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10 Tips on Spotting Depression in Children

Resources and Information for National Depression Screening Day & Year-Round

Between 17 and 20 million Americans are affected by depression each year, but experts warn that depression also hits a largely overlooked part of the population: our children.

In the face of the highly publicized problems and pressures kids face today, and a doubling of the suicide rate among 10- to 14-year-olds in just 10 years, children's experts are warning that it is time to take depression in children seriously.

“Many people don't expect that children, especially very young ones – five, six, or seven years old – can be depressed,” says Dr. Herbert Mandell, medical director of the 125-year-old national children's crisis charity KidsPeace and the KidsPeace Children's Hospital in Orefield, Pennsylvania. “In addition, people rarely spot depression in children because kids often don't show all the same, more familiar signs and symptoms we see in adolescents and adults.”

To help parents, teachers, and others, KidsPeace has put together ten tips on some of the more commonly seen signs of depression in children: These tips, which are also available at www.kidspeace.org , include:

1. **DEPRESSED CHILDREN DON'T ALWAYS “LOOK” DEPRESSED**
One of the problems with identifying depression in young children is that they don't always show depression in the way older people do. Instead of looking visibly “sad” and “depressed,” as adolescents and adults often do, young children sometimes show little sign outwardly, but will instead manifest it behaviorally. Any new pattern of angry outbursts, disciplinary problems in school, and aggressive or negative behavior, including looking or acting bored, especially if kids don't have a past history of such behaviors, calls for closer attention.
2. **SLEEP CHANGES.**
In adults, this may be trouble sleeping. In children and younger teens, there may be an overabundance of sleep, withdrawing and sleeping after school, or refusing to get out of bed. In older adolescents, you're more likely to see patterns of trouble falling asleep and early morning awakening.

3. **APPETITE CHANGES.**
Significant weight loss or gain (as much as 25 pounds) one way or the other in a few months. Although it can vary, it is typical of older teens to lose weight, while younger children and young teens may gain significantly.
4. **IRREGULARITY OF BOWEL MOVEMENTS.**
Withholding or accidents in children normally old enough to control their bowel movements.
5. **SCHOOL PROBLEMS.**
Sudden negative changes in youngsters' interest or performance, including a drop in grades, disciplinary problems, lack of completing homework, etc.
6. **EXTENDED NEGATIVE REACTION TO CRISES.**
A reaction more severe and longer than would normally be expected following a death, divorce, a move to a new school, etc. Typically, children can adapt to these stressors within several weeks to, in the case of a death, up to a year.
7. **LOSS OF INTEREST IN OLD PLEASURES.**
The child loses interest and pleasure in activities that were previously a source of enjoyment.
8. **CHANGE OF FRIENDS AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR**
The child gives up old friends and there may be a shift in the type of friends with whom the child spends time to a group perceived as less desirable by parents.
9. **EXPRESSING A SENSE OF HOPELESSNESS.**
Listen well to children when they express a sense of hopelessness. Take seriously young children and teens if they verbalize that they have no hope for the future. Expressing feelings of hopelessness may precede a suicide attempt.
10. **PHYSICAL COMPLAINTS.**
Children may complain of stomach aches or headaches. These complaints may be accompanied by a withdrawal from typical activities, social life, and a refusal to go to school. These complaints are cause for concern and should be explored.

Older children and adolescents tend to be more similar to adults when depressed, with symptoms that are more familiar to the general public: Withdrawal, fatigue, irritability, loss of concentration,, greater interest in morbid themes, and loss of interest in good hygiene, along with signs listed above.

“It is not unusual for adolescents to go through periods of being sad or down,” says Acting KidsPeace President Lorrie Henderson, Ph.D. “In fact, it is pretty normal. However, it is important to realize that depression is serious, and some of these symptoms you may think are depression may be signs of other issues, including medical problems.”

How to Take Action

When symptoms persist for more than a couple of weeks, or if there is more than one, it is time to take action. Check for signs of childhood depression and other problems of growing up at

www.kidspeace.org , talk to your family doctor and get help. Be sure to touch base with your child's

school to share information, as well. Best of all, to make sure you are protecting your children, talk to your kids on an ongoing basis so that you know what is normal for your kids and what is not. If you suspect a problem, you can find a screening center near you by going to the website www.mentalhealthscreening.org .

A resource for kids facing depression and other issues: TeenCentral.Net

One free resource to help children themselves is an innovative website, TeenCentral.Net, created by KidsPeace with the help and support of the nation's leading child experts at Harvard and Brown. TeenCentral.Net gives kids clinically screened help and advice, assisting kids to identify and work through problems before they become overwhelming.

National Depression Screening Day is held each year and is designed to call attention to the illnesses of depression on a national level. The week helps educate the public about symptoms and effective treatment, offers individuals the opportunity to be screened for the disorders, and can help connect those in need of treatment to the mental health care system. For a site near you, go to www.mentalhealthscreening.org .

About KidsPeace

KidsPeace is a 126-year-old national charity dedicated to giving help, hope and healing to America's children facing crisis. Founded in Bethlehem, Pa., this organization directly helps thousands of children a day at more than 50 centers around the country to overcome the crises of growing up. KidsPeace helps millions more each year through educational outreach and awareness programs designed to help America's kids and parents anticipate, intervene in and master crises that can affect any child – from disasters and personal traumas to family issues and neglect to life-threatening depression, eating disorders, and the many stresses of modern life. KidsPeace was named “The Outstanding Organization” of its kind in the country by the American Association of Psychiatric Services for Children and was called “a prototype of what we need for all children everywhere” by the late, nationally renowned child and family expert, Dr. Lee Salk.

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