

Fact Sheet

Sadness In Children

All children feel sad, frustrated or down at times. But depression is more than just a bad mood or a tough day. It is a mental health condition that affects how a child feels, thinks and functions at home, school, and in different relationships.

What can depression look like in children and adolescents

Children and adolescents don't typically say "I feel depressed". Instead, they show it through behaviour, emotions or physical symptoms. As a parent, you may notice some of the signs:

Emotional clues:

- Ongoing sadness, crying more often, feeling hopeless
- Irritability or anger that seems out of proportion
- Loss of interests in things that they use to enjoy – hobbies, friends, sports
- Low self-esteem or self-criticism
- Feeling worthless or guilty for no clear reason

Behavioural clues:

- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Avoiding school, activities or responsibilities
- Changes in academic performance
- Frequent complaints of boredom or lack of motivation

Physical clues:

- Sleeping too much or too little
- Sudden changes in appetite or weight
- Frequent headaches or stomach-aches
- Low energy, feeling tired all the time
- Restless or seeming "slowed down"

Verbal clues:

- "Nobody likes me"
- "I don't want to be here"
- "Everything is annoying"
- "I don't care"

Even though these statements may be subtle, they could be potential cries for help

How depression can vary by age

Children at different ages show different signs and symptoms and it can look different for everyone

Young children (5-10 years old)

- Act out, become clingy or regress (bed wetting)
- Stomach aches or headaches becoming frequent
- Increased irritability, tearfulness or tantrums
- Increased separation anxiety or fears

Tweens and teens (11-17 years old)

- Describe feeling empty, numb or constantly bored
- Appear irritable, angry or “shut down”
- Increased conflict with parents or peers
- Use of risky behaviours – substance use, skipping school
- Talking about death, self-harm, or suicide

What’s normal and what’s concerning?

It’s natural for children to experience occasional sadness, frustration, or mood swings as part of growing up. However, when these feelings persist and begin to interfere with daily life, it may be more than just a phase. Depression lasts longer, runs deeper, and significantly impacts a child’s ability to function at their best.

Below is a table of what is typical behaviour and what is depression symptoms:

Typical behaviour	Possible depression
Occasional grumpiness or boredom	Constant irritability or hopelessness
Needing alone time	Social withdrawal from everyone, even close friends
Sleepy after a late night	Sleeping too much or insomnia for weeks
Frustrated by homework	Gives up easily or shows no motivation
Upset over a relationship breakup or a friendship ending	Ongoing sadness that doesn’t improve overtime

How can I support my child?

- **Talk to them, even if they don’t talk back:** Start by having gentle conversations with your child, making it clear you’re there to listen without judgment.
- **Explain what depression is:** Helping them understand that what they’re feeling is real and that they’re not alone can be a powerful step toward healing.
- **Offer coping tools (not just advice):** Provide strategies to help them manage their emotions, such as deep breathing, journaling, or physical activity.
- **Stick to routines:** Consistent daily routines can help provide structure and security, which is essential for managing depression.
- **Normalise the conversation:** Encourage open discussions about mental health, showing that it’s okay to talk about feelings and struggles.
- **Be a safe place:** Create an environment where your child feels emotionally safe and supported, even if they don’t always have the words to express their feelings.

When to seek help

If you notice:

- Symptoms lasting more than 2 weeks
- Difficulty functioning at home, school or with friends
- A dramatic change in behaviour, mood or energy

Contacting a paediatrician, a licensed child therapist, a local GP, or community health centres can provide the professional support your child needs. These resources can help guide your child through their mental health challenges and provide them with the necessary treatment.

If your child or adolescent expresses thoughts of self-harm or suicidal thoughts, it is important to connect with appropriate services to ensure their safety. All states and territories have various services available. In the ACT, you can make use of the following services:

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) –
5124 3133 (Southside) and 5124 1407 (Northside)

Access Mental Health – 1800 629 354

Message to parents

You are not alone in this journey, and neither is your child. Depression is real, it’s common, and it’s treatable. Your love, presence, and willingness to support them can make all the difference.