What are the Signs of Childhood Depression

It's normal for children to feel sad now and then, after a disappointment, a loss, or hurtful experiences at school or at home. But depression in children is different from ordinary sadness. It’s persistent, and often includes feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, and the sense that nothing will ever get better. This state can deeply affect how a child thinks, how they see themselves, and how they view the future. Children with depression may stop participating in activities they once loved and may seem withdrawn from their friends or family (American Family Physician).

Signs and Symptoms of possible Depression in Children



Children with depression often have trouble expressing how they feel, making it important for caregivers to watch for observable signs. The following are signs for concern which should be discussed with a psychologist.

- Increased irritability, agitation, or being easily upset
- Angry outbursts, whether verbal or physical
- Persistent focus on negative outcomes or pessimism
- Procrastination and frequent avoidance of tasks
- Low energy and lack of motivation
- Loss of interest in activities that were previously enjoyed
- Difficulty paying attention or concentrating at home and school
- Withdrawal from friends, family, and social activities

- Frequent or persistent sadness in appearance and demeanour
- Crying easily and difficulty being comforted
- Changes in appetite—either eating much less or much more
- Sleep problems (difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, restless sleep, or excessive sleep)
- Waking up feeling tired or unrefreshed
- Negative self-talk (e.g., “I’m not good at this,” “You don’t love me,” “I wish I was never born”)

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If you or someone you know is experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm,

please contact: **Lifeline: 13 11 14** (24/7) | **Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800** | **Emergency: 000**
or present to your nearest emergency department.

What Causes Childhood Depression?

Childhood depression usually results from a combination of factors rather than a single cause. These can include:

- **Biological factors:** a family history of depression or other mental health conditions, and physical illness or brain injury.
- **Psychological factors:** co-occurring anxiety or ADHD, which can wear a child down emotionally over time, and adverse childhood experiences.
- **Environmental factors:** stressful life events such as parental separation, moving house, bullying, family conflict, or the death of someone close to them.

Depression is more common in teenagers than younger children, though it can occur at any age. Symptoms that persist for more than two weeks, or that cluster around specific triggers such as the start of the school week, are more likely to reflect depression than a passing low mood.

How can a psychologist help?

Psychologists are trained to conduct thorough assessments using interviews, standardised questionnaires, and behavioural observations to determine whether a child is experiencing depression. They differentiate depression from other possible issues, such as anxiety or behavioural disorders, and consider factors like family history and environmental stressors. **They also will conduct a suicide risk assessment.**

Therapeutic Interventions

The mainstay of treatment for childhood depression is psychotherapy. Common approaches include:

- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT):** This evidence-based therapy helps children identify and challenge negative thought patterns, develop healthier ways of thinking, and learn coping skills for managing difficult emotions and situations
- **Interpersonal Therapy:** Focusses on improving relationships and communication skills, which can help address social withdrawal and resolve conflicts that may contribute to depression.
- **Play Therapy (for younger children):** Makes use of play and creative activities to help children express emotions they may not have the words for.

Family Support and Education

Psychologists often involve parents and families in the treatment process. They provide guidance on how to support the child at home, improve communication, and reduce conflict. Family sessions can help parents understand depression, recognise warning signs, and respond appropriately to their child's needs. It's understandable for parents to feel frustrated by these behaviours, but it's crucial to avoid blame or punishment.

Monitoring and Prevention

Psychologists monitor progress over time and adjust interventions as needed. They teach children and families strategies to prevent relapse and build resilience, such as stress management techniques, healthy routines, and problem-solving skills.

If a child is at risk of self-harm or suicide, psychologists provide crisis intervention and coordinate with other professionals (such as psychiatrists or paediatricians) to ensure the child's safety. This may include arranging for emergency care or more intensive treatment if necessary

Taking Childhood Depression Seriously

Childhood depression can have a profound impact on a child's life and development. Recognising the signs and seeking professional help early makes a significant difference in outcomes and future well-being. If you notice these symptoms in your child, reach out to a qualified mental health professional for guidance and support.

If you'd like to understand depression more broadly, including in adults, see our page on Depression: Types, Causes & Symptoms. Anxiety and depression often occur together — read more on our Panic Attacks and Anxiety Disorders page.

Frequently Asked Questions

How is childhood depression different from normal sadness?+

Normal sadness is usually short-lived and tied to a specific event. Depression is persistent — typically lasting more than two weeks — and involves ongoing feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, or loss of interest in activities the child previously enjoyed.

Can anxiety lead to depression in children?+

Yes. Chronic, untreated anxiety is one of the most common risk factors for childhood depression, as it can wear a child down emotionally over time. Our psychologists assess for both conditions, since they frequently occur together.

At what age can children be diagnosed with depression?+

Depression can occur at any age, including in young children, though it becomes more common during the teenage years. A psychologist can assess and diagnose depression in children of any age using age-appropriate interviews, questionnaires and observation.

Is childhood depression treatable?+

Yes. Psychotherapy — particularly Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Interpersonal Therapy — is the mainstay of treatment and has good evidence of benefit for many children, especially when combined with family support and early intervention.

Does my child need medication for depression?+

Not necessarily. Psychotherapy is often as effective as, or more effective than, medication alone for childhood depression. Where medication is being considered, this is managed by a psychiatrist or GP in coordination with your psychologist.

When should I seek professional help for my child?+

If symptoms of low mood, withdrawal, or negative self-talk persist for more than two weeks, or are affecting your child's schooling, friendships or family life, it's a good time to consult a psychologist. Seek immediate help if your child expresses thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

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