A Guide for Community Child Serving Agencies on Psychotropic Medications for Children and Adolescents
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The Context for Prescribing Psychotropic Medications
- Individuals create desired change, not medications
- Medication removes physiologically-based obstacles to change, enabling the individual’s own efforts to be more effective.
- Many youth benefit from psychotropic medications used as part of a comprehensive treatment plan.

The Context for Prescribing Psychotropic Medications
- May be over prescribed when there is insufficient attention paid to other supports and services.
- May be under prescribed if a youth has not had access to any mental health assessment or mental health treatment follow up.
- May be either if prescribers have not had sufficient training on use of psychotropic medications in children and youth.

Phases in Treatment When Medication is Part of the Plan
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Evaluation
- Medication Trial
- Follow Up after A Medication Trial has been Initiated
- Medication Tapering and Discontinuation

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Evaluation
- Interviews with child and family / caregivers
- Look for strengths and needs
- Look for needs best addressed by medication and / or other psychosocial treatments
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Evaluation
- History of current symptoms and concerns
- Youth’s developmental, medical and mental health history including current and past medication use
- Youth’s education status
- Youth’s strengths and interests
- Family’s situation including supports and stressors
- Other community and environmental factors impacting the youth and family

Medication Trial
- Informed consent and assent
- Prescriber provides feedback and education to the youth and family about the diagnosis and the proposed treatment and monitoring plan including laboratory tests.
- Description of risks and benefits.
- Description of usual side effects.

Follow-up After a Trial Has Been Initiated
- Follow-up in person or by phone after starting medication ideally occurs within two weeks then at least monthly until symptoms are improved and stable.
- Lab tests may be needed for monitoring.
- More frequent follow-up when dosages are being increased or decreased.
- If emotions or behavior changes, it is important to look at medication changes and other life changes

Medication Tapering and Discontinuation
- Medication trial should be long enough and at a sufficient dose to show effectiveness.
- Once a youth is stable in behavior and environmental circumstances for a period of time, medication reduction or discontinuation can be considered.
- Discontinuation should be gradual.

Issues in Prescribing
- Scientific evidence of effectiveness of medications should be considered.
- Evidence supports use of medication in mood disorders, anxiety disorders, psychosis, and attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder.

Issues in Prescribing
- Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Approval
- Medication FDA approved when found to be safe and effective for a particular diagnosis at a given dosage range for people of a particular age range as determined by evidence based research.
Issues in Prescribing

- "Off label" use is when a medication is not FDA approved for a particular use.
- "Off label" use is common.
- Does not mean the medication’s use is not safe or effective.
- Prescriber should inform family of evidence for this use.

Issues in Prescribing

- Preferred Drug Lists
  - Medicaid or other insurance plans develop a list of medications for free or reduced cost.
  - Often list is of medications that are of lowest cost and work the best.

Issues in Prescribing

- Risk for Misuse of Medications
  - Medications can be overused, sold or used in appropriate ways
  - History of substance use should be obtained

Issues in Prescribing

- Side effects can be minor (headaches), moderate (decreased appetite or sleep) or severe (obesity, seizures, endocrine changes, involuntary muscle movements)
- Family and youth should be told of possible side effects and what to do if they appear.
- Importance of medication monitoring.

Issues in Prescribing

- Medication preference of Youth and Family
- Barriers to follow-up and medication adherence

Issues in Prescribing

- Polypharmacy is the prescribing of more than one psychotropic medication at the same time.
- Review overall treatment plan before adding medications.
- Can be helpful when there is more than one diagnosis; treatment augmentation; treatment resistance.
- Family and youth need to be informed of each medication’s purpose.
Issues in Prescribing

- **Polypharmacy** is nonoptimal when care is fractured or prescribing is non-evidence based.

Issues in Prescribing

- **Use in children under five years of age**
  - Young children are often more sensitive to medications than older youth.
  - Very limited evidence base for efficacy in young children other than in children with autism and severe developmental disabilities with serious aggression and ADHD.

Considerations for Community-Based Child Serving Systems

- **Child serving agencies** should promote use of psychotropic medications only within a comprehensive treatment and care plan.
- Prescriber needs to be part of the development and monitoring of the plan.
- Agencies should develop policies and monitoring systems regarding youth safety and appropriate use of psychotropic medications.

