

RECOGNIZING DEPRESSION IN CHILDREN AND TEENS

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/ID PROGRAM
MARCH 2018 RESOURCE SHARING

In children and teens depression doesn't always look like sadness. Depression can play out differently than how we typically view it. We may think of someone not wanting to get out of bed, eating more or less than usual, sleeping more or less than usual, having trouble with daily activities or not talking much. Among 12-to-17 year olds, almost 13% have had a major depressive episode. Recently the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended universal screening for depression, at least yearly, starting at age 12. It's especially important for parents and caregivers to be aware of the signs. Depression is a treatable illness—and untreated depression can lead to long-term mental health and physical problems, and possibly even suicide.

Here are some possible signs of depression in youth:

Dropping grades. There are lots of reasons why grades can drop. But whenever a child's grades are dropping, it's important to think about depression as a possible cause.

Irritability and anger. There are many reasons for this, including personality and adolescence itself. But if it's new and persistent, or if a child or teen is getting in trouble much more than usual, think about depression.

Boredom. When a child who used to be interested in things is suddenly bored all the time, it can be a warning sign.

Dropping out of activities. It's certainly fine for interests to change, but if new ones don't take their place, that too can be a warning sign.

Difficulty with relationships. When children and teens are fighting with friends, or simply spending much less time than they used to with them, that's a red flag.

Dangerous Behavior. A certain amount of risk-taking is normal, especially in teens, but if it's new and persistent, it may not be normal. Any self-injurious behavior, like cutting, needs attention right away.

Persistent physical complaints, such as stomachaches, headaches, or other pain. Obviously you need to get a thorough checkup for any persistent pain. But the mind-body connection can be very strong; sometimes people who are depressed have physical pain that feels very real.

Fatigue. This is another symptom that needs to get checked out thoroughly, as there are many medical reasons for chronic fatigue. But depression is one of them.

If you are seeing any of these in your child—or any other changes in behavior that you can't explain and don't seem right to you, talk to your doctor or seek out a mental health professional. Don't ignore the behaviors or try to explain them away. If depression, the sooner it is caught, the easier it is to treat.

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/in-children-and-teens-depression-doesn't-always-look-like-sadness>