

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

VOLUME 4, ISSUE 7

MARCH 2006

RECOGNIZING DEPRESSION IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

What is depression?

When children are moody, cranky, or irritable, their parents may wonder if these are normal signs of growing up or something more serious, like depression. While it is true that all people, children and adults alike, experience sadness and changes in mood from time to time, clinical depression is a serious disorder requiring professional help.

The main difference between clinical depression and normative sadness is that the symptoms of depression interfere with the daily life of the child by causing significant distress or impairment in functioning at school, at home, or with friends. In fact, depression is a major cause of academic difficulties, potentially leading to problems such as poor grades or even school dropout in children who are generally bright and able to achieve. The good news is that effective treatments are available to help children and adolescents recover from depression and go on to live happy, healthy lives.

How do I know if my child has a problem?

Depression is often divided into two main types. The first is major depression, in which the symptoms are seen daily for at least two weeks, and the second is dysthymic disorder, which is milder but lasts for a year or more and is considered to be more of a chronic problem. In either case, the symptoms are similar and when present may indicate the need for an evaluation with a child psychiatrist or psychologist. Studies show that, at any given time, between 10% and 15% of all children and adolescents exhibit some signs of depression.

Signs of depression in children include: feeling sad or irritable most of the day nearly every day, decreased interest in doing things that used to be enjoyable, significant change in appetite or weight (or failure to make expected weight gains), trouble sleeping, lack of energy, restlessness or slowing down of movements, and difficulty concentrating. It is also common for depressed children to experience feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, or guilt about things that are out of their control. Finally, some depressed children experience recurrent thoughts of death or thoughts of hurting themselves. Any mention of suicidal thoughts should always be brought to the attention of a mental health professional.

What can I do to help my child?

- Encourage your children to discuss their thoughts and feelings. You may need to take the first step, and to initiate conversation by asking about how things are going for them at school, at home, and with their friends. Try to refrain from telling children “not to feel bad,” as this may make them feel misunderstood. Many kids also find it helpful to keep a journal or to draw as a way of expressing their emotions.
- Pay attention to changes in your child’s mood and activity level. When you see a change, note whether it lasts for one day (i.e., “I don’t feel like going to soccer practice today”) or several days (i.e., “Soccer just isn’t fun anymore, so I’m quitting the team”). When irritability, sadness, and/or decreased interest in activities lasts for several days, it is important to talk to your child about what is happening.
- If you are not sure how your child is feeling, ask! Children learn from watching adults who openly discuss their own thoughts and feelings. It is important that such conversations occur in an environment free from external distractions (e.g., away from cell phones or the television), where the child can feel comfortable expressing tough emotions.

- Always take children seriously if they talk about suicide or death (do not assume that your child is just looking for attention). Consider consulting a mental-health professional if their sadness begins interfering with their ability to succeed in school or to get along with friends and family.

What type of treatment is best?

Psychotherapy and medication can be equally effective in treating depression, and one or both may be chosen based on the needs of the child. However, if a child is suicidal or has difficulty with basic everyday functions, medication should be considered. For most kids, most of the time, medication alone is not enough. A supportive, understanding, caring environment is also necessary.

There are two types of psychotherapy that have been found to be most helpful in treating depression. Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) is considered the therapy of choice for childhood depression. In CBT, children are taught strategies for identifying negative thinking styles, solving problems, and managing emotions. Interpersonal Psychotherapy (ITP) is also considered to be effective, particularly in treating depressed adolescents. ITP is a form of brief therapy focusing on the child's communication and relationship skills.

Useful Resources

The following are resources for families interested in learning more about how they can recognize depression in their children and adolescents.

- www.depression.org
- Help Me, I'm Sad: Recognizing, Treating, and Preventing Childhood and Adolescent Depression. By DG Fassler and LS Dumas.
- More than Moody: Recognizing and Treating Adolescent Depression. By Harold S. Koplewicz, M.D.
- Double-dip Feelings: Stories to Help Children Understand Emotions. By Barbara S. Cain.

Written and developed by Michelle Pearlman, Ph.D. and Eva Levine, Ph.D. of the NYU Child Study Center.

ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, AboutOurKids.org.

AboutOurKids.org

THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER ONLINE

**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health
NYU Child Study Center**

577 First Avenue
New York, NY 10016
(212) 263-6622

1981 Marcus Avenue, Suite C102
Lake Success, NY 11042
(516) 358-1808

The Parent Letter has received generous support from Joseph Healey.