

Intervention Guide Parent Tip Sheet



Behavior Assessment System for Children, Third Edition

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All children feel sad sometimes. Earning a bad grade in school, doing something wrong at home, arguing with friends, or not being included by others are common reasons why children may feel sad. Many times, this sadness lasts for only a brief amount of time. But when a child's sadness lasts for too long, it can begin to interfere with everyday activities, and it might be a sign that he or she is struggling with symptoms of **depression**.

Children with depressive symptoms can show many different feelings, such as loneliness, sadness, or frustration. They may act differently, too, by whining, being overly negative, or having mood swings. A child with symptoms of depression may start to believe that bad things happen because he or she is a bad person. Such thinking can affect most areas in a child's life. The good things can seem bad, and the bad things seem terrible.

Each child's symptoms of depression are unique and can be caused by many factors, including:

- loss of a family member or friend
- high levels of stress at school or at home
- negative self-image
- personal relationships

Teaching new coping skills is key for helping your child manage unhealthy thoughts and behaviors.

Depressive symptoms can quickly change a child's life both in and out of school. His or her grades or school attendance may drop. A child who is a gifted performer or athlete may begin to struggle with a talent or a game. He or she may suddenly switch friends or may lose friends altogether. These changes can make a child feel even worse. The longer these feelings persist, the harder it can be for the child.

It's not always easy to identify a child who is experiencing symptoms of depression. At first, one or two symptoms or behaviors may be seen, and these symptoms may be viewed as normal. But over time, these symptoms or behaviors can increase or worsen. When viewed together, they may reveal a more serious problem. For parents and other people who see a child every day, it can be hard to notice how bad a child's problems have

become. Sometimes, a person who sees a child less frequently is the first to notice these issues.

Many doctors and researchers believe that there are several possible causes for depression. Some of these causes come from a child's environment and surroundings. Other causes might be from changes that occur within a child. Regardless of the cause, there are many things you and others can do to help your child with his or her depressive symptoms.

Not knowing the reason for your child's symptoms of depression can be hard. Parents sometimes feel like they're not doing enough to make their child happy, or that their child isn't grateful for things he or she has. Understanding and using the strategies in this tip sheet is one of several ways that you can help your child.

Dealing With Depression

Children who experience symptoms of depression may:

- act lonely, sad, or frustrated
- become overly negative, whine, or have mood swings
- perform poorly in school
- lose interest in activities
- suddenly change or lose friends

Strategies that can help your child include:

- planning fun activities
- teaching physical awareness and strategies
- recognizing patterns of thinking



This tip sheet provides information that may be helpful for changing how your child manages unhealthy thoughts and behaviors. With the help of your child's school, you can help your child understand and manage his or her feelings. Research tells us that when parents and schools work together to set goals and plan strategies, children learn and adapt more quickly.

The following pages discuss approaches that will give you the tools you need to help reduce your child's symptoms of depression. However, if your child's symptoms last a long time or worsen, it might be helpful to involve your family physician.

Working With Your Child

Talking with your child about depressive symptoms can be difficult. However, it is an important step to understanding why these sad or angry feelings persist and what may be the best way to help. Your child may not be willing to talk much about his or her feelings. Starting a conversation shows your child that his or her feelings are important to you. Listening and developing a plan for helping shows that you are committed to making things better.

There are many things you can do to help make the conversation easier. You can show your child the conversation is important by talking during a time that is **unhurried** and in a place that is **free from distractions**.

Try to **keep the conversation short**. You will be the best judge of how long your child can pay attention to the conversation, but you might want to limit your first conversation to no more than 10 minutes.

When speaking with your child, try to maintain a **positive and calm** attitude. Try not to judge your child's thoughts or feelings. If you become frustrated and upset when talking with your child, he or she may be unwilling to talk about his or her feelings. Also, staying positive will provide a good example for your child to follow.

When talking with your child about his or her symptoms of depression, make sure to:

- choose a time that is unhurried and a place that is free from distractions
- keep the conversation brief
- maintain a positive and calm attitude
- focus on one situation at a time

Did you know?

