

ABSTRACT
ADVANCING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PARENTS' MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY:
INSIGHTS FOR FUTURE PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

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Parents play a central role in recognizing youth mental health concerns and facilitating access to care. However, parents' effectiveness in this role depends on their mental health literacy (MHL). While prior research has identified knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs as core components of MHL, less attention has been given to applied domains critical for translating knowledge into action. The present study sought to extend our understanding of parent MHL by examining multiple components of the construct, investigating variation across parent characteristics, and exploring parents' perspectives regarding MHL programming.

Data were obtained from a national survey of parents (N = 314), with a subset of participants (n = 15) completing follow-up interviews. Quantitative measures assessed multiple domains of MHL, including knowledge of symptoms, familiarity with treatment, self-efficacy, as well as help-seeking attitudes, intentions, and stigma. Interview data were used to further examine parents' needs and preferences related to the design of future mental health literacy programs.

Parents generally reported moderate to high levels of knowledge and positive help-seeking perspectives. However, associations among MHL components were modest, suggesting that these domains are distinct. Interview findings further indicated that parents often experience uncertainty when applying knowledge in real-world situations, particularly when interpreting behavior, determining when professional support is warranted, and navigating access to services. Variation in MHL was associated with prior service experience, caregiving roles, and certain demographic factors, including racial/ethnic identity, although patterns differed across components.

Taken together, findings suggest that parent MHL may be best understood as a multidimensional and context-dependent construct that extends beyond knowledge alone. Competencies related to interpretation, decision-making, and system navigation may be particularly relevant for translating awareness into action. Parents also emphasized priorities for program content, preferences for delivery and format, and practical barriers that may influence participation. These findings highlight the importance of developing programs that not only increase knowledge, but also support how parents apply that knowledge in complex, real-world contexts.