

Recognizing Signs and Symptoms of Childhood Depression

It is important for parents and teachers to recognize that children and teens can and do suffer from depressive illnesses, and the importance of early diagnosis and treatment. Certainly everyday emotions can vary greatly through a child's development. While it is important not to jump to the conclusion that a child's being overly emotional means that they are significantly depressed, neither do we want parents or teachers to overlook or minimize symptoms and let childhood depression go undiagnosed or untreated.

This article on Depression in Children is designed to be a resource that can be provided to teachers and parents, in order to inform of some basic guidelines for recognizing and understanding when a child or adolescent may need additional evaluation or treatment for possible depressive illnesses.

In general, the primary symptoms of depression usually include mood changes, feelings of hopelessness and sadness. Sometimes acting out behaviors are also considered "masked" signs of depression, especially in children. If ongoing sadness or disruptive behaviors that interfere with normal daily routines persist for more than two weeks, these may indicate a child has a depressive illness.

Some specific symptoms of depression for children and teens, as are similar for adults, include: irritability or anger; ongoing and persistent sad, "empty" or anxious mood; changes in sleeping patterns (too much or too little); changes in appetite (increased or decreased); recent appreciable weight gain or loss (without explanation); social withdrawal or isolation; loss of interest in activities once enjoyed (known as anhedonia); vocal outbursts or crying spells; problems focusing or concentrating; feelings of worthlessness or guilt; feelings of hopelessness; fatigue and loss of energy; increased sensitivity to rejection; persistent physical complaints (such as stomachaches or headaches) that do not respond to treatment; and suicidal thoughts or gestures.

Children dealing with depression will not have all of these symptoms but will display different symptoms at different times. However, most children with significant depression will have a noticeable change in either social activities, academic performance or physical appearance. Pre-teens and teens are also prone to begin using drugs or alcohol to cope with the symptoms of depression. Children with a family history of depression, violence, substance abuse or physical or sexual abuse are at a greater risk for depression and suicide.

If any of these signs or symptoms in a child or teen occur, consult with either the school social worker, family M.D. or other mental healthcare professional should be pursued so that a thorough evaluation and proper treatment recommendations can be made.