



Westend61/Westend61 via Getty Images

JUNE 2024

TOOLKIT: Are the Kids All Right?

Portrayals of Mental Health in TV
Watched by Children and Teens



Executive summary

Young people in the U.S. are experiencing mental health struggles beyond what previous generations experienced, and we view television as a valuable intervention tool that can help us better understand and tackle these issues. Accurate representations of mental health can help children and adolescents grasp and communicate their struggles to trusted adults, and minimize the isolation that can stem from mental health issues.

To better understand mental health representation and portrayals that children see in entertainment media, we analyzed the most popular English-language scripted television series (broadcast, streaming, and cable) in the U.S., in 2021 and 2022, for audiences ages 2 to 11 and audiences ages 12 to 17, according to Nielsen metrics.

Key findings:

- ◆ **Mental health issues are uncommon in TV shows that children and teens watch.** In total, 17.4% of all episodes reviewed include at least one character with an explicit mental health issue.
- ◆ **Characters with mental health issues are rare.** Of all prominent characters (lead, co-lead, notable supporting, supporting), only 1.3% have an *explicit* mental health issue; 2.1% of characters have an *implicit* mental health issue (implicit mental health issue are portrayals of mental health that are implied but not made explicit).
- ◆ **Mental health issues in the LGBTQIA+ community are ignored.** Although the mental health crisis uniquely impacts LGBTQIA+ individuals, we did not identify any LGBTQIA+ characters struggling with mental health issues in the episodes analyzed.
- ◆ **Less than 2% of young people are shown with mental health issues.** Among prominent characters, characters ages 50 and older are most frequently shown with an explicit mental health issue (3.5%), followed by children and teens (each 1.7%), and adults ages 20 to 49 (0.7%).
- ◆ **Male characters are more likely to struggle with substance abuse.** Among characters with explicit mental health issues, male characters are about twice as likely as female characters to struggle with substance use disorder.

- ◆ **Nearly 1 in 10 characters (9.3%) with explicit mental health issues are feared by others.** Of the negative reactions we considered (feared, exploited, discriminated, physically harmed, and avoided), the most common reaction was “feared.”
- ◆ **Female characters are more likely to have mood disorders and inflict self-harm.** Among characters with explicit mental health issues, female characters are about 12 times as likely as male characters to struggle with self-harm and about three times as likely to struggle with mood disorders (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder).
- ◆ **Female characters with explicit mental health issues are more than twice as likely as male characters to seek help.** Half of female characters with explicit mental health issues engage in help-seeking behavior, compared with just 21.3% of male characters.
- ◆ **Characters with explicit mental health issues are significantly more likely to be shown using illicit drugs.** Although uncommon overall, 3.1% of characters with an explicit mental health issue are shown using illicit drugs, compared with 0.5% of characters without an explicit mental health issue.



Recommendations

Now more than ever, there is a demand for resources to tackle the youth mental health crisis in media. Television is one avenue that content creators can leverage to make children and adolescents feel heard, understood, and validated. Similarly, the general public can better grasp the realities of mental health issues and what they entail if portrayals are accurate and represent people's lived experiences. We present the following recommendations with the intention of enhancing the representation of mental health issues in television shows most watched by children.

◆ **Write more characters who struggle with mental health conditions.**

Representation makes people feel heard, understood, and validated. Bring more characters who struggle with any sort of mental health issue into narratives, so that children and adolescents can learn to recognize mental health issues in themselves and others. Narratives with characters who struggle with their mental health also lead parents to talk to their children about mental health.

◆ **Think intersectionally when casting characters with mental health conditions.**

People in the U.S. who most report experiencing mental health conditions are girls and women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and people of color. Feature characters representing these communities, including their intersections, struggling with mental health issues to reflect the real world and validate viewers' real struggles.

◆ **Don't blame and shame.**

Storylines are an opportunity to explain various sources of mental health conditions that are outside of individuals' control, such as societal expectations, insufficient public resources, unexpected events, and more. Narratives can also explore why many individuals do not recognize the warning signs and do not seek out help that does not suggest an individual moral failing.

◆ **Make mental health portrayals explicit, intentional, and clear.**

Although mental health issues in general were not prevalent on screen, explicit mental health conditions were even less so. Rather than making mental health issues ambiguous, make them clear. Doing so can decrease stigma and taboos that limit honest conversations. Mention conditions by name, talk about what conditions entail, and bring it up in more than one episode in a series.

◆ **Diversify the types of mental health issues that are shown, and who is shown struggling with them.**

Mental health issues come in all shapes and forms. Television often uses the most intense and drama-worthy storylines, which means common mental health conditions may be ignored. Feature a wide variety of mental health issues, and counter preconceived notions people may have about who deals with certain types of mental health issues. For example, feature male characters struggling with eating disorders or mood disorders, and show female characters struggling with substance abuse.

◆ **Encourage children and adolescents to seek help.**

Television has the power to encourage positive behavior among young people, like seeking help for mental health conditions, or supporting their friends and family through their struggles. Consult with mental health professionals to realistically portray help-seeking behaviors that cater to children and adolescents.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Regina K. Scully and Artemis Rising Foundation for funding this research. They would also like to thank Getty Images for the images featured in this report and Nielsen for generously providing ranking data used in this report through its Data for Good program. Finally, we would like to thank Dr. Tegan Bratcher, Sofie Christensen, Melanie Lorísdóttir, Marisa Rodriguez, Dr. Alexis Romero Walker, Lena Schofield, Dr. Sarah Trinh, Summer van Houten, and Jenna Virgo for contributing to the data collection, and Romeo Pérez for data management and collection.

How to cite this report: Terán, L., and Conroy, M. (2024). Are the Kids All Right? Portrayals of Mental Health in TV Watched by Children and Teens. The Geena Davis Institute.

About the Geena Davis Institute

Since 2004, the Geena Davis Institute has worked to mitigate unconscious bias while creating equality, fostering inclusion and reducing negative stereotyping in entertainment and media. As a global research-based organization, the Institute provides research, direct guidance, and thought leadership aimed at increasing representation of marginalized groups within six identities: gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, disability, age, and body type. Because of its unique history and position, the Institute can help achieve true on-screen equity in a way that few organizations can. Learn more at www.geenadavisinstitute.org.