



## Noticing Mental Health Concerns for Your Child

Mental health problems can occur at any time and can affect anyone.

It is helpful to recognize signs that could indicate that your child is struggling with a mental health problem (changes in mental health that negatively impact how they are regularly feeling, acting, or thinking, at school, home, and in the community). Identifying concerns early, and providing support, goes a long way towards prevention and/or worsening of difficulties.

Here are some ways to know if your child might be experiencing a mental health concern, and how to offer help.

**Note:** While we use the term “child” throughout, we recognize that the child you are caring for may actually be a teenager or young adult.

### How would I know that my child is experiencing a mental health concern?

You may notice changes in behaviours and emotions that could be potential signs of a mental health problem. Ask yourself:

- Are these behaviours and emotions out of character for my child?
- Are they making it hard for my child to enjoy everyday life?
- Are they having a negative impact on our family life?
- Are they getting in the way of my child’s progress at school?
- Are they happening more often?
- Are they more intense?
- Are they lasting longer?



SIGNS THAT MAY INDICATE A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN:	SIGNS THAT MAY INDICATE A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM FOR OLDER CHILDREN AND TEENS:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• frequently changing mood/emotions</li> <li>• easily hurt feelings, crying, anger</li> <li>• ongoing temper tantrums, throwing things, hitting people, etc.</li> <li>• ongoing sadness and lack of interest in things they normally enjoy</li> <li>• withdrawal from friends and family</li> <li>• increased need for contact and reassurance</li> <li>• little motivation or interest in schoolwork, activities</li> <li>• difficulty concentrating</li> <li>• low frustration tolerance, irritability</li> <li>• increase in headaches, stomach aches, other aches and pains</li> <li>• decreased energy, problems with sleep or appetite changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• outbursts of anger or distress</li> <li>• frequent irritability</li> <li>• feelings of anxiety and panic</li> <li>• excessive worries and fears about the safety of family, friends, self</li> <li>• school refusal</li> <li>• use of drugs and/or alcohol</li> <li>• interest in activities from younger years</li> <li>• declining grades, low motivation to complete tasks</li> </ul> <div style="background-color: #e6e6fa; padding: 10px;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• changes in eating and sleeping*</li> <li>• withdrawal from family activities</li> <li>• withdrawal from friends</li> <li>• ongoing negative remarks about self</li> <li>• frequent talk about death and dying</li> <li>• giving away possessions</li> </ul> </div> <p>*The signs shaded in purple, if occurring collectively can sometimes be associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviour. For more support see: <a href="#">Prepare, Prevent, Respond: Suicide Prevention Guide for Parents/ Caregivers</a></p>

## How can I talk to my child about their mental health?

It can be challenging to talk with your child about your concerns for their mental health. However, when parents/ caregivers discuss their concerns, it opens the lines of communication and may help improve the situation.

- **Plan for a conversation rather than reacting in the moment.** How you approach your child about concerns you have with their mental health is important. Choose a time when you feel calm and not rushed, when your child is in a good frame of mind, and you are unlikely to be interrupted. Remember to take some time to care for yourself before you approach your child. Perhaps you might take some deep breaths or go for a walk to relax.
- **Use supportive language in your conversation.** In discussing your concerns, you can describe what you are noticing and express any worries you have (e.g., *I've noticed that you haven't been going out with friends lately, and don't seem to enjoy dance class the way you used to. How can I help? I'm here to listen even if it feels scary to talk about at first*). Allow space for your child to think before they respond, and to share their thoughts and feelings over time.
- **Use prompts gently.** Sometimes young people are hesitant to share what is going on for them, you can gently prompt with a few guesses as to what may be going on (e.g. *"I wonder if you're feeling sad about losing your friendship with Rohan"*). Be careful not to assume and be prepared to be corrected.
- **Be persistent and supportive.** If your child responds with *"nothing is wrong...leave me alone"*, stay calm and reassure them that you are there for them. Give your child some time but don't give up, try again later.



