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Recognizing Depression in Kids

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Children and teenagers can suffer from depression, and although some symptoms are similar to those experienced in adult depression, others are manifested differently. Parents who know how to spot depressive symptoms in children are better able to recognize when their own children need help. Depression can have serious negative effects on a child's health and functioning, but early and active intervention can help mitigate them.

Children and teens sometimes have what psychologists call "masked depression." Masked depression can be manifested as behavior problems or as physical pain. Young children with this form of depression may act out and misbehave more frequently than they had previously, while adolescents and teens may be truant from school and abuse drugs and/or alcohol. Some children complain of physical pain such as headaches, stomachaches, and backaches. Young children in particular have difficulty connecting their physical health with their emotions. Bed wetting is also common among depressed youngsters. Parents and teachers should be aware of these masked symptoms so they can appropriately intervene.

For children to be diagnosed with depression, they must display a sad or irritable mood or experience a loss of pleasure from activities they once enjoyed. This is a cause of concern if it occurs for two weeks or more. Depressed children also tend to have sleeping problems (either sleeping too much or too little), and they may either gain or lose weight. Children and teens are also at risk for inflicting self-harm and for suicide. Teens in particular tend to be very impulsive and susceptible to poor judgment. Having access to guns or prescription medications increases the chances of suicide attempts.

Cognitive challenges are also common among depressed children and teens. Parents and teachers might notice that an individual has difficulty concentrating and has diminished feelings of self-worth. Children might be critical of their looks, their personalities, or their social lives. They might appear hopeless about their futures and their grades might decline. In extremely severe cases of depression, a child could develop psychotic symptoms and hear voices telling them negative things about themselves.

Thankfully studies have shown that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and medication can be effective for treating depression in children, adolescents, and teens. CBT helps people recognize how the way they think relates to what they are doing and feeling. It helps individuals identify environmental and personal triggers to negative thoughts and feelings, and it teaches social problem-solving skills. Medication is not necessary for all children and many need it only initially. CBT alone often treats depression and prevents relapse.

If a child of any age begins to display depressive symptoms or openly talks about being unhappy or wanting to die, take it seriously. It can be difficult for an adult to imagine what a child could be depressed about, but remember that whether or not you understand the cause, it is a real experience for the child. Encourage children to talk about their feelings. If they won't be open with you, encourage them to talk with a professional. Avoid being judgmental and remember that their behaviors are due to emotional pain. Drinking and substance abuse may be a teen's effort to self-medicate, for example. Even parents who are wary of psychiatric medications would rather their child be on Prozac, for example, and monitored by a professional than binge drinking. Parents should also remember that depression runs in families, so if there is a family history, it is especially important to be able to recognize the signs of depression in your children. Depression is caused by a combination of environmental and biological factors, and though it isn't anyone's fault that a child might become depressed, it is the adult's responsibility to recognize and treat it.

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