

# Mental health and kids

## Signs your little one might need support

Young kids can face a lot of stress — from everyday challenges with making friends or avoiding bullies, to family topics such as divorce, a move or the birth of a sibling. Like adults, kids can experience conditions such as depression or anxiety too. But even if they realize they don't feel well, they may not know how to express it.

If you're a parent or caregiver, make sure you're giving mental health the same attention you give physical health. For kids, mental well-being includes:<sup>1</sup>

- Having healthy self-esteem
- Feeling a sense of belonging
- Having relationships with people who care about them
- Learning healthy social skills
- Knowing how to cope with stress and challenges
- Learning how to navigate different emotions in safe ways
- Being able to function well at home, at school and in the community



## Beyond tough days: Kids and mental health conditions

Every kid has days when they don't feel great and don't behave the way their parents or caregivers would like. If those tough moments seem to be happening more often, however, it could be a sign of a mental health condition. While a diagnosis would certainly require a trip to the doctor, here's a quick summary of some things to look for.

**Stress** — When faced with a lot of stress, preschool-age children may become clingier.

They may also complain of stomachaches or headaches, and some kids will even start having bathroom accidents. Elementary-age children may cry easily, become irritable or angry, or have behavior outbursts.<sup>2</sup>

**Anxiety** — Many kids have fears when they're little, such as worrying about dark bedrooms and monsters in their closet. If they don't outgrow their fears, they could have an anxiety disorder.

If your child is very afraid of being away from parents or very worried about the future, social situations or a specific thing, talk to their doctor. Signs of extreme worry can include tearfulness, tiredness, stomachaches, irritability and anger.<sup>3</sup>

**Depression** — All kids feel sad sometimes. But if they feel sad, hopeless or irritable often, it could be a sign of depression. Pay attention to whether your child is having trouble paying attention; experiencing changes in eating, sleeping or energy; or no longer enjoying fun things. Some kids may not show that they're sad, but instead act unmotivated or cause trouble. Others may shut down or withdraw. Extreme depression can lead to self-injury or thoughts of suicide.<sup>3</sup>

**ADHD** — Most kids have trouble focusing or behaving occasionally. But kids with ADHD don't grow out of those symptoms. Kids who experience ADHD may forget or lose things a lot, talk too much, have trouble resisting temptation, have trouble taking turns or getting along with others, and fidget or squirm a lot.<sup>4</sup>

### Among kids ages 10–14:<sup>5</sup>

**3.6%**

experience anxiety disorder

**1.1%**

experience depression

**3.1%**

experience attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)



## Show you care: Support for mental health

Whether you think your child may be experiencing a mental health condition or you simply want to help them build mental wellness, start with these steps.

**Talk with them.** Ask your child how they're feeling, and be there to listen. Make sure they know they aren't in trouble, and reassure them that you care. While it can be tempting to try to fix everything, know that sometimes your role is just to be there in the moment. Be present with compassion. Listen with empathy. If you don't have an answer to a question they ask, be honest and try to find it.<sup>6</sup>

**Take care of yourself** — One in 14 children has a parent with poor mental health, and that makes the child more likely to have mental health challenges too.<sup>7</sup> If you have a mental health condition — or you're feeling overwhelmed with stress — get support. If you're not healthy or don't have the support you need, it can be even harder to care for your kids.<sup>8</sup>

**Reassess the pressure** — Living up to our parents' expectations can be tough, no matter our age. Ask yourself if you're putting a lot of pressure on your child to perform in school or activities like dance or sports. If so, relax a bit. Yes, good grades are important. But they aren't worth a child's health.

**Get professional help** — If you think your child may be dealing with a mental health condition — or you need support as a parent — reach out for help. Your Emotional Wellbeing Solutions, a modern and flexible employee assistance program (EAP), is a great place to start. It is never too early to begin the conversation.



**Caring for young children is full of fun moments, and it certainly includes a lot of challenging ones as well.**

With the right support, you can help build their mental health skills — and teach them to ask for help when they need it.

**If you feel that you or someone else is in immediate danger of hurting themselves or others, call your local emergency services immediately.**



### Critical support when you need it

Visit [optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter](https://optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter) for additional critical support resources and information.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). What is children's mental health? [cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/basics.html](https://cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/basics.html). Last reviewed September 23, 2021. Accessed January 31, 2022.
2. World Health Organization. Adolescent mental health. [who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health](https://who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health). November 17, 2021. Accessed January 31, 2022.
3. American Psychological Association (APA). Students experiencing stress. [apa.org/ed/schools/primer/stress-health-primer.pdf](https://apa.org/ed/schools/primer/stress-health-primer.pdf). October 2021. Accessed January 31, 2022.
4. CDC. Anxiety and depression in children: Get the facts. [cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/features/anxiety-depression-children.html](https://cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/features/anxiety-depression-children.html). Last reviewed March 22, 2021. Accessed January 31, 2022.
5. CDC. What is ADHD? [cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/facts.html](https://cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/facts.html). Last reviewed September 23, 2021. Accessed January 31, 2022.
6. APA. Talking to kids when they need help. [apa.org/topics/parenting/helping-kids](https://apa.org/topics/parenting/helping-kids). April 9, 2020. Accessed January 31, 2022.
7. Wolicki SB, Bitsko RH, Cree RA, et al. Mental health of parents and primary caregivers by sex and associated child health indicators. *Advers Resil Sci*. 2021;2:125–139.[doi.org/10.1007/s42844-021-00037-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s42844-021-00037-7).
8. CDC. Mental health of children and parents — A strong connection. [cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/features/mental-health-children-and-parents.html](https://cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/features/mental-health-children-and-parents.html). Last reviewed April 23, 2021. Accessed January 31, 2022.



**This program should not be used for emergency or urgent care needs. In an emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.** This program is not a substitute for a doctor's or professional's care. Consult with your clinician for specific health care needs, treatment or medication. Due to the potential for a conflict of interest, legal consultation will not be provided on issues that may involve legal action against Optum or its affiliates, or any entity through which the caller is receiving these services directly or indirectly (e.g., employer or health plan). This program and its components may not be available in all states or for all group sizes and is subject to change. Coverage exclusions and limitations may apply.