

# Recognising and getting help for your child's mental health difficulties (3–6 years)

---

## Signs your child might need help with mental health

It's normal for children to have ups and downs that can affect the way they feel and behave. However, sometimes, children don't 'bounce back', and the difficulties they're facing can start to affect other aspects of their lives.

If you notice any of the following signs, and the signs **go on for more than a few weeks**, it's important to talk with your child and get professional help.

### Emotional and behavioural signs that your child might need help are if your child:

- has repeated tantrums or consistently behaves in a defiant or aggressive way
- seems sad or unhappy, or cries a lot
- is afraid or worries a lot
- gets very upset about being separated from you, or avoids social situations
- starts behaving in ways that she's outgrown, like sucking her thumb or wetting the bed
- has trouble paying attention, can't sit still or is restless.

### Physical signs that your child might need help are if your child:

- has trouble sleeping or eating
- says she has physical pain – for example, headaches, stomach aches, nausea or other physical pains that don't have a clear medical cause.

### Social signs that your child might need help are if your child:

- has problems getting along with other children
- doesn't want to go to social events like birthday parties.

## Talking to your child about mental health

If you're concerned about your child's mental health, encourage her to talk with you about what's on her mind, and really listen to what she's saying. Listening and showing empathy can comfort your child if something is bothering her. Here are some ideas to encourage your child to talk:

- Try telling her that you've noticed she seems sad and you want to help. She is more likely to talk openly with you about her feelings if you're accepting and don't judge or over-react to what she tells you.
- Tell her that it's not unusual for children to feel worried, stressed or sad at times.

- Tell her that opening up about personal thoughts and feelings can be scary, but talking about a problem with an adult she trusts can help make feelings clearer.
- Emphasise that she isn't alone. You'll be there whenever she wants to talk.

### **Getting help for your child's mental health difficulties**

If your child is having mental health difficulties, it's important that she receives professional help as soon as possible.

There are various professional support options, including:

- your child's teacher at preschool or school, or a school counsellor
- your general practitioner or family physician
- your paediatrician
- a psychologist who is trained to work with children and families
- a social worker
- social services (such as Family Service Centres)

Supporting your child through mental health difficulties can be hard. It's important to look after yourself too.

### **Childhood mental health problems**

If your child's mental health problems are interfering significantly with her life, a qualified professional might diagnose a mental health disorder – for example, depression, anxiety, or a condition like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or oppositional defiant disorder.

It's important to remember that poor mental health is no one's fault, and no one is to blame. With the right care, children with mental health problems can grow up healthy and well.