

When Should I Be Concerned About my Child's or Teen's Behavior?



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Early identification and treatment are important, but how can parents distinguish normal behaviors from behaviors that can be symptoms of a mental illness? Moodiness and irritability are common responses to the stress of school and finding out who you are. So, when should parents be concerned?

Some of the signs that mean a child may need further help from a mental health professional or health care provider include:

- Less interested in school
- Dropping grades
- Self-critical
- Does not show feelings
- Difficulty making or keeping friends
- Poor grades despite trying hard
- Constant worry or anxiety
- Persistent stomach aches or other aches and pains
- Refusal to go to school
- Persistent and disruptive hyperactivity
- Inability to focus or concentrate
- Disrupted sleep – sleeping less or more than usual
- Continuous or frequent aggression or acting out
- Persistent sadness
- Irritable
- Has little energy
- Doesn't seem to be having fun
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Using alcohol or drugs

It is when a child has more than one of these signs and their symptoms are intense and lasting for more than several weeks that parents should be concerned. Additionally, when these behaviors begin to impact the teen's ability to participate successfully in normal activities, parents should be concerned. Parents are often the first to recognize a problem; they know that something just isn't "right." Talking with your child or teen is always a good idea in order to learn more about what is happening in his or her life such as stress or bullying.

Parents should discuss their concerns with a professional, such as the child's pediatrician or primary health care worker, the school social worker, or the school psychologist. These professionals may administer a mental health screen. A screening does not provide a diagnosis but rather determines whether the child's symptoms warrant further investigation.

If a child is diagnosed with depression, anxiety or another mental illness, parents should learn about the wide range of treatment options. If medication is presented as an option, parents should weigh the risks and benefits and should be sure to follow the recommendations regarding follow-up visits and monitoring side effects. It is important to note that there are many effective approaches that do not involve medications and that medication alone is not effective.

For more information, visit the NAMI website at www.namihelps.org.
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