

Children's Wisconsin's school-based mental health services help kids thrive

Kids across Wisconsin struggle with anxiety, depression and behavioral health challenges. These issues affect kids across communities, with social drivers of health further influencing risks and outcomes. In 2023, 52% of Milwaukee County high school students reported anxiety, 35% reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day, and only 51% reported a sense of belonging at school.

Every child deserves the right support at the right time for their mental, behavioral and developmental well-being. Mental and behavioral health has been identified as a priority through Children's Wisconsin's community health needs assessment, conducted in partnership with other area health systems.

To address this urgent community need, Children's Wisconsin made it a systemwide priority to identify needs sooner, reduce stigma and improve access to care. Caring for the whole child — including developmental, mental and behavioral health — is just as important as caring for a child's physical health.

Since 2014, Children's Wisconsin has invested in school-based mental health therapists who help students address anxiety, depression, trauma, self-esteem, anger management, behavioral and social concerns, and school performance challenges in a familiar environment. Children's Wisconsin therapists, based in more than 85 schools across the state, including 17 in Milwaukee County, also work with school staff and families to reinforce strategies that support students. By working directly in schools, Children's Wisconsin can intervene earlier when mental and behavioral health problems arise and reduce barriers to care like transportation, time off school or work, and therapy wait list times.

Miles had a difficult time in middle school, struggling with feelings of anxiety and depression. A few years ago, he experienced a mental health crisis and attempted to end his life. Fortunately, his parents intervened, and he was admitted to a mental and behavioral health facility for a week, followed by 10 weeks of intensive outpatient therapy.

To set Miles up for success, he switched to a school that staffed a Children's Wisconsin therapist. Miles meets with his therapist every week and together they talk about strategies to cope with stress, how to develop healthy habits and how to de-escalate disagreements with fellow students. Knowing his school therapist is there to help has boosted Miles' confidence and improved his mental health.

In 2025, Children's Wisconsin school-based mental health therapists across the state provided more than 30,000 visits, giving students like Miles convenient, timely access to care. A child's health insurance covers some of the care we provide in schools, however, there are other services that support the care we provide children – including consultation with school staff – that are not covered. While Children's Wisconsin is grateful for support

from schools, donors and government funding, community benefit investment remains essential to sustaining school-based mental health care.