- About 1 in every 33 children and 1 in 8 adolescents may have symptoms of depression.
- Once a child experiences an episode of depression, he or she is at risk of having another episode within the next 5 years.
- Teenage girls are more likely to develop symptoms of depression than teenage boys.

During your conversation, focus on your child's emotions rather than your child's behavior. Keep in mind that your child may misinterpret his or her sad or negative feelings as a personal weakness. Your child may be feeling like "everything's my fault," so listen to what your child is saying. Avoid interrupting, even if what's being said seems unrealistic to you. Following these suggestions will help you and your child **stay focused** on finding a solution.

Sometimes children need help to keep their feelings in perspective. Your child may need to practice talking more specifically about situations that cause bad feelings. Talking keeps problems and feelings in their place rather than spilling into the good things in your child's life. This approach may be more helpful for children who are good at talking about their feelings. Also, be sure to give as much support as your child needs so he or she has the best chance possible to succeed.

With the following strategies, it can be helpful to provide examples of how to use them. Make sure that the examples you use are meaningful to your child. Use examples of situations or behaviors that your child has experienced. The conversations you have with your child about his or her depressive symptoms may help you decide what kinds of examples will be helpful.



Planning Fun Activities

A common symptom of depression is avoiding activities or people that a child once liked. Parents can help a child disrupt feelings of sadness or depression by planning fun activities.

1. Talk to your child about things he or she likes to do. If your child can't think of anything, suggest an activity that you've seen him or her enjoy in the past, or an outing your child has asked about before.
2. Plan the event. Encourage your child to plan out as many of the steps as possible. Make sure the activity is something realistic for your child and something that you can help make happen.
3. Suggest a special reward for following through on the plan. It may take extra encouragement even though your child chose the fun activity. For example, if your child plans a family picnic at a park, suggest a reward of a new kite to fly or a ball to play catch with.
4. Provide positive feedback. With more practice, your child should begin to stop avoiding things that are fun and may soon not need the incentive of a reward.

EXAMPLE:

Kendra has been spending more time alone and less time with her friends. After talking with her, Kendra's dad suggested she pick a movie that she'd like to see with her friends. Kendra said she "didn't feel like it." As incentive, her dad said he'd buy the tickets and popcorn for her and two friends. Kendra's dad helped her make a list of what she needed to do to plan the evening and praised her as she completed each task. When Friday night came, Kendra didn't want to go. Her dad reminded Kendra that she was looking forward to going earlier in the week. Afterward, Kendra couldn't stop laughing about the movie, and later she talked about how much fun she had with her friends.

Teaching Physical Awareness and Strategies

A child might experience physical symptoms (e.g., fatigue, stomachaches, headaches, or tight muscles) while dealing with depression. Parents can teach a child how to recognize and use physical responses to sadness and depression as a way to change emotions.

1. Recall if your child has had any physical symptoms related to depression, or observe and/or ask your child about how he or she feels physically. If your child mentions one or more physical symptoms, ask about how they start or if they are present all the time. Ask about any "warning" feelings. If your child doesn't know or doesn't understand, point to or touch areas of the body (e.g., stomach, head, leg) and ask specifically about any pain there.
2. Talk, model, or teach ways to feel better physically. Exercise increases the "feel-good" chemicals in the body, so take a walk together, run or ride a bike, turn on the music and move or do stretches. Breathing techniques can also change the body. Model how to breathe in slowly while counting to 5 or 10, and breathe out slowly at the same count. Breathe in through the nose, and breathe out through the mouth.
3. If routines trigger physical symptoms, add exercise or breathing activities to the schedule or practice, paying attention to warning signs and using one or both methods to change depressive feelings.
4. Give positive feedback about specific changes in your child's behavior. Specific feedback may be more helpful than general comments. If your child is young, you might give a small reward for helpful changes. Older children might find value in writing about these changes in a private journal or notebook.

