Children and depression: advice for parents

Everyone experiences ups and downs. However, for some people these down times turn into extended periods of deep sadness, along with feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and worthlessness. These periods are called depression and can be triggered by stress, a loss of some kind, a major disappointment or sometimes, just a chemical imbalance.



Although most of us know someone who has struggled with depression or may even have experienced it ourselves, we rarely consider the possibility that our own children might be depressed. However, according to Statistics Canada, about eight per cent of Canada's 12- to 17-year-olds suffer from depression. These numbers include more than twice as many girls as boys—a gender difference that continues to be reflected among older adults with depression.

Tips and tools you can use

Sometimes it's difficult for parents of depressed children to understand how their young lives could possibly be so difficult. But children view things differently and are under enormous pressures from school and from growing up in general. If you think your child or teen might be suffering from depression, it’s important to talk to your doctor.

Take note that a depressed child may feel:

- Unhappy
- Worried
- Guilty
- Angry
- Fearful
- Helpless
- Hopeless
- Lonely
- Rejected
- Lacking confidence
- Lacking self-worth
- Full of self-dislike and self-blame
- Full of negative thoughts

As a parent, be alert for behaviour changes in your child, including:

- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Crying easily
- Sudden outbursts of anger
- Showing less interest in sports and hobbies
- Difficulty concentrating
- Unusually low key and/or lethargic
- Decline in school performance

In addition, physical signs of depression may include:

- Headaches
- General aches and pains
- Lack of energy
- Changes in sleeping or eating patterns

- Feeling tired all the time

How you can help

If you are concerned about your child’s well-being, here are some steps you can take:

- Encourage your child to talk to you about how he or she is feeling.
- Check with your doctor to see if there is a physical cause for your child's feelings.
- Talk to your child's teacher to see if he or she has noticed any change in your child's behaviour.
- Talk to your child’s school counsellor.
- Recognize that depression is very treatable.
- Understand your own feelings about your child's depression. You may feel guilty or frustrated and may benefit from counselling to help you through this period.
- Take threats of suicide very seriously. Call your local distress centre or contact a professional.

If your child is showing some of the signs or symptoms of depression, consider being a supportive parent by reaching out for help. A counsellor at your child’s school or a professional will be able to provide you with advice to help both you and your child cope with this difficult situation.