

Managing Depression or Sadness:

Tips for Families

What is depression?

Depression is another word for feeling sad over a period of time.

Feeling sad is normal. Certain events in a child's life may make her feel sad, such as if a close friend moves away or a pet dies. But when a child's feelings of sadness get in the way of normal activities such as sleeping, eating, going to school, and playing with friends, it's time to take action.

Children experience depression differently than adults. Your child may not be able to tell you she's feeling sad—and she may not even feel sad at all. Instead, you may notice she seems frustrated, restless, or tired.

These are some other common signs of depression in children.

- Having trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Crying a lot
- Not wanting to eat or eating too much
- Losing interest in things she used to care about
- Cutting herself off from family and friends



How can I help my child at home?

These tips are good for all children, but they can be especially helpful for children with depression. Parenting is a busy job, so use your judgment about which tips make the most sense for your family.

Connect with your child.

- **Set aside one-on-one time every day.** Even just 10 minutes can make a big difference. Try cooking dinner together, coloring, or playing a board game.
- **Find out what's upsetting your child,** because stress can make depression worse. For example, if your child seems unhappy when he gets home from school, you might ask, "Did anything happen today at school that you'd like to talk about?"



- **Praise your child** and make him feel good about himself. For example, “You did a great job on that homework assignment!” or “Thank you for helping me with the dishes. I’m so lucky to have your help.”
- **Teach new skills to help with worries (anxiety)**, like deep breathing or thinking in a more positive way.

Encourage your child to have fun and be social.

- **Set aside time for activities** your child enjoys, such as watching a baseball game or going on a bike ride.
- **Help your child plan time with friends and family.** Children who are depressed may cut themselves off from the people they care about, which can make depression worse.
- **Limit “social” screen time.** Communicating by text or social media isn’t a substitute for spending time with friends or family in person, and it can actually make your child feel more cut off from others. Try to limit how much time your child spends texting or on social media until she’s feeling better.

Build healthy habits.

- **Get active!** Encourage your child to be active for at least an hour every day. This can include playing outside, joining a sports team or an activity at the YMCA, biking or walking to school, or dancing at home to favorite music.
- **Eat healthy.** Eat healthy meals every day, including fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and protein foods. Remember to eat breakfast!
- **Get plenty of sleep.** School-aged children need 9 to 12 hours of sleep every night, and teens need about 8 to 10 hours.
- **Limit screen time.** Try for less than 2 hours a day of entertainment screen time. Avoid scary or violent TV shows, video games, and movies.
- **Keep family routines.** It’s important to follow a regular schedule for playtime, mealtime, and bedtime. Knowing what to expect can help your child feel safe and secure.



It can be very scary to even think about your child hurting himself. But if your child is depressed, take extra steps to make your home a safe place by removing weapons, medicines, and harmful household chemicals. If you can’t remove these items, store them safely (for example, in a lockbox).



How can I help my child at school?

Children may find it hard to focus on or even go to school when they're feeling sad. If your child is having trouble in school, try these ways to help.

- Gently, but firmly tell your child why it's important to go to school.
- Praise his successes and improvements at school.
- Talk with your child's teachers and guidance counselor about what to do if your child asks to go home from school early.
- If you think family stress or pressure to do well in school is upsetting your child, let him know he's doing a good job and you're proud of him.
- Help your child set realistic goals for school. If he's setting goals that are too hard to meet, he can wind up feeling worse about himself.



If your child is missing a lot of school because he's feeling depressed or tired, talk with the teacher or guidance counselor. It's also important to let your child's doctor know if your child is missing school more often.



Remember, you know your child best.

Whether it's at school or the doctor's office, you are your child's biggest advocate. Don't hesitate to speak up on behalf of your child.



When do I need to go back to the doctor?

If your child's feelings of sadness continue or get worse, it's a good idea to go back to the doctor. The doctor can help you decide if seeing a specialist for therapy could help your child. A type of treatment called cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown to be helpful for depression.

It's especially important to let the doctor know if

- Your child starts to have other behavior problems, such as anxiety or fearfulness.
- Something happens in your child's life that may make her depression worse, such as a breakup or a death in the family.
- You suspect her depression is affecting another medical condition (for example, if your child's asthma gets worse with her depression).

And be sure to call the doctor right away if

- Your child has thoughts of harming or killing herself.
- There's a suicide in your child's friend group.

Make time to care for yourself, too.



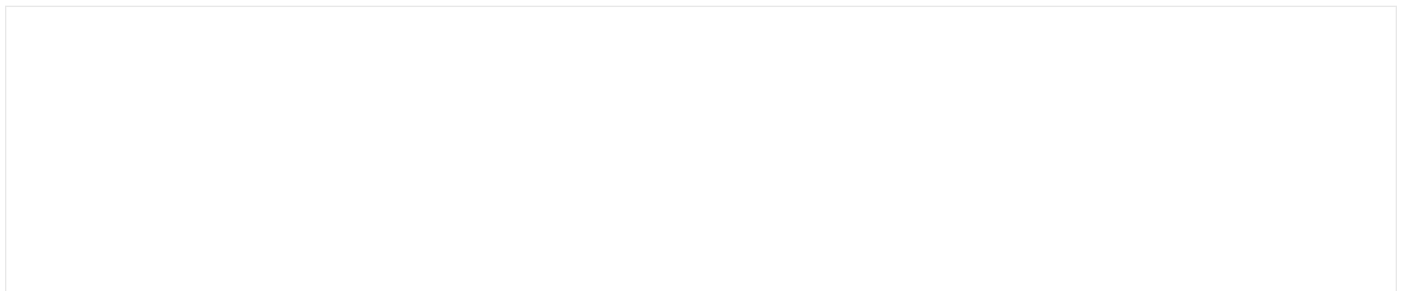
Parenting can be stressful. If you're feeling overwhelmed, don't be afraid to ask for support from family, close friends, social services, or your faith community. Children pick up on the stress and worries of adults around them, so getting support for yourself can help your child too.

To learn more about childhood depression and what you can do to help, visit these Web sites:

- American Academy of Pediatrics HealthyChildren.org: www.HealthyChildren.org
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: www.aacap.org
- American Psychological Association: www.apa.org
- National Alliance on Mental Illness: www.nami.org
- National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health: www.ffcmh.org



More resources about depression:



The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

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