What does depression look like?

What’s making Danielle so moody?

Danielle has been very touchy lately. She snaps at her brother. She snaps at everyone. Yet when her mother tells her off, she often bursts into tears and complains, “I never do anything right. You’re always picking on me!” Then she goes off to her room and sulks. This has been happening more and more. She will mope around for a while and then get cranky again and start picking fights with her brother. Danielle used to swim and play soccer, but she doesn’t want to anyone. Now she is having problems at school too. Her mother got a note from her teacher to say that she had an argument in class and left the room. Danielle just says school is boring.

Is Danielle depressed?

It’s possible, so further investigation would be important. An ongoing pattern of irritable behaviour can be a sign of depression. Being depressed is not just being sad or unhappy. Depression is a serious disorder. However, getting the right type of help and getting it early can make it much easier to deal with and to support Danielle and her family to get back on track.

A child who is depressed may

• have low energy and be difficult to motivate
• lose interest easily in an activity they usually enjoy
• have difficulty concentrating
• make a lot of negative comments about themselves
• look for what’s wrong rather than see the positives in situations
• be very difficult to please
• be irritable, easily annoyed or upset
• seem sad and cry easily and be difficult to soothe
• either have no interest in food or overeat
• have trouble sleeping.

Children affected by depression need to feel supported and understood.

Activity is important to help them feel better, so try to keep up sports and interests they enjoy. This can also help to show them that life is not all gloom and doom.

How parents and carers can help

• Help children open up by showing interest and listening to them talk about school, friends and home.
• If unsure how the child is feeling — ask! If they say, “Don’t know,” suggest some feelings words and see if any hit the mark with them.
• Help children to get moving by making sure they have engaging activities and are not left with too much time to worry.
• Physical activity is a natural antidepressant. Encourage physical activities, such as walking, running, roller-blading, bike riding, swimming — anything that’s physical will help. Don’t wait too long for ‘down’ moods to become ‘happy’ moods. If the change of mood is very severe or goes on for a few weeks without improving, take action. Make an appointment with a doctor or a mental health professional. Seeking help early for your child is the best thing you can do.

Depression affects children’s thinking as well as their mood and their behaviour. They may think they are worthless or that things will never get better. Children who are affected by this kind of negative thinking need help. Professional support from a mental health specialist can help them learn skills to tackle the depression and get back to feeling better about themselves and about their lives.
Are you worried your child is a bit like Danielle?

Here’s how to get help

• Talk with your child’s classroom teacher about how your child is managing at school and find out what resources the school can offer.
• Ask to speak to the school psychologist or counsellor.
• Talk to your doctor about the possibility of an assessment and referral to a children’s mental health specialist.

A mental health professional may diagnose a depressive disorder when

1. there is a marked change from the child’s previous behaviour or the child’s behaviour is not what you would expect at this age or for this child

2. the behaviour is seen in more than one situation and the depressed mood colours everything the child does

3. the behaviour causes problems at home, school and with friends, and the difficulties seriously interfere with the child’s ability to get on or to enjoy themselves.

Sometimes children who are experiencing depressed mood may talk about wanting to die or harm themselves. It is important to take seriously any talk about wanting to die or harm oneself from a child of any age. Such thoughts and talk indicates a high level of distress that requires attention. Consultation with a professional mental health practitioner will be required to support the child and family.

For more, please refer to the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on recognising and getting help for children with mental health difficulties.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au
What is depression?

Feeling depressed is more than just feeling sad. It’s normal to feel sad as a result of being hurt or of losing something or someone special. Depression affects people’s thinking. They see themselves and the future negatively. Along with feeling sad or irritable it may seem that nothing is worthwhile. From time to time everyone feels depressed, but it usually doesn’t last. A diagnosis of depression is made only when the depressed mood has lasted more than two weeks, when it is intense, and when the symptoms of depression interfere with the person’s ability to manage everyday things.

What would you notice in a child with depression?

Children with depression are hard to engage and motivate. Their low mood may be constant. They may cry and whinge and be very difficult to soothe. The child may become irritable easily. Outbursts of anger may result in feelings of misery and guilt. School staff may notice that the child looks sad and withdrawn or seems especially sensitive.

Signs of depression in children

Children are often unable to explain how they are feeling, especially when depressed. In diagnosing depression mental health professionals look for key signs and symptoms in children’s behaviour. When several of the following signs or symptoms occur together and are out of character for the child, they indicate that the child needs assessment and support from a mental health professional with experience treating children with depression.

Children are often unable to explain how they are feeling, especially when depressed.
When adults are depressed, feelings of sadness are often very obvious. In children, irritability may be more noticeable than sadness. Sleep changes in children are more likely to be a change to sleeping less rather than sleeping more. Loss of appetite and weight loss sometimes occur in children but are less common than in adults with depression.

As well as behaviours that can be observed, children with depression have thoughts of self-criticism and helplessness. For example, depressed children may think their parents or carers favour other children in the family or that they are useless. Some children also have thoughts of suicide. It is important to take seriously any talk about wanting to die or hurt oneself from a child of any age. Whether such talk represents a clear intention of suicide or is a way of expressing feelings of depression, it indicates a high level of distress that requires attention.
How is depression diagnosed?

