



Raising awareness about mental illness in children

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Lynn and Timmy Webster at a Boy Scouts award ceremony. Timmy deals with a mental illness (Photo provided by family to WHAM)

Rochester, N.Y. - This is Child Mental Health Awareness Week, and local advocates are raising awareness about disorders and what families can do to help their children.

According to the Greater Rochester Health Foundation, 13-20 percent of children are diagnosed with a mental health disorder, but only one in five of them will get the help they need.

Lynn Webster's 15-year-old son, Timmy, was one child who did receive the help he needed - but it did not come without its challenges.

"It's hard being the parent of a child with mental illness," Webster said, "because I can't tell you how many times I've had people say to me 'but he looks so normal.'"

At an early age, Webster's son was diagnosed with mental conditions including obsessive compulsive, mood and anxiety disorders.

Timmy is a Boy Scout who loves to help people.

"He mows lawns, he shovels snow during the winter," Webster said. "He's always there to help whenever somebody needs it."

He spent a couple years in a residential treatment facility. His high anxiety causes him to continue to struggle in school.

"A lot of times, people don't associate mental health challenges with our kids," said Melanie Funchess, director of community engagement at the Mental Health Association.

"They say kids are bad. They have a behavioral problem. Kids need more discipline. However, what I'd like for people to do is look at our kids like we look at people generally. Not look at what's wrong with you but ask, 'What happened to you?'"

Funchess said it is easy for people to mistake behavioral problems with a mental illness in kids. That is why advocates want to raise awareness about the disorders so families and kids can get the support they need.

Often, traumatic events involving violence, death or the incarceration of parents can trigger these mental disorders. Young people may not know how to cope and process these feelings.

"We want our children to have mental wellness like we want them to have physical, spiritual wellness," Funchess said. "We want them to have mental wellness."

Timmy's mom said she wants that for others, too.

"For parents, you're not alone," said Webster. "Our kids are absolutely amazing. Don't just look at the challenges and behaviors that they're having. There is more to them. There is so much more to them."

The Mental Health Association says if a parent feels something is not quite right with their child, or they're struggling in school, they should reach out for help to address the concern early.