

## HOW DO I...

# Recognize the signs and help my child struggling with mental health problems?

## Advice for Parents and Caregivers

- If you're concerned about your child's mental well-being, pay attention to the three D's:
  - 1) Distress:** How hard is your child struggling? This relates to the intensity of your child's emotions and behaviors, including anxiety or panic attacks, meltdowns, or "feeling terrible."
  - 2) Duration:** How long has this been going on? Meaning, how long do these episodes last and how long have they been feeling this way?
  - 3) Disruption:** How difficult are these symptoms making it for them to live normally? In other words, how much are their symptoms getting in the way of what the child needs or wants to do? This can relate to maintaining family or social relationships or participating in extracurricular activities that they usually enjoy.
- If your answer to one or more of these is "a lot" or "a long time," it might be time to reach out for help. These signs may indicate your child is struggling and needs support. Don't hesitate to reach out to a mental health professional or your child's pediatrician. Early intervention is crucial in helping your child thrive.



**Scan to watch our video on this topic.**

- Anxiety, mood swings, or behavior struggles are common in kids, and often overlap. Changes in sleep, eating, mood, or behavior —especially if they stick around or disrupt your child's daily life — can be signs of something bigger, so we don't want to ignore them.
- Remember, even if it doesn't seem like a diagnosed "disorder," seeking support can make a real difference. Mental health challenges are real, common, and treatable. Trust your judgement and reach out to your child's pediatrician, school counselor, teachers, or even a trusted family friend for support. They can be a great resource and can also help connect you with a mental health professional for your child.

## 7 Tips for Recognizing the Signs of and Helping My Child with Mental Health Issues

To learn more, check out these helpful resources:

[Children and Mental Health: Is This Just a Stage?](#)

National Institute of Mental Health

[Resources for Parents and Caregivers](#)

Seattle Children's Hospital

[Complete Guide to Getting Good Care](#)

The Child Mind Institute

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The Child Mind Institute is dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders by giving them the help they need to thrive. We've become the leading independent nonprofit in children's mental health by providing gold-standard care, delivering educational resources to millions of families each year, training educators in underserved communities, and developing tomorrow's breakthrough treatments.

1. **Remember the three Ds.** Look for distress, duration and disruption. In other words, consider whether there is an increase in intensity of your child's emotions that lasts over a period of time and disrupts your child's life.
2. **Make observations.** If you are worried, start recording specific examples of things that are concerning you. This will give you a clear picture of your child's mood and behavior and help you identify patterns.
3. **Get perspective.** If you're unsure whether your child's behavior is age-appropriate, check in with a professional like a teacher, school counselor, or pediatrician for perspective.
4. **Know the signs.** Specific signs that something is up with your child include changes in eating habits, difficulty sleeping, difficulty concentrating, changes in academic performance, avoiding or missing school, withdrawing from social interactions, extreme irritability, and persistent sadness lasting two weeks or more.
5. **Trust your gut.** You know your child best and you're more likely to notice changes in their mood or behavior. If you sense that something is going on, don't dismiss your instinct. Even if their symptoms wouldn't meet criteria for a mental health disorder, your child still might need help.
6. **Consult a professional.** If you've determined that your child's behaviors, thoughts, or emotions signal that your child might need help, consult a professional. Start with your pediatrician or ask around for recommendations for a mental health professional who has experience with your child's age group and challenges. They can help make a diagnosis and create a support plan. Involve your child in an age-appropriate way so they feel empowered and understand what is going on.
7. **Take one day at a time.** Once you have a diagnosis and support team in place, remember that mental health challenges rarely have a quick fix, and your child will need your support above all else. Know that they aren't choosing this and that while it might be challenging for you, it's almost certainly harder for them. Don't forget to take care of yourself as well.