

Children's mental health

All parents want their children to be happy and successful but at some time most parents wonder whether their children are happy and doing what is expected for their age.

Most children at times misbehave or are unhappy, but these times usually pass. Sometimes a child's behaviour can be unusual or seem different from other children of the same age.

A child may be distressed or behaving unusually or differently from how he has in the past. These changes may be gradual or they may happen quite suddenly. Either way they are a sign that your child needs understanding and help.

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Children's feelings and behaviour

Generally speaking it is likely that children and young people are developing well when they enjoy:

- play and leisure activities
- being with others in the family
- being with friends and other children and young people of their age.

Everyone feels sad, angry, afraid or upset sometimes, especially when things have gone very wrong for them. Not every one will respond to the same event in the same way. Some children may want to talk a lot about something they have found distressing, others may keep their feelings more to themselves.

Most children show feelings in the way they act; their behaviour will tell you how they are feeling. It is important to try to understand what the behaviour means. If you notice your child being sad or

angry much of the time, this is when she most needs your help.

Some children cope better than others with stress or things that upset or frighten them. The support and understanding they have from people around them is extremely important in helping children cope with problems.

Children can have problems with behaviour and with feelings at different times in their lives. These problems happen more often than most people might think. Children are most at risk of serious problems between the age of 12 and 16 years, although it can happen earlier.

Problems can become worse over time if the child or adolescent does not get any help.



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Problems to take notice of

Problems with behaviour are usually easily seen. They include ongoing aggression and bullying, refusal to cooperate or do what they are asked, and being cruel to animals when they are old enough to understand not to do this.

Problems with feelings are often not as easy to see as problems with behaviour. They include ongoing anxiety (or worry), depression, phobias (ongoing fear of a particular thing for example, spiders, or burglars) and eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia nervosa.

Problems with thinking are much less common and affect only about one person in a hundred. They usually don't happen until late adolescence. These problems include illnesses such as schizophrenia.

What causes behaviour, feeling or thinking problems?

There can be many things involved such as:

- family history (genes)
- school or learning problems
- problems with friends, social isolation or not fitting in
- relationship break-ups
- emotional, physical, sexual abuse or chronic neglect
- death or loss of someone very close
- serious illness or physical injuries
- family break-up, separation and divorce
- violence
- lack of engagement in activities, school or unemployment
- homelessness
- thinking patterns such as perfectionism or 'black and white' thinking



What parents should look out for

Generally a problem shows when children or young people have ongoing distress or when they have difficulties coping, getting on with others, or keeping an interest in what they are doing. It is important to take note of any significant changes in usual patterns of behaviour. Signs maybe displayed signs internally (withdrawal), or externally (aggression).

Signs in pre-school children and toddlers:

- not playing
- not starting to talk or not talking having learned to
- harming themselves or others, for example, biting, hitting, or aggressive play
- going backwards in their learning, for example, toilet training
- changes in weight, not growing and putting on weight
- being over friendly with everyone, treating strangers the same as family
- not relating to others, acting as if people are not there
- not seeming to be attached to parents or carers





What parents can do

- Stay in touch with your child, be aware of and attend to any changes in your child's feelings or behaviour.
- Spending some time each day with your child is important.
- Take an interest in what your child enjoys and what he is doing at school.
- Encourage your child to talk about what is happening in his life.
- Model appropriate behaviour in your relationship with others.
- Spend time with your child in family activities (fun and chores).
- Try not to involve your child in adult problems.
- Don't compare your child with others.
- Notice the things that your child is good at and tell him.
- Encourage children's friendships.
- Let your child know that you love him in as many ways as you can — make sure he feels loved and lovable.
- Your child's emotional health is as important as his physical health.

- doing the same play or activity over and over again

Signs in primary school age children:

- constant crying and clinginess
- fears, worries or excessive anxiety about being left alone
- ongoing sleep problems, for example, persistent nightmares
- hyperactivity; constant movement beyond regular playing
- difficulties focusing or concentrating
- marked fall in school performance
- unexplained laughing or crying
- soiling or wetting pants
- ongoing disobedience or aggression towards people or pets
- being so afraid as to be unable to do usual activities
- daydreaming so much that it interferes with usual activities
- frequent temper tantrums
- cruelty to pets
- property damage or lighting fires
- withdrawing from people or usual activities.

Signs in adolescents and teens:

- withdrawing from family, friends, social activities
- marked change in school performance and/or attendance

- abuse of alcohol and/or drugs
- changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- stealing or vandalism
- great concern about weight or physical appearance
- constant worrying
- hearing or seeing things that are not there
- sadness, worry, depression, unhappiness and being irritable
- thoughts about death, comments about not wanting to live or being better off dead
- frequent outbursts of anger
- signs of self-harming behaviour (cutting).

If your child has any of the above signs, or if you are worried about other behaviours or feelings, it is important to get advice from someone who works with children and young people.

As a first step talk to your local doctor, or your nearest Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. Early help can often prevent more serious problems later on.

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This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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