

Dr. Fleming A. Barbour Community Forum Addresses Gender Differences In Adolescent Mental Health Conditions

“Gender Differences in Adolescent Mental Health Conditions: Are New Approaches Needed?” was the theme of the twelfth annual Dr. Fleming A. Barbour Community Forum held on June 6, 2007. The keynote speaker was Sandra Metcalf, Assistant Juvenile Services Director of the 20th Judicial Circuit Court in Ottawa County, Michigan.

Ms. Metcalf’s objective was to increase participant understanding of mental health issues among adolescents, mental health issues in court-involved adolescents and how gender differences play a vital role. History- children’s mental health issues have been ignored and managed care may prevent adequate mental health care access. Result- the Juvenile Justice System has become a major “depository” for young people in need of treatment for mental health disorders. Fact- 73% of youth in juvenile facilities reported mental health problems during screening with only 57% having received prior treatment.

Why does the juvenile justice population matter to the community? The trend is toward the “criminalization” of the mentally ill and society pays \$1.7 million to \$2.3 million per juvenile when he/she leaves school and engages in crime and drug abuse.

Why do gender differences matter when working with the juvenile justice population or the adolescent population in general? Understanding gender differences improves the understanding of their needs, improves communication, contributes to an individualized treatment approach and building a “system of care,” guides relationship building, helps in treatment retention with adolescents and families and improves outcomes with the adolescent.

Sandra talked about gender differences and the female brain compared to the male brain. She gave some tips on working with girls (build the relationship first, be real, allow for expression of thought and don’t isolate) compared to working with boys (get them moving/walking to talk about feelings or have them draw, warn them at least 60 seconds before changing the subject, and/or give them a nerf ball or modeling clay in their non-dominant hand while talking- this keeps blood flowing to the brain). Working differently with boys and girls improves assessment capabilities and improves prevention and treatment outcomes.

Ms. Metcalf concluded her presentation with some ideas for prevention and intervention: create a “wrap around” approach, allow children to “feel to heal,” get kids involved in physical programs and help them understand the mind-body connection, develop access to traditional and non-traditional education programs, teach them that relaxation is important, create a community-wide “keep kids safe” initiative, and develop alternatives to detention programs and a re-entry program for court-involved kids.

Ms. Metcalf has co-authored [Go \(Girls Only\) Girls Curriculum](#), which was created because of the increased numbers of young girls entering the Court system. This curriculum covers attitude, substance abuse, media messages, relationships, anatomy/sexual health, teen pregnancy, career development and self-esteem. Sandra has also co-authored [Being Female: Fun, Fit and Fantastically Healthy](#), a guide for females.

For more information about these books you can contact Ms. Metcalf at smetcalf77@aol.com or smetcalf@co.ottawa.mi.us.