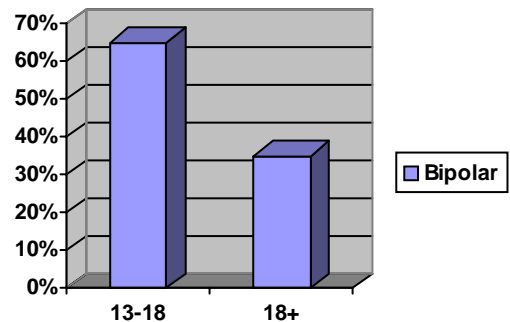


Figure 2 - Perlis 2004

This is indirect evidence that supports the notion that most Bipolar Disorder occurs prior to 18 years old. It appears to peak in adolescents.

A study with 1709 high school students, ages 14-18 years old found a 1.0% prevalence of Bipolar Disorder. It increased to 5.7% for Bipolar Disorder, NOS.

WHY NOW?

- Researchers began to study it in children in the 1990's
- Discovery of the high genetic link for this disorder
- Improved diagnostic skills
- Environmental factors (dysfunctional families, negative life events)

CURRENT TREATMENT PROBLEMS

- Bipolar is still a controversial disorder
- Misdiagnosis often occurs
- Symptoms overlap with other disorders (ADHD)
- Focus on only one symptom – irritability
- Stimulants – adverse reactions
- No cure for Bipolar

WHAT IS COMORBIDITY AND HOW DOES IT AFFECT BIPOLAR?

Comorbidity is having two or more diagnoses at the same time. Usually, the child is given one diagnosis and other problems continue to occur or develop as a result of medication. Research has shown that many children start out with ADHD and from this other disorders are discovered. Bipolar rarely presents by itself and many of the students are already being treated for a mental health diagnosis. The most common are:

- ADHD
- Anxiety Disorders
- Substance Abuse

If the student continues to have problems when being treated for the above disorders, then consideration should be given for Bipolar Disorder.

SO WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

It is more than inattention and a bad mood; rather there are severe problems that impair a student's ability to function. Bipolar children and adolescents have the following behaviors:

- Elevated Mood/Irritability
- Grandiosity
- Flight of Ideas
- Attentional Problems (ADHD)
- Decreased Sleep (Not Just Sleep Problems)
- Hypersexuality (Inappropriate Interests For the Age of the Child)
- Depressive Episodes

HOW CAN WE HELP AT SCHOOL?

Refer To Mental Health Provider – If an educator sees the above symptoms in a child, first discuss with the school mental health providers. Then make sure the parents are referred to a psychiatrist and clinical psychologist. No amount of school accommodations or modifications will help if the student is not receiving proper psychiatric treatments.

Communicate – Collaboration between all agencies will ensure success with the student.

Provide Structured Classroom Settings – Students with Bipolar Disorder need to be in classrooms with high structure and predictability. This helps offset their cognitive and emotional impairments. The educational atmosphere of organization allows them to feel safe and accepted within their environments.

Accommodations – For short attention span, high activity level, organizational difficulties (e.g., Planned breaks; movement built into the classroom schedule; use of fidgets, sit fits, lap buddies, etc.; highly structured routines; predictability; visual supports, such as visual schedules, visual organizers for writing; use of computer technology, software/keyboarding.

Stress Management – Help the student to recognize internal states, use stress reduction techniques.

Problem Solving Skills – Focus on teaching effective strategies for dealing with frustration and negative thinking. Help them develop a plan such as establishing a "cool down" or safe place to go when feeling upset.

REFERENCES

Websites

These are wonderful web sites with tons of information, CD's on the topic, and links.

<http://www.bpkids.org>

<http://www.dbsalliance.org>

Books for Children

The Storm in My Brain – Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation and the Depression & Bipolar Support Alliance

*Kid Power Tactics for Dealing with Depression – N & S Dubuque
Matt, the Moody Hermit Crab- C McGee*

Books for Adolescents

Recovering from Depression: A Workbook for Teens – M E Copeland & S Copans

Conquering the Beast Within: How I fought Depression and Won... and How You Can Too – C Irwin

Everything You Need to Now about Bipolar Disorder and Manic Depressive Illness – M A Summers

Books for Parents

Raising a Moody Child: How to Cope with Depression and Bipolar Disorder – M A Fristad & J S Goldberg Arnold

*Bipolar Disorders: A Guide to Helping Children and Adolescents – M Waltz
The Bipolar Child – D & J Paplos*

Books for Professionals

Bipolar Disorder in Childhood and Early Adolescence – B Geller, M P DelBello