

A Brief History of Children's Mental Health Awareness in the United States



May has been recognized as **Mental Health Awareness Month** in the United States since **1949**. Mental Health America, then known as the National Association for Mental Health, helped establish the observance to raise public awareness of mental health and reduce stigma. In those early years, the conversation was shaped mostly by clinical spaces and formal systems. The focus was largely on illness, diagnosis, treatment, and public education. Youth were part of what those systems were responding to, but they weren't usually being recognized as people with their own insight into what they were living through or what support actually felt helpful.

By the **1960s and 1970s**, mental health support in the U.S. was changing in visible ways. Care was moving away from large state-run settings and toward more community-based approaches. That shift mattered because it brought more attention to the places where young people actually lived their lives: home, school, communities, and relationships. It also helped create more space for caregivers to organize around what they felt their children needed, and awareness was becoming less abstract and more connected to real, lived realities.

In the **1980s**, national reports made it harder to ignore how many children and youth weren't receiving meaningful support. In **1982**, Jane Knitzer's *Unclaimed Children* documented serious gaps in children's mental health policy and services. A couple of years later, in **1984**, the National Institute of Mental Health launched the Child and Adolescent Service System Program (CASSP) to help states build more coordinated, community-based systems of care for youth and their families. CASSP helped establish ideas that still show up today: that support should be community-based, coordinated across systems, and developed with youth and families in mind rather than forcing them to fit disconnected services.

In the **early 1990s**, a more specific awareness effort focused on children's mental health began to take shape. Missouri's Department of Mental Health traces the start of **Children's Mental Health Week** to **1991**, when a group of parents formed a coalition to raise awareness and reduce stigma. Some national sources, including materials from the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, cite **1992** as an early milestone in broader recognition. There isn't a single universally agreed-upon "official" start year, but the early 1990s clearly mark the beginning of this effort. What is consistent is that this was a parent and caregiver-led movement that grew out of a need to make children's mental health more recognized and understood. Over the next several years, other states began developing their own Children's Mental Health Week efforts, too. This history matters because it shows how strongly the early awareness movement was shaped by youth and family advocacy, which helped bring children's mental health further into public view and into policy conversations.



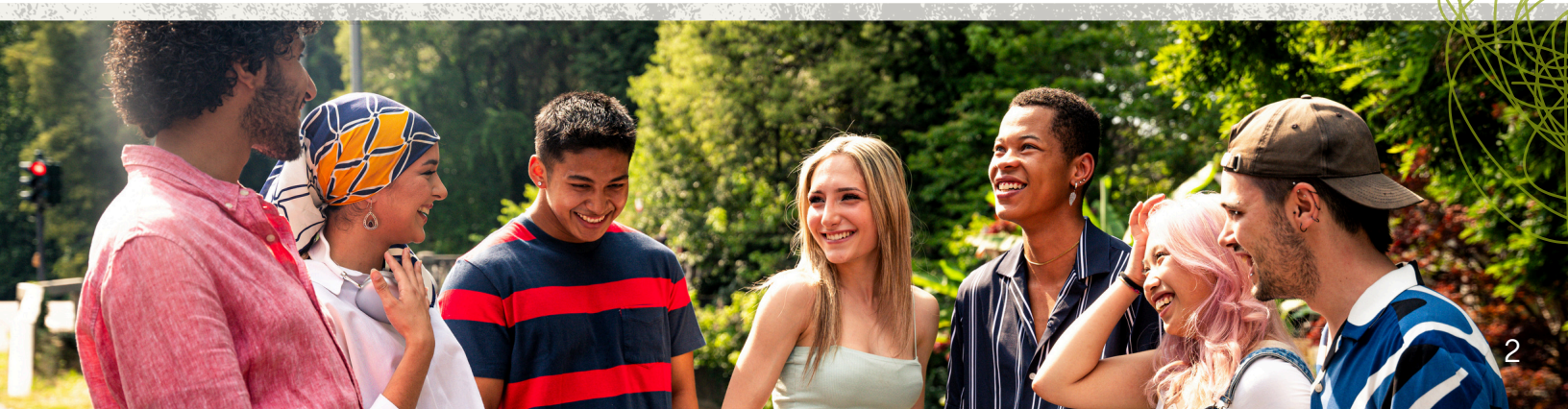
It's also important to recognize that "family voice" and "youth voice" are not the same thing. Family advocacy has played, and still plays, a crucial role in changing systems. At the same time, for much of this history, youth perspectives were often filtered through adults or not centered directly. As children's mental health awareness grew, there was still a gap between talking about young people and actually centering what young people themselves had to say about their experiences, their needs, and what support felt most affirming.

