

Tips to Support Your Child's Mental Health

Now that the holidays are over and the winter weather is upon us, many people report occasional episodes of sadness and low mood. They may describe this as “depression,” though the true definition of depression is more persistent than the “winter blues.” The term may be overused, but clinical depression is a common mental health illness that affects at least 6% of the population. Over the past 20 years, there has been a significant increase in both depression and anxiety disorder diagnoses. Especially alarming is the increase in these mental health illnesses diagnosed in children and teens.

Anxiety disorder is defined as “worry, anxiety or fear that are strong enough to interfere with one’s daily activities.” While it is normal for children to have certain fears and worries (such as being afraid of the dark or separation anxiety), persistent or extreme fear could be due to an anxiety disorder. In children and teens, these fears may interfere with school, home, sports or play activities. Often kids may not know how to express their feelings with words and their anxiety may present as anger or irritability. Physical symptoms are also common, including sleeping issues, fatigue, headache or stomachaches.

Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are not limited to adults and could be due to depression, even in young children. Depression can be defined as “a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest in things once enjoyed.” In kids/teens, depression may manifest as acting out or a loss of motivation. Physical symptoms of depression can include changes in appetite leading to weight loss or weight gain, trouble sleeping or excessive sleeping. They may also openly express feelings of sadness, loneliness or low self-esteem. Illness or medical issues, use of drugs and/or alcohol, as well as a family history of depression may put your child at higher risk of developing depression. Extreme depression can lead to suicidal thoughts. The CDC reports that suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the 10 – 24-year-old age group.



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There are things you can do to help prevent depression and anxiety in your children and teens. Encourage healthy habits such as eating nutritious foods, staying physically active and getting sufficient sleep. Children also tend to thrive with predictable routines and a robust social support system. **Parental support is so important.** Allowing your child/teen to share their thoughts and feelings in a nonjudgmental and supportive environment can go a long way. Counseling can also be extremely helpful for those suffering with anxiety or depression. There are medications that have been found to be safe and effective for both anxiety and depression in the pediatric population. If you are concerned that you may be seeing signs of anxiety or depression in your child, please reach out to your child's health care provider. If there is concern that your child may be having suicidal thoughts or planning to harm themselves, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is another available resource and can be reached by phone at (800) 273-8255 or by texting the word TALK to 741-741. Your call is free and confidential and there are trained counselors available 24/7. If your child is in imminent danger for harming themselves or others, please call 911.

For more on this and other topics, head to www.healthychildren.org. This is a great resource for health tips designed for parents by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Should a situation arise in which your child needs to be admitted to a hospital, remember that Hendricks Regional Health's dedicated pediatric unit is staffed 24/7 to care for children from birth to 18 years. Learn more at hendricks.org/pediatrics.