



Recognizing Mental Health Concerns in Children

A Practical Toolkit for Parents, Educators & Caregivers

Introduction

This toolkit was created to help parents, educators, and caregivers recognize early signs of mental health concerns in children. Early identification and support can make a meaningful difference in a child's life.



Why This Matters

1 in 5 children experience a mental health challenge, yet many go unrecognized. With the right knowledge, you can spot the signs early and connect children with the support they need to thrive.

What You'll Learn

- Common signs of anxiety, depression, and behavioral concerns 2-4
- Age-appropriate emotional and social milestones 5-6
- How to start supportive conversations with children 7-8
- When and how to seek professional help 9-10
- Practical strategies for everyday support 11



Anxiety

Anxiety in children often looks different than in adults. Understanding these signs can help you provide early support and reassurance.



Physical & Emotional Signs

Children with anxiety may complain of frequent stomachaches or headaches, have trouble sleeping, or seem unusually clingy. They might cry more often, avoid eye contact, or become very quiet in social situations. Physical tension, nail-biting, and restlessness are also common indicators.

Behavioral Signs

Watch for avoidance of new activities, excessive worry about everyday events, or frequent meltdowns before school or social gatherings. Some children may seek constant reassurance, ask repetitive "what if" questions, or have difficulty concentrating. These patterns, when persistent, may signal an anxiety concern worth exploring further.

Depression

Depression in children can be subtle and easily mistaken for moodiness. Recognizing these signs early allows you to offer compassion and seek appropriate support.



Emotional & Social Signs

Children experiencing depression may seem persistently sad, irritable, or withdrawn. They might lose interest in activities they once enjoyed, pull away from friends, or express feelings of worthlessness. Frequent tearfulness, low energy, and a noticeable change in mood lasting more than two weeks are key indicators.

Physical & Behavioral Signs

Look for changes in sleep patterns, appetite, or energy levels. Some children may complain of unexplained aches, struggle to concentrate at school, or show a decline in grades. Increased irritability, frequent outbursts, or talk of feeling hopeless should always be taken seriously and explored with care.



Behavioral Concerns

Behavioral concerns in children can manifest as persistent patterns of defiance, aggression, or difficulty managing emotions. Recognizing these signs helps you respond with understanding rather than frustration.



At Home & School

Children with behavioral concerns may frequently argue with adults, refuse to follow rules, or have intense tantrums beyond what is typical for their age. They might destroy property, lie persistently, or struggle to take responsibility for their actions. At school, they may disrupt class, have trouble staying seated, or react aggressively to peers.

Social & Emotional Patterns

Watch for difficulty making or keeping friends, blaming others for their mistakes, or showing little empathy. Some children may seem deliberately annoying, have frequent mood swings, or become easily frustrated over minor issues. When these patterns persist for several months and affect daily life, it may be time to seek guidance from a professional.



Age-Appropriate Emotional Milestones

Understanding what is typical at each stage helps you distinguish between normal development and potential concerns. Below are general emotional milestones by age group.

Ages 3-5

Children begin to identify basic emotions like happy, sad, and angry. They may have frequent tantrums as they learn to regulate feelings. Imaginative play helps them process experiences, and they start showing empathy toward others in simple ways.

Ages 6-9

Children develop greater emotional vocabulary and can express why they feel a certain way. They begin understanding others' perspectives, forming deeper friendships, and managing frustration with growing independence. Fear of failure or rejection may emerge.

Ages 10-13

Pre-teens experience more complex emotions and social pressures. They seek peer approval, may become self-conscious, and start developing personal identity. Mood swings are common as they navigate hormonal changes and increasing academic demands.





Age-Appropriate Social Milestones

Social skills develop gradually as children grow. Knowing what to expect at each stage helps you identify when a child may need extra support building connections with others.

Ages 3-5

Children engage in parallel play and begin cooperative play. They learn to share and take turns with guidance, start forming simple friendships, and enjoy group activities. They may struggle with conflict resolution and often seek adult help to solve social problems.

Ages 6-9

Children form closer friendships and understand social rules like fairness and loyalty. They can work in teams, resolve minor conflicts independently, and show awareness of how their behavior affects others. Peer acceptance becomes increasingly important.

Ages 10-13

Pre-teens navigate complex social dynamics including cliques, peer pressure, and online interactions. They develop deeper empathy, understand sarcasm and nuance, and begin forming their social identity. They may pull away from family as peer relationships take priority.





Ways to Start Supportive Conversations with Children

Starting a conversation about feelings can feel daunting, but the right approach makes all the difference. These gentle strategies help children feel safe enough to open up.

Create a Safe Space

Choose a calm, private moment — not right after school or during a conflict. Side-by-side activities like drawing, walking, or driving often feel less intimidating than face-to-face conversations. Let the child know there are no wrong answers and that you're there to listen, not to judge.

Use Open-Ended Questions

Instead of asking "Are you okay?" try "What was the hardest part of your day?" or "How did that make you feel inside?" Open-ended questions invite children to share more than a yes or no. Follow their lead — if they give short answers, gently reflect back what you notice without pushing.

Validate Their Feelings

Resist the urge to fix or minimize. Phrases like "That sounds really tough" or "It makes sense you'd feel that way" show children their emotions are valid. When children feel heard, they're more likely to continue sharing and develop healthy emotional expression over time.



Supportive Conversations (continued)

Share Your Own Feelings

Modeling vulnerability teaches children that emotions are normal. Try saying "I felt nervous about that too" or "Sometimes I feel sad and that's okay." When adults share appropriately, children learn that big feelings aren't something to hide — they're part of being human.

Follow Up Later

One conversation is rarely enough. Circle back in a day or two with something like "I've been thinking about what you shared — how are you feeling now?" This shows children their words matter and that you genuinely care, building trust for future conversations.

