

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 4 (10/92)

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THE DEPRESSED CHILD

Not only adults become depressed. Children and teenagers also may have depression, which is a treatable illness. Depression is defined as an illness when the feelings of depression persist and interfere with a child or adolescent's ability to function.

About 5 percent of children and adolescents in the general population suffer from depression at any given point in time. Children under stress, who experience loss, or who have attentional, learning, conduct or anxiety disorders are at a higher risk for depression. Depression also tends to run in families.

The behavior of depressed children and teenagers may differ from the behavior of depressed adults. Child and adolescent psychiatrists advise parents to be aware of signs of depression in their youngsters.

If one or more of these signs of depression persist, parents should seek help:

- Frequent sadness, tearfulness, crying
- Hopelessness
- Decreased interest in activities; or inability to enjoy previously favorite activities
- Persistent boredom; low energy
- Social isolation, poor communication
- Low self esteem and guilt
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
- Increased irritability, anger, or hostility
- Difficulty with relationships
- Frequent complaints of physical illnesses such as headaches and stomachaches
- Frequent absences from school or poor performance in school
- Poor concentration
- A major change in eating and/or sleeping patterns
- Talk of or efforts to run away from home
- Thoughts or expressions of suicide or self destructive behavior

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A child who used to play often with friends may now spend most of the time alone and without interests. Things that were once fun now bring little joy to the depressed child. Children and adolescents who are depressed may say they want to be dead or may talk about suicide. Depressed children and adolescents are at increased risk for committing suicide. Depressed adolescents may abuse alcohol or other drugs as a way to feel better.

Children and adolescents who cause trouble at home or at school may actually be depressed but not know it. Because the youngster may not always seem sad, parents and teachers may not realize that troublesome behavior is a sign of depression. When asked directly, these children can sometimes state they are unhappy or sad.

Early diagnosis and medical treatment are essential for depressed children. This is a real illness that requires professional help. Comprehensive treatment often includes both individual and family therapy. It may also include the use of antidepressant medication. For help, parents should ask their physician to refer them to a child and adolescent psychiatrist, who can diagnose and treat depression in children and teenagers.

Also see the following Facts for Families: #8 Children and Grief, #10 Teen Suicide, #21 Psychiatric Medication for Children, and #38 Manic-Depressive Illness in Teens. **See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).**

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The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 6,000 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

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