



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

Getting Professional Help for Your Child

After a childhood of turmoil and an early adolescence of constant troubles, Molly's parents finally sought professional help for their 14-year-old daughter.

Molly was the third of four children. Her siblings were generally happy and well adjusted, only occasionally experiencing normal childhood problems. Molly was different.

Her parents' concerns began when she was a toddler. Typical temper tantrums escalated to extreme rages. Molly would be happy one moment, and then angry in response to some minor provocation. Her preschool teacher described her as "challenging," but Molly's third grade teacher was more direct. The parents were strongly advised to seek psychological help for their daughter. They listened politely, but did nothing.

The chaos and confusion in Molly's life escalated in junior high school. She became more withdrawn and sullen. Mealtimes were tense. The unspoken rule was to be careful what you said so as not to provoke Molly. Her rages were severe. This was scary to the other children, and perplexing to her parents. The approaches that worked so well with her siblings failed miserably with Molly. The parents didn't know how to reach her.

When Molly's parents finally sought help, I asked them the obvious question. Why did you wait so long? Molly's parents were caring and loving people who dedicated their lives to their children. They spoke eloquently of the path that eventually led them to a psychologist's office. Here are the reasons they waited ten years.

- **Is her behavior normal?** In Molly's early years, the parents didn't have a sense of whether Molly's behavior was truly that much different from her peers. Her two older siblings were mild mannered and easy to discipline. Perhaps Molly was more the typical child and they needed to learn how to live with her.

Molly's teachers did a disservice to this family. I suspect they knew that Molly's problems were grossly inappropriate, but were reluctant to be direct and forthright.

- **Maybe this will pass.** Children go through phases of development and the parents maintained hope that their daughter's behavior would improve as she matured. Some kids do have a difficult time in their early years, but later develop effective coping skills.
- **Uneasiness about seeking professional help.** If Molly's teacher had recommended a medical evaluation, the parents would have followed up immediately. However, they were uncomfortable with the thought that their daughter needed a mental health assessment.

The parents were confused. What exactly would occur during such an evaluation? What if Molly refused to be cooperative? Would they be in the room with their daughter? The parents had very little information about mental health treatment and were fearful it could actually make things worst. Their impressions of psychologists came from television shows and stories from their friends. This left them more anxious than hopeful.

- **This is my child and my problem to fix.** Molly's parents always looked to each other to solve problems, not outsiders. When they had money issues, they didn't call a financial counselor or seek government assistance. When their youngest daughter was having some problems in math, they worked with her every night until she improved.

Molly's parents felt that their daughter's bad behavior was due to their poor parenting. They knew that Molly was different from her siblings, so they challenged themselves to try different parenting approaches to reach her. If they could only be better parents, Molly would be a better child.

Molly's parents were wonderful people, and I learned a lot from them in the time we worked together. With therapy and medication, Molly's behavior improved a great deal. However, it was a very long road to recovery for their teenager. This journey would have been much less traumatic if the parents had acted ten years earlier.

When is the right time to seek help for your child? If your child has serious problems that persist in spite of three to six months of your focused, consistent, and aggressive efforts, then you should seek professional help.

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