



NATIONAL
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Stigmatizing Mental Health or Developmental Disorders is Harmful

Bethesda, MD—As the initial shock of the horrific events in Newtown, Connecticut begins to subside, the nation is left to contemplate why such a terrible tragedy occurred. There have been frequent reports in the news that the perpetrator had been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder and this may have been related to his homicidal behavior. While it is natural for people to want to understand why such an event occurred, speculating on possible causes at this time would be irresponsible. To conclude that the presence of such a diagnosis predisposes someone to commit this type of violence perpetuates an incorrect stereotype and maintains a stigma that often creates a reluctance to seek treatment.

Homicidal or sociopathic behaviors are often the result of a complex combination and interaction of risk factors, which may be environmental, biological, or both. In most cases, the presence of a diagnosable disorder or disability alone does not predispose someone to extreme or calculated violence. Implying so risks undermining the important efforts to reduce stigma around mental health problems and disabilities and may discourage individuals and families from seeking appropriate treatment. With appropriate treatment, especially early intervention, people with mental health issues can lead rich, full, and productive lives.

The same is true for children exhibiting problem behaviors and learning difficulties. With proper interventions, children can overcome barriers to learning, display positive behavior, and engage in positive socialization. Indeed, the primary focus of school-based mental health services is to provide students with the necessary supports to thrive in school and throughout life. Providing ongoing access to these services also promotes school safety by helping students feel connected and supported and by helping to identify students who may need more intensive services. In these cases, collaboration among school, community providers, and families is critical to ensuring continuity and effectiveness of supports. Improved access to mental health services in schools remains among the most critical factors in preventing and responding to school crises.

Our nation must engage in a serious discussion about how we can improve our efforts to provide for the mental health needs of our children and youth; not just to prevent horrific acts of violence, but to support their well-being, academic achievement, and success in life. Speculating or circulating misinformation can be harmful and distracting to the mission of providing a safe school environment for our children. Numerous organizations have accurate information on the real risk factors and interventions for specific disorders and disabilities. These include, among others: the [National Association of School Psychologists \(NASP\)](#), [The Child Mind Institute](#), the [American Psychological Association](#), the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), the [Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#), the [National Council for Behavioral Health](#), and the [Autism Society of America](#).

NASP believes that ongoing efforts to improve school safety and to create safe and welcoming school environments are vital to promoting the well-being of all of our children. Eliminating stigma and providing needed mental health services and accurate information is critical to this mission.

For additional information, visit www.nasponline.org or contact NASP Director of Communications, Kathy Cowan at kcowan@naspweb.org.

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