

Depression

Early Childhood Mental Health Fact Sheet

About the Disorder

Most children will, at some time, show signs of sadness, be whiny, or engage in their play halfheartedly. These times are usually short-lived and can often be linked to an oncoming illness, boredom with an activity, or a minor disruption in their routine. However, when these feelings or behaviors are consistently evident for longer than two weeks, the child may be suffering from depression.

Depression in children can be experienced in different ways. Some children may experience a low-grade feeling of sadness and/or lethargy nearly all the time, while others will experience intense periods of sadness that come and go. Regardless of the type of depression, research findings suggest that depression in preschool-aged children is typically characterized by symptoms of sadness and/or irritability. The symptoms, however, can look different—one child may appear sad and withdraw from activities, while another child may appear irritated and aggressive. In addition, children may exhibit joylessness—even though they may be engaging in playful activities, they will not be having fun.

In young children, these symptoms may be somewhat difficult to recognize because infants and toddlers don't always have clear ways to indicate these somewhat complex feelings. Actually depression can be especially difficult to recognize because some of its symptoms are similar to some of the cues infants use to get their everyday needs met. For example, an infant who is fussy or whiny may be getting in their first tooth and may need extra comforting. However, as a child's skills develop and their personality emerges, caregivers may be able to gain a clearer understanding of the

child's usual temperament. Therefore, as a child matures, the ability to recognize depression as a change from the child's normal behavior may become easier.

What You May See When

In very young children depression may appear as irritability, isolation, consistently aggressive or destructive play, or being accident prone. Extreme anxiety may also be noted. These indicators must be a change from the child's usual emotional state. With depression, the depressed mood or sadness will occur across settings and activities and impede the child's development or impair their functioning.

When – Infancy

What – A baby experiencing depression may be whiny, lethargic, show signs of sadness, or play half-heartedly; their sleep patterns may be disrupted and they may lose weight. These children may either sleep more than usual or be more wakeful than is normal; they may also lose interest in their favorite toys.

When – Toddlers & Preschoolers

What – Toddlers and preschoolers, along with the indications above, may express feelings of sadness verbally and tend to be socially withdrawn. They may also complain of headaches or stomachaches, seem apathetic, have trouble concentrating and /or regress in some skill areas. For example, they may have trouble paying attention, have trouble solving problems, or they may even engage in creative play that offers clues about their feelings.

Symptoms

- Depressed or irritable mood
- Diminished interest or pleasure in developmentally appropriate activities
- Reduced capacity to protest (may seem apathetic)
- Emotional withdrawal
- Lethargic
- Sad facial expression
- Regression in skills
- Regression in developmental milestones
- Excessive whining
- Reduced repertory of social interactions
- Change in sleep patterns
- Weight loss

IMPORTANT

This fact sheet is not intended to be used as a diagnostic tool. It is meant to be used only as a reference for your own understanding and to provide information about the different kinds of behaviors and mental health issues you may encounter.

While it is important to respect a child's need for confidentiality, if you work with children or families, you are legally required to report suspected child abuse or neglect. For more information, consult "Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect: A Resource Guide for Mandated Reporters," available from the Minnesota Department of Human Services.



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Strategies

- When developing strategies for a child who is exhibiting symptoms of depression, remember that acknowledging feelings is critical to emotional development.
- Allow the child to initiate play, then be sure to show interest in the objects they select for play.
- Allow the child time to express their needs and wants—then relay back to them what they said and ask the child if you have accurately identified how they feel.
- Verbalize emotional expression with the child (for example, “Your face looks happy, are you enjoying this story? Your body looks frustrated, do you need help?”)

Helping Children Express Their Feelings

Because all children—even those who never experience depression—will have feelings of sadness at some point, it is critical to engage in activities designed to help them recognize and express their feelings and emotions appropriately.

By about age 3 children are able to verbally label their own emotions, identify emotional states from pictures, and link emotions to social situations (The birthday party made me feel excited!). Preschool children may also begin to understand the experience of more than one feeling at a time, including the experience of conflicting emotions. The capacity to understand and experience emotions continues to increase during the preschool period. By age 5, children are learning to verbalize rather than act upon feelings, and they are gaining important insights into self-regulation.

Caregivers and others involved in children’s lives can help support this development. For example, when a caregiver acknowledges that a child is feeling mad, sad, frustrated, or tired, the caregiver can offer the child the support they need to be able to release tension and begin to problem solve.

Trusted adults can also help children focus on positive thoughts and actions rather than negative ones by teaching positive self-talk and coping strategies. Another excellent way to teach about emotions is to regularly express your own feelings of anger and frustration (“I’m feeling frustrated right now”) as well as feelings of joy and happiness (I’m feeling happy about going outside to play) in very simple and easy-to-understand language. This will help them be better able to deal with a wide range of emotional experiences.

- For infants who seem sad or depressed, be sure to hold, comfort, rock, and soothe them.
- In group situations, avoid games that may be socially isolating, such as one that requires picking teams.
- Openly give encouragement and positive reinforcement.

Documenting Your Concerns and Next Steps

When documenting behavior, always be specific. Avoid generalizations such as “Grace looked depressed” or “Kyle seems really sad this week”; instead, record specific behaviors you are seeing or are not seeing. For example, “Kyle looked away when I held his favorite sparkly keys this morning. He did not appear to want to play with any of the toys; he fussed and looked away with each one I offered him. I held him and rocked him, but he made very little eye contact with me and did not seem soothed by my singing. This is the 5th day that Kyle has exhibited this very uncharacteristic behavior.”

If a child’s behaviors are causing concern, you may want to suggest to the parents that they take their child to their primary care provider who may refer the parents to a mental health professional, an early childhood behavior specialist, or a developmental pediatrician. When discussing your concerns, focus on the child’s behaviors and avoid drawing conclusions about whether the behaviors are indicative of a mental health problem.

For more information about early childhood mental health, see MACMH’s *A Guide to Early Childhood Mental Health*, available for order at www.macmh.org.

Ready Resources

- iFred—the International Foundation for Research and Education on Depression at www.ifred.org (formerly www.depression.org)
- Kami M. Talley Reading and Resource Center at the University of Minnesota offers a bibliography of resources at <http://education.umn.edu/ChildCareCenter/Kamihealingthroughbooks/>
- National Institute of Mental Health at www.nimh.nih.gov
- SAMHSA’s National Mental Health Information Center at www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov
- ZERO TO THREE at www.zerotothree.org

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