



It's Not Mental: Finding Innovative Support and Medical Treatment for a Child Diagnosed with a Severe Mental Illness

Jeanie Wolfson

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Can a child diagnosed with a mental illness, i.e., a brain disorder, in reality have a physical illness--a disorder affecting the brain?

"**It's Not *Mental***" is the compelling yet educational story of Keri, a highly intelligent, learning-disabled child diagnosed with mental illness. It is also the story of her parents' persistence in finding help for their daughter, help that ultimately led to a future filled with promise.

Sleep dysfunction, body pains, attentional difficulties, tics, obsessions, mood swings, and hallucinations, gradually diminished her quality of life. Before reaching her teens, she'd been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder and several co-occurring conditions, while underlying issues were ignored.

Keri's parents struggled to find comprehensive medical care for their daughter. What they found instead were doctors too busy to listen or too rigid to look beyond a "mental" diagnosis. Without an integrated approach to her care, Keri, like many children in similar circumstances, became subject to a merry-go-round of psychiatric medications.

But the author would not give up. She continued to investigate brain malfunctions, psychiatric diagnoses, hormones, diet, sleep, and immune function, all the while navigating the torturous paths of our health care system. Much of what she learned is outlined here in gripping narrative based on real-life experience. In easy-to-understand prose and with clear explanations of medical jargon, she covers topics such as:

- Helping a child deal with hallucinations while they're happening
- Using a psychiatric service dog to give a child greater independence
- Obtaining special accommodations at school
- Communicating effectively with doctors
- Identifying and obtaining necessary medical tests
- Dealing with medication side effects.

Otherwise mentally healthy children can experience sleep problems and/or symptoms of depression, bipolar mood swings, and/or psychosis. "It's Not *Mental*" encourages anyone caring for a child with these or other signs of a psychiatric illness or a full-blown psychotic disorder to think outside the box.

It is only by tearing down the barriers of stigma and abandoning our traditional band-aid approach to psychiatric treatment that we can embrace more effective emotional, educational, and medical support for these children and their underlying condition(s).

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