

What to Do if You Think Your Child Is Depressed

What should I do if I think my child or teen is depressed?

Ask your child about his or her thoughts and feelings. It may also be a good idea to talk to your doctor about your child's behavior and your concerns about depression. In most cases, taking your child to your doctor's office is a good idea. A medical problem may be causing the depression. Your doctor may want to give your child a general medical check-up and get some blood tests.

What are some of the signs of depression in young children and teens?

Infants and preschool children may have a poor appetite and may lose weight. You may notice that they don't seem to enjoy playing.

School-aged children may be less confident. They might feel like they can't do anything right. Older children and teens may stop caring about themselves or family members, may not want to go to school and, in general, may lose interest in life activities. Older children may also show signs of eating more and sleeping more, or eating less and sleeping less.

In some children, the only signs of depression may be headache, stomachache, not

wanting to go to school or losing their temper. When these signs last for several weeks, they might mean your child is depressed.

Why do young people get depressed?

Here are some of the reasons children and teens might get depressed:

- The family moves to another place to live.
- The child has to change to a new school.
- A pet or a friend dies.
- Someone in the family is very sick.
- The hormonal changes of puberty can cause depression.

What can be done to help depressed children and teens?

Medicine and counseling help children and teens who are depressed. Most depressed children and teens should talk to a counselor, therapist, psychologist or psychiatrist about what is making them feel the way they are feeling. Family counseling can help everyone in the family. Your family doctor can refer you and your child to someone for counseling.

Medicines also can help treat depression. Most depressed children and teens do best when they get both counseling and medicine.



Pediatric Symptom Checklist

Mark under the heading that best fits your child: *never, sometimes or often.*

	Never	Sometimes	Often
1. Complains of aches or pains.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Spends more time alone.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Tires easily, little energy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Fidgety, unable to sit still.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Has trouble with a teacher.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Less interested in school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Acts as if driven by a motor.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Daydreams too much.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Distracted easily.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Is afraid of new situations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Feels sad, unhappy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Is irritable, angry.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Feels hopeless.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Has trouble concentrating.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Less interested in friends.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Fights with other children.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Absent from school.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. School grades dropping.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. Is down on himself or herself.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. Visits doctor, with doctor finding nothing wrong.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. Has trouble sleeping.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Worries a lot.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. Wants to be with you more than before.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. Feels he or she is bad.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. Takes unnecessary risks.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26. Gets hurt frequently.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
27. Seems to be having less fun.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28. Acts younger than children his or her age.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
29. Does not listen to rules.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
30. Does not show feelings.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
31. Does not understand other people's feelings.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
32. Teases others.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
33. Blames others for his or her troubles.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
34. Takes things that do not belong to him or her.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
35. Refuses to share.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

SCORING: Zero points for *never*; 1 point for *sometimes*; 2 points for *often*. A total score of 28 or more points suggests dysfunction and the need for further evaluation.

FIGURE 1. A checklist to use in assessing children for depression.

Adapted with permission from Jellinek MS, Murphy JM, Robinson J, et al. Pediatric symptom checklist: screening school-age children for psychosocial dysfunction. *J Pediatr* 1988;112:201-9.

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Evaluating the Psychosocial Status of Children and Their Families

FAMILY

1. Who is in your family and who lives with you in your home?

Household Stability

2. How many times has your family moved?
3. Have there been any changes in your family or lifestyle since the last time we met?
4. How are you and your child coping with this change?

Marital Conflict and Divorce

5. Are you and your spouse able to work together in raising your child?
6. How do you handle disagreements in raising your children or between yourselves?
7. When things get out of hand, how far do they go?

Crisis

8. Has your family ever been through a major crisis?
9. How did you all deal with that crisis?

Parental Mental Health

10. Have you or any of the members of your family ever suffered from a mental illness or substance abuse problem?
11. Are you aware of any effects that this problem may have had on your child or his or her care?

SCHOOL

12. How does your child like school and his or her teachers?
How do you like school and your teachers?

13. How did your child do in first grade?

Academic Achievement

14. What grades does your child get on his or her report card?
What grades do you get on your report card?
15. Has your child ever stayed back a grade?
16. Has your child ever been in special education classes?

School Attendance

17. Have you ever had difficulty getting your child to go to preschool or school?
18. Has your child ever missed more than 10 days of school in one year? What was the reason?
19. Has your child ever cut school? How often? *Have you ever cut school? How often?*

PEER RELATIONSHIPS

20. How does your child get along with peers?

Friends

21. Does your child have a best friend? (In adolescence, a group of good friends?) *Do you have a best friend?*

Bullies and Victims

22. Does your child seem to enjoy picking on, bothering or bullying weaker children? *Did you ever like to pick on or bother another kid?*
23. Does your child always seem to get picked on? *Are you a kid who always gets picked on?*

ACTIVITY

24. What does your child like to do? *What do you like to do?*
25. Is there something that your child is really good at doing? *Is there something that you are really good at doing?*

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

26. What emotions do you see in your child these days?
Everyone feels sad or angry at times. How about you?
27. Has your child suffered from the loss of someone important to him or her?
28. Has your child ever been treated for an emotional or school problem?

MISCELLANEOUS TOPICS

Poverty

29. Have you ever been on welfare or been unable to financially support your family?

Injury

30. Has your child ever had to go to the emergency room for treatment of an injury? How many times?

Substance Abuse

31. Do you ever drink alcohol? If yes, then:
 - C. Have you ever felt the need to cut down on your drinking?
 - A. Have people ever annoyed you with criticism of your drinking?
 - G. Have you ever felt guilty about your drinking?
 - E. Have you ever taken a morning eye-opener to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover?
32. Do you think that your child is drinking alcohol or using drugs? *Have you ever tasted beer, wine or alcohol? How old were you when you began to drink alcohol?*

Risk-Taking Behavior

33. Is there anything that your adolescent is doing or has done to himself or herself that has you really concerned?

Suicide

34. Has your teenager ever tried to intentionally hurt himself or herself? *Did you ever feel so upset that you wished you were not alive or that you wanted to die? Did you ever do something that you knew was so dangerous that you could have gotten hurt or killed? Did you ever intentionally try to kill yourself?*

SCORING: There is no specific scoring system for this questionnaire. The majority of historical questions should be asked of the parents. The child should be asked the questions in italics.

FIGURE 2. Questions for parents and children (queries to children are in italics) in the evaluation of children with depression. (Readers are referred to the source article for an excellent discussion of these questions.)

Adapted with permission from Hack S, Jellinek MS. Historical clues to the diagnosis of the dysfunctional child and other psychiatric disorders in children. *Pediatr Clin North Am* 1998;45:25-48.