EXAMPLE:

Each morning for a week, Todd told his mom that he couldn't go to school. He didn't know why, but when it was time to leave, his throat would get tight and he would sit down on the steps and cry. Todd and his mom started walking around the block in the morning before school and did breathing exercises in the car on the way to school. On mornings that were too busy for a walk, Todd's mom would ask him to run fast in place for 2-4 minutes as a game and competition with his sister in the kitchen. If Todd would not participate, his mom would make him do some other form of physical activity (e.g., jumping jacks, sit ups).

Recognizing Patterns of Thinking

A child can sometimes fall into the habit of negative thinking. Parents can teach new habits of thinking to change a child's outlook.

1. Explain that words, like events, sometimes have different interpretations. Identify a word that has different meanings (e.g., chicken), and ask what it means. A chicken can be a bird or a scared person.
2. Describe an event that is "neutral," such as when you ask your child to come talk to you. Ask how your child interprets this request. Your child may admit to feeling bad because he or she might be in trouble, or your child might be unhappy to leave an activity to see what you want.
3. Talk to your child about how this might be a time that he or she is in trouble, but it may also be a time to talk about something great or to give praise about an accomplishment.
4. Talk about how negative thinking can be a habit or a pattern. It may be learned and come from real experiences, but it can also be unlearned because not all experiences are negative or sad.
5. Imagine other examples of neutral events with your child. Encourage your child to think of some positive interpretations of these events.
6. Ask your child to keep a record of each time he or she replaces a negative thought with a positive one during the day. Use the Showing Success form in this tip sheet.
7. Follow up with your child each day to see how it is working.

EXAMPLE:

Shelly told the high school principal about a group of kids who cheated on an exam. Now she is bullied and left out; even former friends and boyfriends call her a "narc." She struggles to attend school and has dropped sports. Anytime students are talking, Shelly feels like it is about her and what she did. After learning about thinking habits, Shelly begins to challenge her own assumptions and tries to practice "neutral thinking," such as, "They are probably not talking about me," whenever she sees students talking together, rather than her former habit of assuming the conversation was about her.



When should I expect my child to feel better?

The time it takes for behavior and feelings to change depends on both the severity of the symptoms of depression and how long your child has been feeling this way. While your child may begin to understand how to manage his or her mood, it can take time for actual changes in mood and behavior to occur. Don't be surprised if you don't see an immediate change. One way to ensure change is to be consistent. When families are busy, it can be hard to find time to talk about how your child is feeling. But it's important to keep practicing the positive thinking and planning that will lead to change. If you don't notice a change, your child may need more help. Remember that there will always be times when your child feels real sadness from events or situations in his or her life. This sadness is normal for all children. As your child learns to manage his or her moods, you should expect difficult times to pass more quickly and that he or she will rejoin favorite activities or find new ones.

What should I do if I don't notice any change or if my child's behavior gets worse?

Think about how consistently you and your child have been about working together on the techniques. Consider using different examples, or try asking more frequently how your child feels about his or her progress. Talk with the person who gave you this tip sheet for more ideas to help your child. If your child's symptoms of depression become worse, immediately consult with the person who gave you this tip sheet, even if you have a future appointment scheduled.



Where can I get more information?

Many books have been written for parents and teachers about how to understand and manage children's aggression problems. The person who provided you with this guide might be able to recommend books relevant to your child's age. If you have access to the Internet, the websites of the following organizations are good sources of information.

www.apa.org

The American Psychological Association's website has information that can help you understand your child's problems or locate a psychologist.

www.nasponline.org

The website of the National Association of School Psychologists contains information for families about different childhood behaviors and about the role of school psychologists in the diagnostic and treatment processes.

www.ed.gov

Many handouts, booklets, and online resources for parents, teachers, and others who care for and teach children can be found on the Department of Education website. This site also includes a link to the "What Works Clearinghouse" that features reports on the effectiveness of educational interventions.

www.healthychildren.org

From the American Academy of Pediatrics, this website has useful information on a variety of topics related to children's growth and physical and mental development.

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