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Several epidemiological studies have documented that mental health disorders are extremely prevalent in children and adolescents with rates varying from 10 to 20% depending on whether the evaluation of impairment is part of the assessment [1, 2]. In addition, data from longitudinal studies and retrospective investigations in adulthood have demonstrated that a substantial proportion of psychiatric diagnoses identified in adults have their roots in childhood and adolescence [3, 4]. Moreover, several reports in the literature have also documented the substantial amount of burden that child mental health problems impose on children, their families and society in general [5]. Thus, understanding child psychiatric disorders is a priority in the worldwide mental health agenda based on its prevalence, continuity into adulthood and impact.

Throughout the last decades, several different frameworks have influenced the field of child psychiatry. In the past, the field was strongly based on psychodynamic and social concepts [6]. In the last two decades, an enormous amount of data has emerged in areas such as neuroimaging, molecular genetics, neuropsychology, and neurophysiology, helping to better understand the biological basis of the majority of child mental disorders. Thus, we have moved from attributing the causes of severe child mental disorders like autism primarily to problematic mother-infant relationships to an era in which huge genome-wide scanning studies and longitudinal gene-environmental investigations are beginning to reveal the complex interplay of nature and nurture in normal development and in the etiology of child mental disorders [7]. Advances in biological child psychiatry may ultimately facilitate our understanding of how environmentally and psychosocially mediated risk processes operate on the developing brain and also increase our knowledge of the developmental trajectories that occur across the life course [8].

In this exciting context, the authors of this book wrote their chapters. They are among the world’s leading experts, both researchers and clinicians, in the area of
biological child psychiatry. While some contributors focused exclusively on recent biological aspects of specific disorders, others preferred a more comprehensive approach describing some clinical aspects too. However, independent of the approach chosen, the reader will always find the most recent advances in neurobiological research on each of the disorders addressed in this book.

During the rapid development of child psychiatry in the last decade, investigators have also paid special attention to the impact of cross-cultural issues on the development and/or modulation of phenotype or course of child mental disorders [9]. This is another interesting aspect of this book, since the team of authors came from very diverse cultural backgrounds and, whenever possible, we tried to have authors from different cultures address specific disorders.

Finally, a very relevant issue is related to what is called ‘translation research’. In other words, how very sophisticated basic laboratory findings translate into clinical practice [10]. Although the focus of this volume is on child biological psychiatry, the authors tried to present findings in an integrative context helping readers to establish the needed connections with the real clinical world.

For all the reasons mentioned above, we are confident that this book will be valuable to all practitioners and researchers both in child and adolescent mental health services and developmental and clinical neuroscience who are interested in deepening their knowledge of the recent advances in the underlying biological bases of major child and adolescent mental health disorders.

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References