recognizing and responding to depression in your child

Many people believe that children do not experience depression, but evidence shows that even young children can and do experience depression. However, the signs of depression can be different in children than in adults. A child or adolescent might not always seem sad, making depression hard to recognize. Here’s what you can look for to see if your child is depressed.

Identifying clues:
- Frequent sadness, tearfulness, or crying
- Hopelessness
- Causing trouble at home or school
- Less interest in activities and/or friends
- Inability to enjoy previously pleasurable activities
- Frequent complaints of physical illness, such as headaches or stomachaches
- A change in eating and/or sleeping patterns
- Increased irritability and/or anger
- An increase or decrease in activity level
- Thoughts or talk about death, suicide, or self-destructive behavior
- Difficulty concentrating
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
- Low self-esteem
- Talking about, planning, or making efforts to run away from home
- A change in school attendance and/or performance
- Isolation such as staying in the bedroom and avoiding family contact
- Fascination with violent/destructive games

Depression is a serious illness that usually requires professional help. Early diagnosis and treatment are very important. Parents are usually the first to recognize that their child has a problem. However, asking for professional help can be hard. Parents often blame themselves and believe that others will too. It may be helpful to know that about 5% of children and adolescents suffer from depression at any given time. It is unusual to see depression in preschool and early school-aged children, but it does occur. During childhood, the incidences of depression in boys and girls are about the same. By adolescence, twice as many girls as boys are diagnosed. Getting professional help is important. Treatment usually consists of individual and family therapy. Antidepressant medications may also be used.
Helpful strategies

You should try to find a mental health professional who has training and experience working with children, adolescents, and/or families. It is also important to find someone that you and your child feel comfortable with. When looking for a mental health professional, make sure you take into account your health plan’s coverage and provider network.

• When looking for a mental health professional, you can start by talking to friends, family members, or your spiritual adviser.
• Your child’s teachers or school counselor can be resources for locating a mental health professional who has experience working with children.
• You should always consult your family physician.
• Your health plan can tell you which professionals in your area are in the network.
• The Employee Assistance Program through your employer can often help.
• The local mental health association can give you referrals.

Helpful strategies once you get help

• Don’t blame yourself.
• Learn all you can about depression.
• If your child is prescribed antidepressant medication, make sure he or she takes it.
• Become educated about medications that your child is taking, and their actions and effects.

Resources

Internet sites:
Blue Shield of California
blueshieldca.com

Books:
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Your Child, Emotional, Behavioral and Cognitive Development from Infancy Through Preadolescence
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Your Child, Emotional, Behavioral and Cognitive Development from Infancy Through the Teen Years
Dubuque, Nicholas and Susan, Kid Power Tactics for Dealing with Depression
Dubuque, Susan, A Parent’s Survival Guide to Childhood Depression
Cobain, Bev, When Nothing Matters Anymore: A Survival Guide for Depressed Teens