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- **Reassure your child.** If your child does acknowledge some concerns, tell them that you are glad they told you and that you are there to help. You can work on some things together (see below for ideas) and/or you can [help them find a mental health professional](#) to talk to. Reassure your child that they are not alone and that you will be there for them every step of the way.
  - **Assess risk and respond if needed.** If your child tells you anything that makes you worried about their immediate safety (e.g., thoughts of suicide), reach out for help. Do not leave your child alone if you feel that they are in danger of harming themselves.

## What can I do to help if my child is struggling with their mental health?

In non-emergency situations, there are many ways that you can provide support if your child is experiencing feelings of sadness, anger, worry etc. Here are a few ideas:

- **Listen.** Take time to listen to and validate your child's thoughts and feelings. Echo back what you are hearing to check your understanding.
- **Reduce stress.** Try to relieve pressure where you can (e.g., reduce the number of household chores, avoid talking about stressful things in front of your child).
- **Be together.** Spend 1:1 time with your child each day. Even 10-15 minutes helps, where you follow their lead and let them pick the activity that you will do together.
- **Highlight strengths.** Remind your child of ways they have overcome challenges in the past. Help them to notice and build on their strength and resiliency.
- **Get active.** If your child is experiencing a low mood, even 15-20 minutes of physical movement that raises their heart rate can help them to feel better.
- **Explore culture and community.** Help your child to explore cultural, faith and/or community activities to help them to develop their sense of identity and belonging.
- **Practice calm together.** Deep calm breathing can help your child to slow down and think more clearly. Model this for your child, and encourage them to regularly engage in practices that help them relax (e.g., stretching, mindfulness, art, listening to music, spending time outdoors, etc.).
- **Help others.** Help your child find opportunities to do something nice for others. This could be taking on a volunteer opportunity, or sending a kind note to a friend or family member. Doing something for others can help us feel better too.
- **Inspire hope.** Even if you don't know the answers, or if solutions seem a long way away, reassure your child that you will find a way through it together.

If your child does not seem to be improving with the actions you have tried, and if you are still feeling worried about them, it might be time to reach out for more help.



## How can I access professional mental health help for my child?

### At school

If your child is already connected to the school support team, you can reach out to them. If not, check with the school principal to learn about school mental health services that are available. Schools in Ontario offer assessment and brief prevention and early intervention services from social work and psychology staff.

### In the community

If more support is needed, your family physician can connect your child with mental health services. You can contact:

- [Children's Mental Health Ontario](#) to access free mental health treatment in your area, including walk-in clinics (virtual and in-person), ongoing counselling and therapy, and intensive and specialized treatment. No referrals are necessary.
- [One Stop Talk](#) to instantly connect with a therapist from anywhere in Ontario to create a plan and access to additional support when needed.
- [Youth Wellness Hubs](#) to access a range of services in several Ontario communities. Free services can be easily accessed by walk-in or appointment.



**Help is available for suicide crisis and prevention.**

**Suicide Crisis Helpline 9-8-8  
(call or text 24/7)**

There is also:

**Kids Help Phone  
1-800-668-6868 or  
text CONNECT to 686868**

**Indigenous Hope for Wellness Help Line  
1-855-242-3310 or click the link to chat**

**Black Youth Helpline  
1-833-294-8650**

## What should I do in a mental health emergency?

If you are worried about your child's safety, or the safety of those around them, it is important to seek immediate assistance. This could include calling an ambulance, local mobile crisis service (if available in your area), 9-1-1, or going to the emergency room of your local hospital.

The following would be considered mental health emergencies requiring urgent professional help:

- Your child has a suicide plan and intends to act on it right away.
- Your child has made a suicide attempt.
- Your child is threatening to hurt others and/or acting violently.
- Your child is showing signs of a drug overdose.

Supporting a child who is experiencing a mental health problem can be hard, consider reaching out for your own support. You can contact [Parent's for Children's Mental Health](#) to connect with other parents and caregivers who have been through similar experiences.

