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Action Through Prevention: Rethinking Children's Mental Health

J. Hudziak¹

¹The University of Vermont, Department of Psychiatry- Department of Pediatrics,
Burlington, USA

The perfect storm for positioning the field of child and adolescent mental health to the forefront of health care reform is upon us. If we embrace the power and scope of health promotion and illness prevention, our field will become central to the care and wellbeing of all children and families. Change agents include rapid advances in the understanding of genetics, epigenetics, and structural and functional neuroimaging studies of large populations of children across development. This research allows our field to understand the unique vulnerabilities and opportunities that occur during the epoch of brain development. With the explosion of interest in, and evidence from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study, it is now clear that the same factors that place children at risk for anxiety, depression, and substance abuse also contribute to similarly elevated risk for obesity, diabetes, and hypertension (and many other general medical problems). This plenary session will review the considerable data undergirding this new approach to children's mental health. It will then describe ways in which we are already implementing this science into programs that change children's and families' life trajectories for the better. The specific implementation examples described have the potential of being widely scaled up across the country and indeed around the world: 1) the Vermont Family-Based Approach, 2) the University of Vermont Wellness Environment (WE), and 3) the WE App, for promoting student health, and reducing alcohol and drug use.