If you are concerned that a child may have depression you should seek a mental health assessment. Your child’s school counsellor/psychologist or family doctor can help with this. They may refer you and your child for specialist assessment to a psychologist, psychiatrist or counsellor who works with children. There is no single test that can tell us whether a child has depression or is just feeling down. The diagnosis of depression depends very much on how intense the symptoms are and how much they interfere with the child’s ability to get on with everyday things. To help with the diagnosis, the mental health professional will need to find out about your child’s emotions and behaviours, physical changes and stresses that have been experienced by the child in the last few months. This information will be gathered by talking to parents and carers, the child themselves and, where possible, also to teachers. Sometimes parents and carers will be given questionnaires that help to assess how big an impact the child’s symptoms are having. The mental health professional will use the information they gather to put together a professional support plan that will suit the child and the situation.

Types of depression

Major Depression is diagnosed when symptoms are severe enough to cause problems at home, at school and with friends. Dysthymia may be diagnosed when symptoms are milder but continue for a long time and limit the child’s ability to cope with everyday situations.

Depression and other mental health problems

Depression and anxiety often occur together. Symptoms of anxiety in children include having fears and worries and complaining often of aches and pains. See the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on anxiety for further information.

Depression and Conduct Disorder may also occur together, especially when the child gets closer to adolescence. See the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on serious behavioural difficulties for further information on Conduct Disorder.

What treatments are effective?

Psychological treatments are best for depression in children. While antidepressant medication has been found to be helpful for adults, the evidence of its effectiveness for children is unclear. There is debate amongst medical researchers about the safety of antidepressant medication for children and adolescents. It is therefore important to discuss any concerns around risks with a medical practitioner.

Evidence shows that psychological professional support can:

- reduce the time it takes to recover from depression
- decrease the likelihood that another bout of depression will occur.

Coping skills learned through professional support help to protect the child from getting depressed again. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is a particularly helpful psychological professional support for children. It helps by identifying the negative thinking patterns that lead to feeling depressed and teaching children skills for changing them. The therapy will be tailored to the individual child, but is likely to include learning age appropriate skills for:

- telling the difference between optimistic and pessimistic thoughts
- challenging the child’s own negative thinking patterns
- solving problems in more helpful ways
- relaxation and exercise
- engaging in activities that the child enjoys.

The therapy can be offered in groups or to an individual child.

Psychological professional support that involves the whole family is also helpful and especially important in supporting your children. Parents and carers can play a key role in encouraging children to use the new coping strategies and setting up opportunities for practising them.

To get the best outcome, a professional support plan needs to include strategies to modify the stresses experienced in the child’s environment. For example, if the child is being bullied, action should be taken to stop it and prevent it from recurring. If there is conflict in the child’s family, this should be addressed. If there is a family member who is also suffering from depression, they may be encouraged to seek help for themselves as well as for the child.

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How to assist children with depression

Depression is a common disorder but it can be overlooked in children. Since the symptoms of depression are often negative behaviours (eg irritability, whingeing), it is easy for adults to feel annoyed by them and to blame or punish the child for his or her behaviour. This can lead to missing other signs of depression. Paying attention to your child’s emotions will help in noticing signs of depression earlier so that help can be accessed.

When you are concerned about changes in children’s behaviour and mood that suggest they may be feeling depressed, the first step is to talk with them. Even when children are not able to explain why they are unhappy, talking with them about problems in a supportive way can often start to improve their mood. If the child’s mood and behaviour does not improve in a few weeks, it is important to seek help from a mental health professional.

General principles for assisting children with depression

Be supportive and make time to listen
Let the child know that it is okay to ask for help and that you are ready to listen to whatever he/she wants to say. If a particular situation has caused him/her distress, help the child to solve the problem or find ways yourself to improve the situation.

Keep a focus on normal routines and activities
When children are depressed their thinking gets clouded by lots of negatives. The more they think about them, the bigger they become. Encouraging children to keep up with normal routines and activities helps to distract them from negative thinking patterns.

Keep active
Depression slows down children’s bodies as well as their minds. Keeping active helps to restore physical health and improves children’s mental health and wellbeing.

Seek professional help
When concerned about a child who may have depression, take prompt action to seek help. Getting help early is best.

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Depression: Suggestions for families

Children with depression may see the world as hopeless and themselves as helpless. Ordinary things often seem too hard. They tend to feel bad and don’t know how to feel better.

How you can help

Parents, carers and school staff can help children with depression by being understanding and supportive. They can show they care by listening and by helping them to sort out problems. They can spend time together with children and let them know they are confident that things will get better.

Provide time and space to talk
Make time and space for your child to talk to you. It works best when you can be unhurried and uninterrupted. Often children find it easier to talk when doing something with you. Doing ordinary things like playing with you at home, going on a shopping trip, or going for a long drive might provide opportunities for them to open up.

Listen fully
If you want your child to talk, it is best not to judge what they say or offer advice. Allow crying or whatever else helps get out whatever is on your child’s mind. Help the child feel understood by listening carefully before responding.

Help them think again
When the child reports a negative experience, gently ask whether there might be another explanation for things happening the way they did and try to help the child see that it’s not as awful as he/she thinks. Help them find other ways to solve the problem.
Encourage contact with others
Friends can help to reduce unhappy feelings – it helps to know you’re liked, loved and appreciated. It can help to think about others and not just yourself. Friends can also suggest better ways of thinking about situations.

Do fun things
Having fun can be very helpful. Although children who are depressed may be reluctant to participate at first, fun activities can be extremely helpful for lifting their mood.

Encourage relaxation
Having quiet time is important. Time out for your child to relax can reduce nervous tension.

Don’t wait to seek help
Depression in children is serious and usually does not get better by itself. If you are concerned about your child, don’t wait for things to change. Talk with school staff about how your child is going at school. Ask the school about speaking with the school psychologist or visit your family doctor and if necessary get a referral for treatment.