

# Mental Health Challenges in Children: A Legal and Policy Analysis.

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## **Abstract:**

*Mental health challenges among children have become a pressing global concern, with profound effects on their emotional well-being, physical health, and societal participation. This research paper presents an in-depth analysis of the legal and policy frameworks addressing these challenges, focusing on India while drawing comparisons with international standards. In addition to international frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the study assesses important Indian laws such as the Juvenile Justice Act, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, and the Mental Healthcare Act. Case laws like Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India and Gaurav Kumar Bansal v. Union of India are analyzed to illustrate the judiciary's approach to child mental health rights. The paper highlights existing gaps, barriers, and areas requiring reform to promote a child-centered legal response to mental health challenges.*

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Date of Submission: 07-12-2024

Date of Acceptance: 17-12-2024

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## **I. Introduction**

Children are among the most vulnerable members of society, and their general growth, development, and well-being are greatly influenced by their mental health. Childhood is a formative time when relationships, experiences, and the outside world have a big impact on mental and emotional well-being. However, with millions of young people afflicted by a variety of diseases, mental health issues among youngsters are becoming a global concern. These include, but are not restricted to, behavioral problems, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, and autism spectrum disorders. These problems are incredibly common. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that one in seven kids between the ages of 10 and 19 suffers from a mental illness. This figure demonstrates how pervasive the issue is and how deeply it affects kids, families, and communities. In addition to interfering with children's social and academic growth, these problems put them at risk for long-term issues like chronic illnesses, fewer prospects for employment, and difficulties establishing committed relationships.

Even while this crisis is becoming more widely acknowledged, institutional and social responses frequently fail to adequately meet the special needs of kids who struggle with mental health issues. The issue is made worse by the stigma associated with mental health as well as the lack of access to supporting educational frameworks, mental health services, and qualified specialists. Furthermore, children who are dealing with these problems are further marginalized by the absence of coherent legal and regulatory frameworks, which leaves them and their families without enough protection and support. In order to close these gaps and guarantee that kids have the attention and assistance they require to flourish, legislative and policy actions are essential. A comprehensive strategy that incorporates mental health services into communities, schools, and healthcare systems while defending children's rights through strong legal protections is necessary for effective interventions. This chapter explores the significance of tackling mental health issues in children by looking at their incidence, effects, and the current legislative and policy frameworks that are intended to assist them. It highlights the necessity of a rights-based strategy that places children's mental health and wellbeing first as a crucial aspect of their overall development. Stakeholders can endeavor to develop systems that enable children to realize their full potential, free from the constraints imposed by untreated mental health issues, by acknowledging the magnitude and urgency of this issue.

## **II. Legal And Policy Frameworks**

- i) **Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 (India):** In India, the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, plays a crucial role in safeguarding the mental health rights of individuals, including children. It enshrines the right to access mental health care as a fundamental right, ensuring that mental health services are accessible, available, and of good quality. Importantly, the Act includes provisions aimed at protecting children's rights, emphasizing non-discriminatory access to mental health services. It mandates that children are treated with dignity, and

their right to appropriate care is recognized, ensuring that mental health issues are addressed without prejudice or stigma.

