

# It Takes a Village to Raise a Mentally Healthy Child

By Tricia Baker

Raising a mentally healthy child is a communal effort involving many different people and groups, from parents, teachers, school counselors, grandparents, neighbors, and sometimes dogs.

Today, 1 out of 5 youth is struggling with a mental health disorder. Only 1/3 of those are receiving medical treatment for these biological brain illnesses. Fifty percent of mental health disorders will present by age 14, but the average time period of the first onset of the disorder and the first time seeing a doctor for that illness is 10 years.

I have been a youth mental health advocate for the past 16 years. My son, Kenny, who struggled with significant mental health issues, was my teacher. His diagnosis came as a complete shock. I was uneducated and not prepared for what was to come. We immediately went into high reactive mode to find the help he deserved. Unfortunately, we ran out of time, and we lost Kenny to his biological brain illness.

Since Kenny's passing, we have developed age-appropriate mental wellness programs, based in research, from kindergarten through college. We have educated over 250,000 students and have helped save thousands of young lives.

Suicide used to be the third leading cause of death of New Jersey's youth. I am very sad to say, as per the 2024 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the State of New Jersey Department of Education, suicide is now the second leading cause of death of our precious young people in New Jersey. It is getting worse.

There are many challenges facing educators and school administrators across New Jersey today. There have been significant government budget cuts in many school districts. Just when our children need support the most, the support is being pulled out from under them. Mental wellness programs are being canceled.

At AIR (Attitudes in Reverse), our hope is to continue to educate youth so they know they can always ask for the support they



deserve. We hope to educate parents so they may recognize the signs and symptoms of a mental health issue and not pass it off as a sign of puberty. We include the partnership with certified therapy dogs in every one of AIR's mental health educational programs.

As a nonprofit that receives no federal or state grant funding, we are grateful for the sponsors, families and donors who understand the importance of these conversations

and share funding directly with AIR so we can talk to students where they are.



In our hearts, we want to continue helping educate children and providing certified therapy dogs. We want to help save young lives. It takes a village—both human and canine. Our hope is for people to recognize the crisis our children are facing and want to be part of the solution, be a part of AIR's Mental Wellness Village.

Please find it in your hearts to support AIR; visit <https://air.ngo> for more information.