

Psychosomatic Problems in Children

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The past two decades have seen a significant change in the relationship between psychology and medicine. The psychologist's role is expanding beyond that of a mental health subspecialist who relates primarily to the psychiatrist. Increasingly, psychology has become involved in primary health care through the emerging subspecialties of pediatric and health psychology. The involvement in health care has been stimulated by changing conceptualizations of illness and by the positive role psychology has played in the treatment of psychosomatic disorders. In this chapter, the term *psychosomatic disorder* is used in a broad sense to include any problem that has both physical and psychological components. The traditional concept of a mind-body separation in conceptualizing psychosomatic disorders has been discarded, replaced by a model that takes into account the combined effects of biological, psychological, and social influences on childhood illness. The aims of this chapter are (1) to examine relevant historical and theoretical concepts leading to the current conceptualization of psychosomatic illness; (2) to describe a biopsychosocial model of psychosomatic disorders, including consideration of developmental level; and (3) to discuss issues relevant to the assessment and treatment of psychosomatic disorders in children.

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HISTORY AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

Examination of the history of psychosomatic disorders reveals a trend from conceptualizing these conditions as resulting from a singular cause, either physical or psychological, to a more integrated and multifactorial approach that considers multiple levels and paths of causality and illness maintenance. Historically, psychoanalytic theory dominated thinking regarding psychosomatic disorders. Freud was the first to use the term *conversion* in reference to the substitution of a somatic symptom for a repressed idea (Jones, 1953). Treatment involved the production of a catharsis in the patient, which allowed repressed ideas to become conscious, thereby alleviating the somatic symptoms. Freud's success in treating such conversion disorders produced several results. First, it thrust Freud to the forefront of the emerging field of psychiatry, but in an associative manner, it also set the theory of psychosomatic illness in a position where the illness was a manifestation of the mind. This tenet was so strong that it suggested that the body had little or no part in the illness, resulting in the treatment of affected patients as mentally and not physically ill.

The psychoanalytic conceptualization of psychosomatic disorders led to a limited treatment approach, characterized by a mind-body dualism, whereby physical illness had to be excluded before a