In **2004**, the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health formally recognized the first full week of May as **Children's Mental Health Awareness Week** at the national level, helping create a more unified and widely recognized observance across states. Then in **2006**, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), through its Center for Mental Health Services, launched the first annual **National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day** (the first Thursday in May), bringing increased national attention to children and youth and emphasizing the importance of early support and connection to services.

In **2007**, the National Federation launched the "**Green Ribbon Campaign**," which became one of the most widely recognized symbols connected to children's mental health awareness efforts. The green ribbon created a shared visual identity across communities and offered a simple way for people to show support and start conversations.

From there, the observance continued to grow and evolve. What started as a broader mental health month in 1949, then a more specific children's awareness week in the early 1990s, expanded into a broader landscape of campaigns, events, school and community activities, policy conversations, and public messaging throughout the month of May. By the **2010s**, youth-led efforts had become more visible across the country. Young people with lived and living experience were organizing, building peer support spaces, contributing to advisory efforts, and influencing how mental health was understood in ways that felt more connected to real life, relationships, identity, and community.

The naming has continued to shift in recent years, which also suggests that the field is still trying to define what this observance is really for. In **2022**, the National Federation of Families reframed the week as **Children's Mental Health Acceptance Week**, reflecting a shift beyond awareness toward belonging and more active efforts to reduce stigma. In more recent years, language like "Action Week" has also been used in national campaigns to emphasize moving toward advocacy and concrete change. However, this phrasing isn't consistently used as a formal, universal rename across all organizations. Many groups continue to refer to May more broadly as **Children's Mental Health Awareness Month** when discussing May as a whole. Through all of this, the continued growth of youth voice, youth leadership, and lived experience has shaped what this month means now and what it can become moving forward!



Despite all this history and good intentions, this month was largely built by systems and adults. Youth MOVE National is excited to move past this history and reclaim this month for youth, by youth, and move it into the future where ALL youth thrive. When we asked youth from all across the nation, here is what they said:

- **Over 50%** have never heard of the month before
- **Over 50%** had no idea what the green ribbon symbolized

Those who responded that they had heard of Children's Mental Health Awareness Month didn't define it the same way, and there was no clear, shared understanding of what this month actually is. While the intention of this month is clear - if something is built for youth, they should be able to define it. Most importantly, their voices should be in the room designing it! Which is why Youth MOVE National is excited to let the past be the past, but claim the future of Children's Mental Health Awareness Month to be for youth, by youth, moving forward. Stay tuned for amazing things to come! Visit our website at youthmovenational.org/mental-health-awareness-month-2026 for more information.



Sources

- [National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day from Quality Start San Bernardino County >>](#)
- [Children's Mental Health Awareness from NCTSN >>](#)
- [The History of Children's Mental Health Acceptance Week \(CMHAW\): Why Green? from The National Federation of Families >>](#)
- [Childrens Mental Health Week Timeline from Parent/Professional Advocacy League >>](#)
- [Going Green for Children's Mental Health from The National Federation of Families >>](#)
- [The History of Children's Mental Health Awareness Week: Why Green? from The National Federation of Families >>](#)

