

# Recognizing and Understanding Depression in Children and Adolescents: A Handout for Parents

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*The prevalence of childhood and adolescent depression is on the rise. Parents are often know their children better than anyone else and can play a significant role in identifying problematic behaviors and facilitating the treatment process. This handout provides background information about depression, a specific list of behaviors that may be indicative of depression, and suggestions for parents if they think their child or adolescent may be depressed.*

## How Does Depression Affect Children and Adolescents?

Depression in children and adolescents has been found to play a large role in car accidents, violence and suicide, as well as eating disorders, headaches, sleep problems and other physical issues. The prevalence of depression among children and youth depression has increased significantly during the past two decades.

## What Could Be Causing Our Children and Adolescents to Be Depressed?

- Pressures of modern life
- Competition for good grades and college admission
- More violence in the newspapers and on television
- Lack of direction, meaning, or focus in life
- Biological influences: brain chemistry, genetics
- Losses: death of a loved one, divorce, move to a new area, breakup, stress, chronic illness
- Pessimistic/negative patterns of thinking
- Lack of parental involvement, divorce, family breakup and conflict

## Behaviors to Look For:

- Feeling of being down in the dumps or really sad
- **Lack of energy**, feeling unable to do the simplest task
- Inability to enjoy the things that used to bring pleasure
- **Lack of desire** to be with friends or family members
- Feelings of irritability, anger, or **anxiety**
- Inability to concentrate
- **Weight** gain or loss (or failure to gain weight as expected), and little or too much interest in eating
- Significant change in **sleep** habits, such as trouble falling asleep or getting up
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Aches and **pains** even though nothing is physically wrong
- A lack of caring about what happens in the future
- Frequent thoughts about death or **suicide**

## How to Help a Depressed Child:

- Talk to your child. Early detection of depression is the first step to treatment.
- Reassure him or her that you love him. Remind her that no matter how awful her problems seem, they can be worked out, and you are willing to help.

- Ask her to talk about her feelings. Listen carefully. Do not dismiss her problems or get angry at her.
- If there are indications of suicide, remove all lethal weapons from your home, including guns, pills, kitchen utensils and ropes.
- Seek professional help through Medical Doctors, psychiatrists, school psychologists, counselors, etc.
- A doctor may prescribe medication and/or suggest therapy.
- Parents and family members may be involved in treatment.

## Resources

### Websites

[http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/understanding\\_depression.html](http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/understanding_depression.html)  
<http://www.nami.org/youth/whatmtr.html>

<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/childhealthmonth/prevteensuicide.htm>

### Practical books

Cytryn, L., & McKnew, D. (1998). *Growing up sad. Childhood depression and its treatment*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

Fassler, D. G., & Dumas, L. S. (1998). *"Help me, I'm sad": Recognizing, treating, and preventing childhood and adolescent depression*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.