

A NOTE TO GROWN-UPS

Seeing your child suffer from the painful feelings of being sad or lonely, or from depression or Bipolar Disorder, can be very upsetting. You know your child is hurting, yet you feel helpless because it seems like nothing you say or do helps. This section offers some practical information and ideas so you can help more effectively.

How Children React When They're Sad

Feeling sad is a normal part of life for children and adults alike. We all experience loss, whether it be through death, moving, divorce, loss of friends, saying good-bye to teachers, and more. Most children will feel sad when these things happen. They may react by isolating themselves, crying, or acting out in anger. With time, however, the sadness fades and it doesn't keep them from having fun, getting along with others, or doing well in school. But for some kids, the sadness lingers. It can affect all areas of their life and sometimes depression can set in.

How to Help Your Child

Give lots of encouragement. Give your child as much encouragement as possible for her attempts to practice the exercises in this book. If she has trouble or feels like giving up, reassure her that with time and practice, you're confident she will eventually learn to overcome her sad feelings.

Let your child know it's okay to express feelings. Many children don't like talking about how they feel. Reassure your child that though it may be hard to talk about strong emotions, the more he does so, the sooner he will start feeling better. Children are sensitive to how adults react when they do share their feelings, so it's important to show you are accepting of those feelings. If you react with alarm or by criticizing, making fun, ignoring, or yelling, your child will stop confiding in you.

Make exercise a family activity. Exercise can help release negative feelings and prevent depression. Ask your child to join you in doing something active, such as a walk, a bike ride, or swimming.

Be patient. If your child is sad or depressed, she may not have the motivation to follow your instructions and may get very angry with even simple requests. Children with Bipolar Disorder can have meltdowns during which they are incapable of listening to reason. This is a time to be flexible with your expectations. Try to be encouraging but not pushy. Stay calm, try to accept the feelings behind any inappropriate words or actions, and offer ways of expressing feelings more constructively and respectfully.

Observe carefully. Be on the lookout for signs that your child's symptoms are worsening, such as increased irritability, sleep disturbance, social withdrawal, a drop in grades, or an increase in anger outbursts. By catching these problems early, you can work with your child to get the help he needs.

When Is Counseling Needed?

If you and your child try the ideas in this book and nothing seems to work, it's wise to seek professional help. Begin by having your child's pediatrician conduct a full medical checkup. Sometimes there are medical reasons for symptoms of depression or Bipolar Disorder, and this possibility should be ruled out.

Who Offers Counseling?

Mental health professionals such as psychologists, social workers, and licensed professional counselors can provide therapy for your child, if needed. They can diagnose the problem and decide whether your child's sadness is normal or whether the problem is more serious. Be sure to ask what kind of training and experience the therapist has in working with children with depression. If you

aren't sure where to start looking for a therapist, ask the school guidance counselor or a health-care professional for recommendations. You can also check the phone book under Mental Health Services or Counselors or Psychologists. The list of organizations on page 120 also may be of assistance. Let the agency know if cost is a concern; ask if free or low-cost services are available.

Will Medication Be Necessary?

For more serious forms of depression or Bipolar Disorder, the therapist may recommend medication. Usually, a child psychiatrist will be consulted who can prescribe and monitor the medication. A child psychiatrist is a medical doctor with specialized training in working with children who are experiencing emotional and behavioral problems.

Before your child is placed on medication, it's wise to insist on a full medical checkup complete with blood work. This way, the doctor can monitor any effects the medicine may have. Bring your child in for regular checkups once a medication has been prescribed.

While medications can be very effective and safe when properly monitored, there can be risks. It's possible that your child may feel worse after taking medication. Some antidepressants, for example, have been linked with an increase in suicidal thoughts in children. Also, it's important to remember that your child may need to change prescriptions, perhaps several times, before finding one that works. Finally, some medicines can be fatal if a child overdoses on them. If your child is suicidal, be sure to lock up these medicines. Ask the doctor or pharmacist about any concerns you have regarding safety, side effects, or other questions.