- ii) **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, US):** In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a pivotal piece of legislation that guarantees educational support for children with mental health disorders. Through IDEA, children who require special education and related services due to mental health challenges are provided with individualized education plans (IEPs). These plans ensure that children receive personalized support tailored to their specific needs, promoting their academic success and overall well-being. The law mandates that public schools create an inclusive environment where students with mental health challenges are integrated into the general education system, offering them a fair chance at achieving their potential.
  - iii) **Children's Act, 1989 (UK):** The Children's Act of 1989 in the United Kingdom outlines the responsibilities of local authorities in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. The Act places a strong emphasis on protecting children's mental and emotional health, requiring that the mental well-being of children be considered when making decisions about their care. The Act supports a holistic approach to child welfare, ensuring that children with mental health issues are provided with the care and services they need. It has been instrumental in shaping the legal framework for child welfare and mental health care in the UK.
  - iv) **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (India):** The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015<sup>1</sup>, provides essential mechanisms for addressing the mental health needs of children in conflict with the law or those in need of care and protection. The Act emphasizes rehabilitation and social reintegration as its core objectives, which include providing comprehensive mental health services. This ensures that children's psychological and emotional well-being is given priority during legal proceedings. The Act establishes child-friendly procedures and provides for the establishment of Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) and Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs), which play a critical role in safeguarding children's rights. These bodies ensure that the mental health needs of children are adequately addressed, whether they are victims, witnesses, or accused. By recognizing the importance of mental health in the rehabilitation of children, the Act reflects a progressive approach to juvenile justice, focusing on reintegration rather than punishment.
- **Provisions for Mental Health Support:** The Juvenile Justice Act and similar frameworks emphasize the need for mental health services as part of the rehabilitation process. Children involved in the juvenile justice system are particularly vulnerable and may suffer from mental health disorders due to trauma, abuse, or neglect. The law mandates that appropriate mental health support, including counseling, therapy, and psychiatric services, be provided to help these children overcome their challenges and reintegrate into society successfully. This holistic approach aims to address the root causes of delinquency, promoting the emotional and psychological healing of affected children.

### III. Case Law Analysis

Legal precedents are instrumental in shaping the interpretation and enforcement of children's mental health rights. By examining key case laws, we can better understand how courts have influenced the development of mental health protections for children.

1. **Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California (1976):** This landmark case from the United States primarily dealt with the duty of mental health professionals to warn third parties of potential harm posed by a patient. While the case focused on adults, its principles have important implications for the mental health care of children. The court's ruling established the legal responsibility of mental health providers to take appropriate steps to prevent harm, which is relevant to cases involving children with mental health issues. The duty to warn and protect extends to vulnerable populations, including children, highlighting the need for mental health professionals to act in the best interests of their young patients.
2. **R (On the Application of P and Q) v. Secretary of State for Health (UK):** This significant case in the UK addressed the rights of minors within mental health institutions. The court ruled on the need for humane treatment of minors, emphasizing that children should not only receive the appropriate mental health care but should also be treated with dignity and respect. The case reinforced the principle that the rights of children with mental health issues must be upheld, ensuring proper oversight and a child-centered approach in institutional settings.
3. **Unni Krishnan, J.P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh (India):** Although this Indian case primarily focused on the right to education, it also highlighted the interconnection between education and mental health. The court's ruling emphasized that children's right to education cannot be fully realized without addressing their mental health needs. The judgment underscored the need for an integrated approach that recognizes the importance of mental well-being in children's educational success and overall development.
4. **L v. Lithuania (European Court of Human Rights):** This case before the European Court of Human Rights centered on the rights of children with mental health challenges. The court ruled that children with mental

health issues are entitled to non-discriminatory and equitable access to health services, underlining the importance of inclusive mental health care. The ruling reinforced the principle that children, regardless of their mental health status, should have access to the same rights and services as other children, ensuring their full participation in society without discrimination.