Primary Health Care System

- Approximately 75% of youth with psychiatric disorders are initially assessed in their primary care provider’s office.
- Pediatricians often prescribe psychotropic medications and need to be included in care planning.
- Consultation, when needed, by child and adolescent psychiatrists to pediatricians can be helpful.

Education System

- Medications are often administered at school and used to assist learning.
- It is important for school staff to be a part of care planning and to understand the purpose of psychotropic medication use and to help in monitoring for medication effectiveness and side effects

Child Welfare System

- Studies indicate that 60 – 85% of children and youth served by the child welfare system meet criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis.
- In many states there is a disproportionate number of children in foster care on psychotropic medications.
**Child Welfare System**
- Child welfare workers often provide consent for medications.
- They need to actively participate in care planning along with foster families.
- Both deserve education on proper use of and monitoring of psychotropic medications.

**Juvenile Justice System**
- As many as 75% of youth involved with the juvenile justice system have one or more diagnosable psychiatric disorders.
- Juvenile justice workers need to actively participate in care planning.
- They deserve education on proper use of and monitoring of psychotropic medications.

**Early Childhood Service Systems**
- Early signs of mental health need are often seen and can be missed in early childhood systems like child care and pre-school settings.
- Mental health consultation to these settings is important.
- Psychotropic medication research is very limited in young children. Medications should only be utilized after full, careful assessment of the child’s needs and part of a comprehensive care plan.

**Developmental Disabilities Systems**
- Youth with developmental disabilities may have higher rates of co morbid medical illnesses that may impact prescribing psychotropic medications.
- Medical illnesses in youth with developmental disabilities can present with changes in behavior.

**Developmental Disabilities Systems**
- Youth with developmental disabilities may be more sensitive to medication side effects.
- Medication should be used only after thorough evaluation and as part of a comprehensive care plan.
- Caregivers of these youth should be educated on the use, side effects and monitoring of psychotropic medications.

**Substance Abuse Treatment Services System**
- Often substance use and mental health disorders co occur.
- Psychotropic medications to treat a psychiatric disorder in a youth with substance use needs can be done but extra attention to interaction with other substances needs to be taken.
Sources for Information about Medications

- Correct information allows youth and families to make an **informed decision** about whether they should agree to take medication.
- Youth, family members and professionals working with them should ask prescribers any questions they have from researching medication options themselves.

Types of Information Available

- Printed materials, experts, Internet
- Your doctor, pharmacist and other medical professionals can provide accurate information on medications.
- The Internet has much information but the source should be considered to decide what is accurate and useful and what is not.

Direct Marketing

- Advertisements by drug companies and promotional materials are available along with information on their websites.
- This information can be very useful for factual data related to dosing guidelines, how and when to take medication, side effects and contraindications (reasons the medication should not be taken).

Direct Marketing

- There are limitations with this resource.
- Only FDA indications can be discussed.
- Only available for brand name medications not generics.
- They present only positive outcomes and do not have to present unfavorable studies, results or outcomes from research.

Medication Package Insert

- Has useful information about the medication.
- Doctor or pharmacist can help with understanding the information.

Medically Oriented Commercial Websites

- Have information on illnesses and medications
- User friendly
- Driven by advertising and subscription fees.
- [www.drugs.com](http://www.drugs.com)
- [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com)
Government Resources
- Provide accurate information without advertising
  - www.nlm.nih.gov
  - www.nimh.nih.gov
  - www.samhsa.gov

Professional Organizations
- These are non-profit organizations.
- Do not contain advertising.
- Designed for the public with information on illnesses and their treatment.
- Can include guidelines for treatment, handouts for families, information on current research, contacts for support groups.

Professional Organizations
- Information created and written by experts in the field.
  - www.aacap.org
  - www.psych.org
  - www.aap.org
  - www.parentsmedguide.org

Consumer Support and Advocacy Groups
- Agencies created by consumers and advocacy organizations to serve a specific population.
- Helpful in finding links to resources as well as basic information.
- Many have discussion groups where questions can be posed to other consumers.

Consumer Support and Advocacy Groups
- www.ffcmh.org
- www.autismspeaks.org
- www.adaa.org
- www.chadd.org
- www.nami.org