

What Does Depression “Look Like” in Children? How Can Parents Help?

Depression in children looks **different** than depression in adults. Adults who are depressed usually look sad or blue and lose interest in things they used to enjoy. They complain of fatigue, loss of energy, guilt, feelings of worthlessness, and problems concentrating. Children who are depressed may not look sad or down. They may still enjoy some things in their lives. They also do not always complain of fatigue, guilt, or feelings of worthlessness. In fact, children who have been depressed for a while may not even complain that something is “wrong.” That’s because they may not know that how they feel is not the same as how other kids feel. This is why it is so important for adults to recognize signs of depression in children. Here are some of those signs.

Children who are depressed may show some of these **emotional problems**:

- **Irritability:** These children may be easily irritated. They might have more of an “attitude” than other children their age. They may get angry more easily. They may have emotional “outbursts.”
- **Boredom:** Though they might still enjoy their favorite activities, these children often do not seem or look “happy.” Many children with depression complain a lot about feeling “bored” or having nothing to do.
- **Anxiety:** Children with depression are at risk for feeling anxiety and worry. They often have low confidence in their abilities and low self-esteem.
- **Apathy:** Children with depression may seem like they don’t care about things. They may seem “flat” or low in emotional expression. They may smile and laugh less than other children.

Children who are depressed may have these **self-control problems**:

- **Poor frustration tolerance:** These children often have a hard time managing everyday frustrations. Little things may overwhelm them. They may cry or become angry easily.
- **Poor self-regulation:** These children often have difficulty controlling themselves. When upset, they may overreact. For example, they might make dramatic statements, or might destroy something they’ve made.
- **Acting out:** Some depressed children “act out” their feelings. They might break rules. They may lie, hit, or start fights. This happens because these children do not have the words to express what they are feeling.

Children who are depressed may have these **social and communication problems**:

- **Interpersonal sensitivity:** Children with depression may think others are out to get them, or that people are angry at them when they aren’t. They may be oversensitive to criticism or worry a lot about failing.
- **Withdrawal:** These children may not seem interested in spending time with family and friends. They may not text or call their friends, or spend time with peers outside of school.
- **Loneliness:** Most children report feeling lonely sometimes. But depression can intensify feelings of loneliness or lead to isolation. Feelings of loneliness, isolation, or peer rejection can make depression worse.
- **Won’t Talk:** These children often do not want to – or do not have the words to – talk about their feelings. They may also have trouble communicating in general.

Children who are depressed can have the following **information processing problems**:

- **Slowed Processing Speed:** Depression can “slow down” how quickly a student thinks. Tasks might take longer, or feel more effortful. Some children may even move more slowly.
- **Attention problems:** Depression uses up a child’s “mental energy.” As a result, these children often have trouble with everyday attention and organization.
- **Trouble with initiative and persistence:** It might be hard for these children to get started on things. They may have trouble coming up with ideas. They might not be able to stay motivated for boring or difficult tasks.

- **School problems:** These students may underachieve in school. Older children may refuse to go to school.
- **Limited cognitive flexibility:** These children often have trouble adapting to change. They might seem ‘rigid’ or like ‘black and white’ thinkers. They may have a hard time coming up with a different way to solve their problems if their first idea doesn’t work.

Depression in children can also be expressed through **physical problems:**

- **Underactivity:** Children who are depressed are often less active than other children their age. They may move or think slowly or even seem like “couch potatoes.”
- **Agitation:** However, some children with depression are more active than their peers. They may make a lot of agitated, nervous, or restless movements.
- **Somatic complaints:** These children may complain of aches and pains (like stomachaches or headaches) that do not have a clear cause. They may worry a lot about physical issues.
- **Changes in sleeping and eating patterns:** These children may sleep a lot, or seem tired even when they’ve had enough sleep. Or, they may have trouble falling asleep. They may want a parent nearby, or the light on, even though they are old enough to fall asleep by themselves. Children who are depressed may seem only interested in “junk food” and may eat a lot or gain too much weight. Or, they may seem uninterested in all food, and may even lose weight or fail to make expected weight gains as they grow.

Ways to Help:

1. **Get in touch with a therapist:** Partner with a mental health professional who works with children who have depression. This therapist will teach your child many tools for coping with their feelings and worries.
2. **Give your child emotional support:** Talk to your child about their emotions. Listen to their problems and concerns. Ask questions and encourage open and honest conversations. Let them know you hear and understand their inner struggles.
3. **Encourage a healthy lifestyle:** Make sure your child is getting good sleep. Pediatricians recommend 9-12 hours of quality sleep a night for children ages 6-12. Offer healthy food choices. Encourage exercise and active play.
4. **Help your child feel connected:** Keep your child involved in activities they love. Do fun things together as a family. Inspire your child to connect with others, to nature, and to the world around them. Encourage their special interests or passions. Give them opportunities to shine.

Helpful Websites:

- The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry:
http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/the_depressed_child
- NIMH: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression/depression-in-children-and-adolescents.shtml>
- WebMD: <http://www.webmd.com/depression/guide/depression-children>
- The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance: www.dbsalliance.org

Helpful Books:

- *Lonely, Sad, and Angry: How to Help Your Unhappy Child*, by Barbara Ingersoll & Sam Goldstein
- *Helping Your Depressed Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents*, by Martha Barnard
- *My Feeling Better Workbook: Help for Kids Who Are Sad and Depressed*, by Sara Hamil