

How To Spot Depression In Children:

Signs And Symptoms Parents Should Look Out For

By Amy Packham



It's important to notice what is different to your child's 'normal

Depression can affect children and young people just as it affects adults.

New research shows a quarter of girls (24%) and one in 10 boys (9%) are depressed at age 14.

Researchers from the UCL Institute of Education and the University of Liverpool analysed more than 10,000 children and found that 14-year-olds' own reports of their emotional problems were different to their parents', highlighting the importance of having open conversations about emotions with your kids.

"Worryingly there is evidence that parents may be underestimating their daughters' mental health needs," the authors wrote in the report published with the National Children's Bureau.

“Conversely, parents may be picking up on symptoms in their sons, which boys don’t report themselves.”

Why might your child be depressed?

Dr Monika Parkinson, clinical psychologist and co-author of ‘Teenage Depression: A CBT Guide For Parents’, said it’s important for parents to first realise that depression is a “complicated illness”.

“There is never one reason or one cause,” she told HuffPost UK. “Depression can be down to a whole interplay of different factors.”

She said parents should never blame themselves.

“There may be a biological basis to it and they may have a sensitivity to developing depression,” she said.

“There could be a whole bunch of life events or triggers such as bullying, parental separation, bereavement, or any kind of loss.

“And also, it is down to how they cope with things and their resilience.”

Calls to the helpline run by child and adolescent mental health charity YoungMinds, show that children face a huge range of pressures as they are growing up.

According to parents’ helpline operations manager Emma Saddleton these include: stress at school, body image issues, bullying on and offline, around-the-clock social media and uncertain job prospects.

And Sarah Blackie, head of operations at PAPYRUS (Prevention of Young Suicide) said even good news can provoke depression or suicidal thoughts in kids.

“This could be the perceived loss when an older sibling moves to a new school college or university or a significant person in the young person’s life has a major change in their life and the young person sees that as a loss to themselves,” she explained.

How can you spot if your child is depressed?

As depression is a complicated illness, children who are depressed don’t fit a set of fixed signs and symptoms. But there are things parents can look out for.

“It is hard to hide depression,” said Parkinson. “It’s all-consuming and pretty hard to put on a brave face, so most parents will start to notice changes in their child’s behaviour.

"It's important to notice what is different to your child's 'normal'. What's difficult is that it might pop up at the same time as puberty, when children already have changes going on.

"So for parents, it's about noticing what is really different and looking to see whether a child gets better over a period of time."

Saddleton agreed that a change in a child's behaviour is a crucial signal for parents to look out for.

"While depression can show itself in many different ways, big changes in your child's behaviour can be a warning sign," she told HuffPost UK.

"If they are not wanting to do things that they previously enjoyed, not wanting to meet friends, sleeping a lot more or less than normal, eating a lot more or less than normal, or seem constantly irritable or upset, it's important to take it seriously."

It's important to notice what is different to your child's 'normal'."

Dr Monika Parkinson, clinical psychologist

Common symptoms and signs your child may be depressed:

Parkinson said symptoms frequently associated with a child suffering from depression include:

- Experiencing low mood.
- Having a loss of interest in activities they normally enjoy.
- Withdrawing from seeing friends and family.
- Irritability - feelings of anger or lashing out unnecessarily.

She added: "There are also more obvious signs including self harm and them talking about death or suicide."

Blackie said parents should also listen out for suicidal thoughts or phrases like: "There is no point in it all", "Why am I going on?" and "What is the point of keeping going with this?".

Less common symptoms and signs your child may be depressed:

Other things Parkinson advises watching out for include:

- Changes in sleeping habits - sleeping more or sleeping less.
- Tiredness and complaints of feeling tired all the time.
- Changes in weight and appetite.
- A difficulty to make decisions.
- Not being able to concentrate.
- Not being able to keep up with lessons in school.
- Feeling restless and agitated, going from one thing to the next.
- Feelings of worthlessness, feeling like they're not good at anything.

Blackie added: excessive drug or alcohol use (depending on their age), risk-taking behaviour, lack of self-care and a lack of care for previously precious things.

How long should you monitor symptoms?

As a rule of thumb, if symptoms last at least two weeks or more and occur most days, then Parkinson said you should assume something is not quite right and seek professional help.

What next steps should parents take?

"As a general recommendation to parents, just ask your child how they are, even if they tell you go to away," said Parkinson.

"Do ask and don't be put off to keep on asking.

"Parents need to give the message to their child that they are there to talk when they're ready. Ask them how they are feeling and show you've noticed changes."

Saddleton said if your child does open up, don't make assumptions and make sure you listen to what they have to say.

"Make sure they know that you love them and are proud of them, and that you're on their side," she said.

"It can be a good idea to talk to your child about what they think would help, as they may have good ideas about solving their own problems."

If you are worried your child has thought about suicide, Blackie advised asking them about it in a straight-forward manner.

“Asking directly – ‘Are you telling me you are thinking of killing yourself?’ is a straightforward question and likely to get a truthful answer.

“Hence it is far more preferable to a general, judgemental and negative: ‘Are you thinking of doing something silly?’”

Parkinson said parents should suggest to their child that they go along to the GP, and give their child options including offering to go along with them, offering to do all the talking, or allowing their child to go in alone to talk to themselves.

“I point parents towards self-help material and websites [see below] too,” she said. “This can help them feel a bit knowledgeable about it and talk to other parents.

“My one message to parents would be: Don’t suffer it alone. Get help.”

Source: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/spot-depression-in-children-signs-symptoms_uk_59c0f05de4b0186c220580cd