#### **IV. Challenges And Barriers**

1. **Lack of Awareness:** One of the primary challenges in addressing children's mental health issues is the lack of awareness among caregivers, educators, and policymakers. Many individuals in these key roles lack a sufficient understanding of mental health problems, which leads to significant delays in both diagnosis and intervention. This gap in knowledge often results in children's mental health issues being overlooked or misinterpreted as behavioral problems rather than medical or psychological conditions. As a consequence, children may not receive the necessary care or support at an early stage, which can exacerbate their symptoms and lead to long-term developmental issues.
2. **Insufficient Infrastructure:** Access to mental health care is further hindered by the scarcity of mental health professionals and services, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Mental health facilities and specialists are concentrated in urban areas, leaving children in remote or economically disadvantaged regions with limited access to appropriate care. This lack of infrastructure exacerbates the disparity in mental health services, meaning that many children, especially those in rural or marginalized communities, are unable to receive timely or adequate treatment for their mental health challenges.
3. **Stigma and Cultural Barriers:** Cultural attitudes and societal stigma surrounding mental health play a significant role in discouraging families from seeking help for children experiencing mental health issues. In many cultures, mental health problems are viewed as a source of shame, leading to a reluctance to acknowledge the problem or seek professional assistance. This stigma can result in delayed treatment, as families may attempt to deal with the issues in isolation or deny the need for external support. In some cases, mental health problems are seen as personal failures, rather than legitimate medical conditions that require intervention.
4. **Digital Threats:** The rise of digital technology and online platforms has introduced new threats to children's mental health. Cyberbullying, online abuse, and overexposure to harmful or inappropriate content can have a profound impact on a child's emotional and psychological well-being. Digital interactions, especially in the form of bullying or harassment, can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression. Furthermore, excessive screen time and exposure to unrealistic portrayals of life on social media can negatively affect children's self-esteem and mental health. These digital threats add a modern layer of complexity to addressing children's mental health.

#### **V. Recommendations**

1. **Strengthening Legal Protections:** It is imperative that current laws be changed to specifically target children's mental health in order to meet their requirements. Accessible and comprehensive mental health care that addresses prevention, early intervention, and continuing treatment should be guaranteed by legal frameworks. Ensuring that children's mental health needs are given priority within larger healthcare and social systems and holding institutions responsible are two benefits of strengthening legal protections.
2. **Capacity Building:** Enhancing the recognition and treatment of mental health issues in children requires training for educators, medical personnel, and law enforcement personnel. We can enable earlier intervention and more suitable responses if we provide these people with the information and abilities to identify the symptoms of mental health illnesses. Developing knowledge of the unique requirements of kids with mental health disorders and making sure that professionals are equipped to provide children and their families with resources, support, and direction should be the main goals of capacity building.
3. **Improving Access to Services:** To guarantee that all children, irrespective of their location or financial situation, have access to suitable mental health treatments, it is imperative to expand the infrastructure for mental health care. Rural and low-income communities, where resources are especially scarce, should receive special attention. Potential ways to get around these financial and geographic constraints include community-based mental health treatments, telemedicine, and mobile clinics. We can guarantee that children receive the attention they require to flourish by expanding the availability of child-specific mental health care services.
4. **Awareness and Advocacy:** Reducing the stigma associated with mental health concerns requires national awareness efforts. These public awareness efforts ought to promote early intervention and raise awareness of the significance of mental health for kids' general wellbeing. Assisting families in identifying the warning signs of mental health illnesses and seeking professional assistance without feeling ashamed or judged should be another goal of advocacy campaigns.
5. **Integrating Mental Health into Education:** Mental health education should be incorporated into school curricula to foster awareness, resilience, and emotional intelligence from an early age. By integrating mental

health topics into the educational system, children can learn to recognize and manage their emotions, as well as understand the importance of seeking help when needed. This integration can also help create a supportive and understanding environment in schools, where mental health challenges are acknowledged, and students are encouraged to prioritize their emotional well-being. Schools should also provide resources and support services to ensure that students can access professional help when necessary.

By addressing these challenges and implementing these recommendations, we can create a more supportive, accessible, and effective system for promoting and safeguarding children's mental health.

## **VI. Comprehensive Explanation Of Legal And Policy Frameworks For Children's Mental Health.**

One of the most important legal and societal priorities is protecting children's mental and emotional wellbeing. Strong national and international frameworks that are backed by important case law are designed to fully satisfy these objectives.

### **Domestic Case Laws in India.**

1. **Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India (2011):** In accordance with the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, this crucial case highlighted the importance of offering children comprehensive care. The ruling emphasized how crucial it is to include psychological support in rehabilitation plans for kids who require care and protection. It forced the government to guarantee that institutional processes incorporate sufficient mental health services that are suited to the emotional and developmental requirements of children.
2. **Sheela Barse v. Union of India (1986):** The Supreme Court addressed the humane treatment of children in custodial settings, such as juvenile homes, in this historic decision. The Court demanded that institutional changes give mental health as much priority as physical treatment. The fundamental idea that children in custodial care should get all-encompassing support that addresses their emotional and psychological well-being was established by this ruling.

