

Signs of Depression in Children and Adolescents

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Adults, children, and adolescents with depression usually share the common feelings of sadness and hopelessness, but children may express depression in a number of ways that are not the same as adults—irritability and vague physical complaints (e.g., recurrent stomach aches) are classic examples. Other signs that a child might be experiencing depression are listed below.

PHYSICAL SIGNS OF DEPRESSION IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

- Changes in sleep patterns: Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep; sleeping much more than is typical for the child's age.
- Unusually low energy; fatigue; sluggishness in moving, talking, reacting; reduced amount of activity or playing.
- Restlessness and agitation: increased fidgeting, squirming; reduced ability to sit still.
- Changes in eating patterns: increased or decreased appetite; weight gain or loss.
- Frequent physical complaints: complaints about illness symptoms, especially vague ones such as headaches, stomachaches, muscle aches, and tiredness.

COGNITIVE SIGNS OF DEPRESSION IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

- Poor attention and concentration.
- Poor memory.
- Difficulty taking tasks to completion.
- Difficulty making decisions.
- Pessimistic world-view; perceiving things as worse than they are; negative attributions.
- Negative view of self, life, world, and future.
- Helplessness and hopelessness; belief that there is nothing that can be done about their depression and that this is the way it always will be.
- Low self-esteem; over focus on one's deficiencies and failures.
- Thoughts of suicidal or death; self-destructive thoughts.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL-BEHAVIORAL SIGNS OF DEPRESSION IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

- Disengagement from friends, family, teachers; seeking solitude; difficulty with interpersonal relationships.
- Excessive time alone with videogames and other solo activities.
- Reduced participation in previously enjoyed activities; dropping sports and clubs.
- Classroom misbehavior; lack of cooperation.
- Decreased performance in school.
- Tardiness and absence from school.
- Running away or talking about running away.
- Suicidal talk or attempts; reckless behavior; self-injurious behavior.
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse.
- Lack of grooming and self-care.
- Decreased ability to appropriately cope with social events, extracurricular activities, hobbies, and family events.
- Decreased ability to cope with responsibilities.
- In young children: regression, clinginess, avoidance of new situations, accident proneness, and fears.
- Increased sensitivity to failure, rejection, and criticism.
- Increased irritability, anger, brooding, or hostility.
- Increased dependency and insecurity.
- Apathy and boredom.
- Feelings of sadness, isolation, hopelessness, worthlessness, or guilt.
- Crying or verbal outbursts without apparent cause.

Remember that not every child or adolescent who exhibits these signs is depressed; nor do those who are depressed exhibit all these signs. Judging whether a young person is depressed is sometimes very difficult to do. Consulting with a school psychologist, school social worker, school counselor, or school nurse is a good first step for teachers or parents who have concerns. Such a professional will be able to advise you as to whether further assessment or intervention might be warranted.