Don't allow children to be in charge of taking their medication, because if they skip or forget doses the medicine can be less effective. It's important the medicine is taken exactly as prescribed, and adults are the best people to make sure that happens.

Considering using medication can be scary. You may wonder why medicine is needed, what the benefits are, what the risks are, and whether there are alternatives. One thing to consider is the risk of *not* using medications. For children who are depressed enough to feel suicidal, refusing to consider medication could increase your child's risk of suicide.

Nutritional Approaches

Eating a healthy diet may be especially important when kids are feeling down or depressed. Proper nutrition ensures the brain has all the nutrients it needs to produce the various neurotransmitters and hormones needed for proper brain functioning. Some experts also recommend dietary supplements or vitamins for kids who feel depressed. Talk to your child's doctor to learn more.

Alternative Treatments

When traditional treatments fail, doctors or therapists may recommend other treatments. These may include herbs such as Saint-John's-wort or other "natural" approaches. Some of these treatments have yet to be tested fully in children and some may be controversial in other ways. Be sure to ask about the possible risks and side effects of alternative treatments, and don't hesitate to get a second opinion or say no to the treatment if you're not comfortable with it.

Suicide

The danger of suicide is one that cannot be underestimated. Suicide is one of the leading causes of death among teens and it is a real problem for younger kids as well. In the United States in 2000, suicide was the third-leading cause of death among children ages 10–14. Children as young as five years old have committed suicide. While girls attempt suicide more often, boys are more likely to succeed in killing themselves.

Danger signs include giving away belongings, talking about or threatening suicide, saying that no one cares,

avoiding friends and family members, having “accidents” that could lead to death, or engaging in risky or daring behavior.

Always take threats of suicide seriously. If your child seems sad, don’t hesitate to ask if he has had thoughts of wanting to hurt or kill himself. It is a myth that talking about suicide will make kids actually commit suicide. Actually, the opposite is true. Seek help immediately if your child admits to having these kinds of thoughts.

You can:

- Call your child’s counselor, if he has one. Use the counselor’s answering service or emergency number if possible. Having suicidal thoughts is always an emergency. If you don’t hear back, call again until you reach someone.
- Contact school officials if your child is in school. Guidance counselors often have training in this area and can refer you and your child if needed.
- Call 911 and have the rescue squad come to your home if you believe the danger is severe. They are trained to deal with mental health emergencies.
- Call the nearest hospital and ask if they have staff who can evaluate a suicidal child or adolescent.

While it’s critical you get professional help, there are things you can do to help children get over suicidal feelings. Tell them suicide won’t really solve their problems. Many kids think the pain will stop and they’ll feel better once they’re dead. But dead people don’t feel anything at all. Staying alive is the only way they’ll ever know what it’s like to really solve their problems and feel happy.

It can also help to try to keep children distracted. Sometimes doing something else—like playing a game or hanging out with a friend—can get their mind off their suicidal thoughts. After a bit, the suicidal feeling usually passes.

Some children may need to go to a hospital to keep themselves safe while they get extra help for their sadness and suicidal thoughts. At the hospital, they can talk to a counselor every day. They also will be with other kids who have the same problems with depression. They may have group counseling. Once kids realize they're not alone and other kids understand how they feel, they usually start feeling better. Another benefit to being in a hospital is that doctors can make changes to children's medication faster than if they were not there.

Family members can visit kids while they're in the hospital. Most kids stay about a week, though some may need to stay longer.



For more information on parenting children with depression or Bipolar Disorder, check out the references in the resource section that follows. The better you understand these illnesses, and the different parenting techniques that are often needed to help children who have these illnesses, the more effective your parenting will be.

Remember . . .

While it's hard to see your child struggle with sad feelings and grief, you can provide valuable help. Sadness and grief are normal, yet still require your support. Depression is a very treatable illness. By helping your child learn and practice the exercises in this book, pursuing counseling and medication when needed, and educating yourself about these illnesses, you can help ensure that your child is able to overcome sad feelings and lead a happier, more productive life.