

No. 1 worry for Cincinnati parents? Children's mental health

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The biggest worry weighing on Cincinnati parents these days isn't bedtimes or social media or loud, jangly guitar music.

It's their children's mental health.

In a first-of-its-kind survey this year by Beech Acres Parenting Center, nearly half of Greater Cincinnati parents, 44 per cent, said "understanding kids' mental health issues" is "very or extremely concerning" to them. More than half of respondents, or 55 percent, were "very or extremely interested" in getting training or guidance to address childhood mental-health issues.

Even the leader of Beech Acres, who has devoted his career to the facility and its clients, found the poll results surprising – and encouraging.

"A generation ago, I would say that the responses would have been a lack of respect, a lack of self-control, drug use, more negative things," said Jim Mason, Beech Acres' president and chief executive officer. "Recently, parents have adopted more of a mental health outlook – not, 'What's wrong with my kid?' but, 'How can I help them?'"

The results of the online poll of 616 parents, taken April 27 to May 11, come as the region struggles with a puzzling outbreak of youth suicide. Over the past two decades, an average of five people 18 and younger ended their lives in Hamilton County every year. Last year, 13 children died by suicide. This year so far, there have been 10 youth suicides.

The January death of 8-year-old [Gabriel Tave](#) of Westwood alarmed parents and pushed experts to accelerate collaborations with nonprofits to put more mental-health care providers in more area schools. Even so, experts say, the amount of care is not enough: The National Institute of Mental Health [reports](#) that at least one in five young people needs mental health care.

Nancy Eigel-Miller, executive director of the local nonprofit [1N5](#), said she takes heart in the Beech Acres poll results. She said they reflect a swiftly changing parental attitude toward mental health issues – which children, in part, are driving. "These kids aren't afraid," she said. "They understand. They want to have this conversation."

"Parents have to rethink how they parent now," she said. "In a lot of cases, we don't understand what the kids need, and it's scary to us."

Eigel-Miller's group is working with the local nonprofit [MindPeace](#) and the mental-health program [Surviving the Teens](#) at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center to raise enough outside grant money to put 75 care providers in area schools by January.

Cathy Strunk is a registered nurse who since 2001 has run the Surviving the Teens program. She said the poll reveals encouraging signs, but the stigma around mental illness abides.

"Denial is a big issue," she said. "It's hard for parents to believe that something serious is going with their kids. Sometimes, it's hard for them to tell a real problem and what's a typical teen thing. Many of them may even think: What do you have to be depressed about? What I tell parents is that mental illness happens like any other illness."

Strunk speaks at local schools about mental health care and suicide, and she said that teenagers say parents worry about spending money on a therapist. "I reply, 'There's no amount of money that would keep your parents from getting you the help you need if they thought it was a life-or-death situation.'

"And that's just it. They don't realize that depression can be a life-or-death situation because of suicide."

Mason said Beech Acres commissioned the survey to help shape the parenting center's offerings. Since 1849, Beech Acres has served as a regional institution for orphaned children, evolving after World War II into a resource center for parents and children.

Mason has worked at the center for 35 years as a clinical counselor and administrator. Like Eiger-Miller, Mason said the poll suggests parents are awakening to the fact that a lifetime of good mental health begins in childhood.

"We are riding a razor-thin edge on those issues," Mason said. "On the one hand, I appreciate parents focusing on aspirations and the positive. On the other hand, anxiety in families has never been higher, and there's a lot of reasons for that, and people tend to focus on that..."

"The goal is to look for the positive. How am I going to make a proactive change? We want help parents to focus on what's right with your child."

The poll, managed by the branding firm [Eric Mower and Associates](#), had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.95 percentage points. More than half of respondents had children under age 10. Three-quarters were married women. About a third of the study sample made between \$50,000 and \$80,000 a year. The poll also found:

- After mental health, the next four main concerns of respondents were "finding effective discipline techniques," bullying, using drugs and "lack of respect/talking back."
- Poll respondents said they also want more help on "building on my child's innate strengths," finding effective discipline techniques, "understanding kids' emotional development" and learning disabilities.
- While 58 percent of respondents called parenthood very or extremely challenging, 81 percent said the institution is very or extremely fulfilling.
- More than 60 percent of respondents said they reach out to social networks for support at least once a month.