### **Protection Of Children From Sexual Offenses (Pocso) Act, 2012.**

One of the main pillars of child safety in India is the POCSO Act<sup>4</sup>, which was created especially to combat sexual abuse and exploitation. The Act approaches legal processes and requirements with a child-sensitive perspective:

- **Trauma-Informed Practices:** Making sure that there is as little discomfort as possible throughout inquiries and trials.
  - **Mandatory Psychological Counseling:** Giving victims the emotional assistance they need to help them heal.
- **Case Laws Under POCSO Act.**
- i) **Independent Thought v. Union of India (2017):** This case highlighted the importance of victim-sensitive processes. The Court mandated psychological counseling and trauma care for children affected by sexual abuse, reinforcing the principle that a victim's emotional well-being must be central to legal proceedings.
  - ii) **State of Karnataka v. Krishnappa (2000):** The Court stressed trauma-informed judicial practices, emphasizing the need to protect child victims from further distress during legal processes. The judgment advocated for a child-centric approach in cases involving abuse.

### **Mental Healthcare Act, 2017**

With special provisions for minors, the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 ensures that everyone has the right to mental health care. It seeks to guarantee children's access to mental health care and shield them from cruel treatment.

#### □ **Important Case Laws Under the Mental Health Act**

- i) **Union of India v. Gaurav Kumar Bansal (2018):** This case reaffirmed the Act's application and brought attention to the need for easily available mental health care for children and other vulnerable groups. The decision emphasized how important it is for the government to prioritize mental health care.
- ii) **Union of India v. Amit Sahni (2020):** The Supreme Court reiterated that the Constitution's guarantees of healthcare rights include mental health as a fundamental component. Equal access to mental health care for children was highlighted in the ruling as a crucial aspect of their general wellbeing.

#### □ **International Legal Frameworks.**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) <sup>9</sup>The UNCRC ensures children's access to mental health services through Articles 23, 24, and 25. These clauses urge governments to set up safeguards for the mental health of children with mental health issues, acknowledging their special requirements.

**Who's Mental Health Action Plan (2013–2030).**

Promoting mental health and creating inclusive services, especially for kids and teenagers, are the goals of the WHO's worldwide program. It highlights the importance of including mental health services within more comprehensive social, educational, and health services.

**The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

As a part of total well-being, mental health is given priority in Goal 3 of the SDGs. This objective emphasizes how crucial it is to create all-encompassing healthcare systems that address mental health issues. This objective emphasizes how crucial it is to create all-encompassing health systems that address children's mental health needs.

**Key International Case Law**

i) **Zehra v. Turkey (2008):** According to the European Court of Human Rights, states are fundamentally required to give vulnerable children access to quality mental health care. This decision reaffirmed how crucial it is to match national laws with global norms in order to guarantee that kids receive prompt and efficient mental health care.

**VII. Conclusion:**

At the national and international levels, concerted efforts are needed to safeguard children's mental health through strong legislative frameworks. While the Juvenile Justice Act, POCSO Act, and Mental Healthcare Act in India offer a solid basis, they must be implemented well in order to close service delivery gaps. Precedents such as *Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India* and *Independent Thought v. Union of India* demonstrate how the judiciary actively protects the mental health rights of children. International frameworks, such as the SDGs and UNCRC, act as benchmarks for nations creating child-centric policies. Collaborative efforts across the legal, social, and educational sectors will be necessary to address structural impediments including stigma, poor infrastructure, and the growing problems of the digital era. Societies can guarantee children's holistic development, protect their rights, and allow them to flourish intellectually, socially, and emotionally by placing a high priority on mental health treatment.