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 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.
- Trouble with focusing or making choices.
- School grades may drop.
- Not caring about what happens in the future.
- Aches and pains when nothing is really wrong.
- Frequent thoughts of death or suicide.

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 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 (counseling to help people with emotions and behavior) or medicine for depression.
- 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 and encourage physical activity 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]). 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 reached at 1 800-273-8255 or online at [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])
- **Signs of Low Self-Esteem** ([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])
- **Healthy Children Radio: Children and Depression (Audio)** ([English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Healthy-Children-Radio-Children-and-Depression-Audio.aspx])