

## HEALTH ISSUES

# Childhood Depression: What Parents Can Do To Help

## What is childhood depression?

Depression may be present when your child has:



- A sad or irritable mood (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Mood-Disorders.aspx>) for most of the day. Your child may say they feel sad or angry or may look more tearful or cranky.
- Not enjoying things that used to make your child happy.
- A marked change in weight or eating, either up or down.
- Sleeping too little at night or too much during the day.
- No longer wanting to be with family or friends.
- A lack of energy or feeling unable to do simple tasks.
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt. Low self-esteem (</English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Signs-of-Low-Self-Esteem.aspx>).
- Trouble with focusing or making choices. School grades may drop (</English/ages-stages/teen/school/Pages/Poor-School-Performance-How-Parents-Can-Help.aspx>).
- Not caring about what happens in the future.
- Aches and pains when nothing is really wrong.
- Frequent thoughts of death or suicide (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Help-Stop-Teen-Suicide.aspx>).

Any of these signs can occur in children who are not depressed, but when seen together, nearly every day, they are red flags for depression.

## What should I do if I think my child is depressed?

- Talk to your child (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/How-to-Communicate-with-a-Teenager.aspx>) about his feelings and the things happening at home and at school that may be bothering him.
- Tell your child's doctor. Some medical problems can cause depression. Your child's doctor

may recommend [psychotherapy](#) (/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Mental-Health-Care-Who%27s-Who.aspx) (*counseling to help people with emotions and behavior*) or [medicine for depression](#) (/English/health-issues/conditions/treatments/Pages/Common-Medications-for-Psychiatric-Disorders.aspx).

- Your child's doctor may now screen your child for depression every year from ages 11 through 21, with suicide now a leading cause of death among adolescents. Treat any thoughts of suicide as an emergency.

## What can I do to help?

### Promote health

- The basics for good mental health include a healthy diet, enough sleep, exercise, and positive connections with other people at home and at school.
- [Limit screen time](#) (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Where-We-Stand-TV-Viewing-Time.aspx) and encourage [physical activity](#) (/English/healthy-living/fitness/Pages/Energy-Out-Daily-Physical-Activity-Recommendations.aspx) to help develop positive connections with others.
- One-on-one time with parents, praise for [good behavior](#) (/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/Positive-Parenting-How-To-Encourage-Good-Behavior.aspx), and pointing out strengths build the parent-child bond.

### Provide safety and security

- Talk with your child about [bullying](#) (/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Bullying-Its-Not-Ok.aspx). Being the victim of bullying is a major cause of mental health problems in children.
- Look for [grief or loss issues](#) (/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Helping-Children-Cope-with-Death.aspx). Seek help if problems with grief do not get better. If you as a parent are grieving a loss, get help and find additional support for your child.
- Reduce [stress](#) (/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Helping-Children-Handle-Stress.aspx). Short-term changes in the amount of schoolwork, chores, or activities, may be needed.
- Weapons, medicines (*including those you buy without a prescription*), and alcohol should be [locked up](#) (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Is-Your-Home-Safe-For-Your-Teen.aspx).

### Educate others

- Your child is not making the symptoms up.
- What looks like laziness or crankiness can be symptoms of depression.
- Talk about any [family history](#) (/English/family-life/health-management/Pages/Your-Family-Health-History-and-Genetics.aspx) of depression to increase understanding.

### Help your child learn thinking and coping skills

- Help your child relax with physical and creative activities. Focus on the child's strengths.
- Talk to and listen to your child with love and support. Help your child learn to describe their feelings.
- Help your child look at problems in a different more positive way.
- Break down problems or tasks into smaller steps so your child can be successful.

### Make a safety plan

- Follow your child's treatment plan. Make sure your child attends therapy and takes any medicine as directed.
- Treatment works, but it may take a few weeks. The depressed child may not recognize changes in mood right away.
- Develop a list of people to call when feelings get worse.
- Watch for [risk factors for suicide](/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Which-Kids-are-at-Highest-Risk-for-Suicide.aspx) (/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Which-Kids-are-at-Highest-Risk-for-Suicide.aspx). These include talking about suicide in person or on the internet, giving away belongings, increased thoughts about death, and substance abuse.
- Locate telephone numbers for your child's doctor and therapist, and the local mental health crisis response team.
- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can be reached at 1 800-273-8255 or online at [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org) (<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>).

## Additional Information:

- [Mental Health and Teens: Watch for Danger Signs](/English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/Mental-Health-and-Teens-Watch-for-Danger-Signs.aspx) (/English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/Mental-Health-and-Teens-Watch-for-Danger-Signs.aspx)
- [Signs of Low Self-Esteem](/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Signs-of-Low-Self-Esteem.aspx) (/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Signs-of-Low-Self-Esteem.aspx)
- [Sleep and Mental Health](/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Sleep-and-Mental-Health.aspx) (/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Sleep-and-Mental-Health.aspx)
- [Healthy Children Radio: Children and Depression \(Audio\)](/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Healthy-Children-Radio-Children-and-Depression-Audio.aspx) (/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Healthy-Children-Radio-Children-and-Depression-Audio.aspx)

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