

What You May Not Know About Children and Depression

The Problem

- In the United States, depression is the most common mental health disorder.
- Each year it affects 17 million people of all age groups, races and economic backgrounds.
- As many as 1 in every 33 children may have depression; in teens, that number may be as high as 1 in 8.

(Kids Health)

Children and Depression

▪Children can be sad without having depression. When the sadness becomes persistent or disruptive behavior occurs that interferes with normal social activities, interests, schoolwork or family life, these may be indicators a child is depressed.

(WebMD)

Causes of Depression

- Genetics.* Research has shown that depression can run in families. However, not everyone who has the genetic makeup for depression gets depressed. Many people who have no family history of depression have the condition. Though genes are one factor, they aren't the single cause of depression.
- Life events.* The death of a family member, friend or pet can go beyond normal grief and sometimes lead to depression. Other difficult life events, such as when parents divorce, separate or remarry, can trigger depression. Events like moving or changing schools can be emotionally challenging and can cause depression.
- Family and Social Environment.* Some teens may be experiencing a negative, stressful or unhappy family atmosphere. This can affect their self-esteem and lead to depression. High-stress living situations, such as poverty, homelessness and violence in the family, relationships or community, can also lead to depression.
- Substance Use and Abuse.* Alcohol and some drugs are known to have depressant effects. The negative social and personal consequences of substance abuse can also lead to severe unhappiness and depression.
- Medical Conditions.* Some medical conditions can affect hormone balance, resulting in a change in mood. Some conditions, such as hypothyroidism, are known to cause a depressed mood in some people. When these medical conditions are diagnosed and treated by a doctor, the depression usually disappears.
- Undiagnosed Learning Disabilities.* For some teens, this might block school success, hormonal changes might affect mood, or physical illness might present challenges or setbacks.

(Kids Health)

Signs and Symptoms of Depression

- Persistent hopelessness and sadness
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Missed school or poor school performance
- Increased irritability or agitation
- Indecision, lack of concentration, or forgetfulness
- Poor self-esteem or guilt
- Frequent physical complaints, such as headaches and stomachaches
- Lack of enthusiasm, low energy, or low motivation
- Drug and/or alcohol abuse
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Increased irritability or agitation

(National Institute of Mental Health)

If You Suspect A Child Has Depression

- Depression can be successfully treated in more than 80% of people who have it.
- However, if depression goes untreated, it can have deadly effects. It is the number one cause of suicide.
- Depression can be treated with psychotherapy, medicine or a combination of therapy and medicine. A psychiatrist can prescribe medicine, and although it may take a few tries to find the right drug, most people who follow their prescribed regimen eventually begin to feel better.
- If depression is suspected, a parent's first consultation should be with their child's doctor. The doctor will probably perform a complete examination to rule out physical illness. If depression is suspected, the doctor may make a referral to a psychiatrist (a medical doctor who can make a diagnosis, offer treatment, and prescribe medicine), psychologist (a health professional who can diagnose and treat depression but is unable to write prescriptions), or licensed clinical social worker (a person who has a degree in social work and is qualified to treat childhood depression).

(Kids Health)

More Tips for Parents and Caregivers

- Parents should be aware of the behaviors that concern them and note how long the behaviors have been going on, how often they occur, and how severe they seem.
- Parents should take their child to see a mental health professional or the child's doctor for evaluation and diagnosis.
- Parents can get accurate information from libraries, help lines and other sources.
- Parents should ask questions about treatments and services.
- They should talk to other families with similar problems in the community.
- Family support groups may be very important to a family experiencing depression. National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) may have support groups in your area, or there may be other agencies who also offer support groups.

(National Alliance on Mental Illness)

What Can Parents and Caregivers Do to Help A Child with Depression?

- Some parents may have some feelings of guilt. It may be important for them to receive some counseling as well.
- Children should take prescribed medicines. Healthy eating should be encouraged as well, as this may help improve mood and outlook.
- Physical activity has been shown to help alleviate the symptoms of depression. Physical activities, such as bike rides or walks, can be incorporated into the family's routine.
- To show they care, parents can tell their children they are there, they love and care about them, and want to hear what he or she has to say, even if it isn't pleasant. Although these things may be difficult for a child to believe, it is important for parents to say them.
- Treatment for children should be kept up. Make sure the prescribed treatment is followed, whether it's medication, therapy or both.
- Parents should call the doctor if they see signs that their child may be thinking about suicide. Untreated depression is the number one cause of suicide. If a child talks about suicide, to their parents or anyone else, or shows warning signs such as giving belongings away and being preoccupied with death, call a doctor or a mental health professional immediately.
- Parents should accept the situation and never tell their child to "snap out of it." At times, parents may need to remind themselves that it is not laziness causing their child's inability to get out of bed, complete chores or do homework. He or she simply doesn't have the desire or the energy.

(Kids Health)

Resources

- National Alliance on Mental Illness, http://www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/HelpLine1/Facts_About_Childhood_Depression.htm
- National Institute of Mental Health, <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression/depression-in-children-and-adolescents.shtml>
- Kids Health.org, http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/understanding_depression.html