Know When to Seek Help

If a child shares something concerning — thoughts of self-harm, abuse, or persistent distress — thank them for trusting you and connect them with a professional. You don't need to have all the answers. Sometimes the most supportive thing is helping them find the right person to talk to.

Remember: You don't need to fix everything. Simply being present, patient, and consistent builds the foundation for a child to feel safe and supported.





When to Seek Professional Help

Not every struggle requires professional support, but some signs suggest a child may benefit from extra help. Trust your instincts — if something feels off, it's worth exploring.

● **Emotional Signs**

Persistent sadness or irritability lasting more than two weeks, excessive worry that interferes with daily activities, sudden mood changes, or expressing feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness.

● **Behavioral Signs**

Withdrawal from friends or activities they once enjoyed, significant changes in eating or sleeping patterns, declining school performance, or frequent angry outbursts that seem out of proportion.

● **Physical Signs**

Frequent unexplained headaches or stomachaches, self-harm or talk of self-harm, regression to younger behaviors (bedwetting, thumb-sucking), or expressing a desire to disappear or not exist.

● **Social Signs**

Extreme difficulty making or keeping friends, intense fear of social situations, bullying others or being bullied persistently, or complete avoidance of age-appropriate activities.

If you notice several of these signs together, or if any single sign is severe, reaching out to a professional is a caring and proactive step.





How to Seek Professional Help

Taking the first step can feel overwhelming, but finding the right support doesn't have to be complicated. Here's a simple path forward.

1

Talk to Your Pediatrician

Start with your child's doctor. They can screen for concerns, rule out medical causes, and provide referrals to specialists. You don't need a diagnosis to ask for guidance — simply sharing what you've noticed is enough.

2

Research Local Therapists

Look for licensed child therapists (LPC, LCSW, or psychologists) who specialize in children's ages and concerns. Psychology Today's directory, your insurance provider's website, and school counselors are great starting points.

3

Prepare for the First Visit

Write down specific behaviors, how long they've lasted, and what you've already tried. Bring examples from school or home. The more details you share, the better a professional can understand your child's needs.

4

Involve Your Child

Explain therapy in age-appropriate terms: 'This is someone who helps kids with big feelings.' Let them know it's not a punishment — it's a support. Ask if they have questions and validate any nervousness they feel.

5

Be Patient with the Process

Finding the right fit may take time. It's okay to try a different therapist if the first one isn't the right match. Progress isn't always linear — celebrate small wins and stay consistent with appointments.





Practical Strategies at Home

When your child is struggling, small daily practices at home can make a big difference. Here are strategies to create calm and connection.

Create a Calm Corner

Designate a cozy space with pillows, soft lighting, and sensory tools like stress balls or coloring books. This gives your child a safe place to go when emotions feel big.

Practice Deep Breathing Together

Try 'balloon breathing' — inhale slowly through the nose, then exhale as if blowing up a balloon. Doing it together normalizes the practice and builds connection.

Establish Predictable Routines

Consistent morning and bedtime routines reduce anxiety by helping children know what to expect. Use visual schedules for younger kids to build independence.

Name and Validate Emotions

Help your child build emotional vocabulary: 'It sounds like you're feeling frustrated.' Validation doesn't mean fixing — it means they feel heard and understood.

Encourage Creative Expression

Art, music, journaling, or imaginative play give children a safe outlet for feelings they may not have words for yet. Keep supplies accessible and judgment-free.

Model Your Own Coping

Let your child see you manage stress: 'I'm feeling overwhelmed, so I'm going to take a few deep breaths.' This teaches them that coping is normal and lifelong.



Resources for Parents

You don't have to navigate this alone. These trusted American organizations offer guidance, support, and connection for families.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988

Free 24/7 support for anyone in emotional distress. Available in English and Spanish. Chat online at 988lifeline.org.

SAMHSA National Helpline

1-800-662-4357

Free, confidential, 24/7 treatment referrals and information for mental health and substance use disorders.

NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness)

nami.org | 1-800-950-6264

Education, support groups, and advocacy for families affected by mental illness. Free HelpLine Mon-Fri 10am-10pm ET.

Child Mind Institute

childmind.org

Evidence-based resources on childhood mental health, learning disorders, and parenting strategies. Free articles and guides.

Crisis Text Line

Text HOME to 741741

Free 24/7 text-based crisis support. Trained counselors respond quickly. Great for teens who prefer texting.

Reaching out is a sign of strength, not weakness.

A delicate watercolor illustration of various plants and flowers. The composition includes several branches with rounded, olive-green leaves, some with small, dark spots. Interspersed among the foliage are clusters of tiny, light pink blossoms and a few larger, more prominent flowers with soft pink petals and dark centers. The background is a light, warm cream color with subtle, larger-scale watercolor washes in shades of yellow and orange, creating a gentle, ethereal atmosphere.

"Every child deserves someone
who never gives up on them."

— Unknown

You are that someone.

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Author's Note

My name is Abigail Isaacson, and I am a student at Rutgers University studying Public Health with a minor in Psychology. My goal is to earn my master's degree and become a therapist.

I wrote this booklet during my internship at NAMI Mercer because this topic is deeply personal to me. As a child, I went undiagnosed with mental health concerns for years. I know firsthand how isolating and confusing that experience can be — both for the child and for the family.

My hope is that this resource helps parents recognize the signs early, start supportive conversations, and seek help when needed. No child should have to navigate their mental health alone, and no parent should feel lost in knowing how to support them.

If even one family finds clarity or comfort through these pages, then this booklet has served its purpose. Together, we can ensure that fewer children go undiagnosed and unsupported.

With hope and heart,

Abigail Isaacson

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