

Supporting parents and families: the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people





Our children's mental health

In Australia we are fortunate that most of our children and young people enjoy good health. However, mental health problems are not uncommon in people under the age of 25 years. Some of these problems may be relatively mild and short-lived and others may cause considerable distress to children, young people and their families over a longer period of time.

Children and young people may be affected by depression and anxiety, challenging and disruptive behaviours, eating disorders, psychosis and self-harming behaviour. They may also have difficulty adjusting to an illness or loss in the family.

Mental health problems are manageable. You can assist your child or young family member to live a happy, fulfilling life by encouraging them to talk about and work through these problems.

This brochure will help you to become aware of the warning signs, the importance of early help seeking and the ways you can help support your child.

What can parents and families do?

Parenting and being part of a family are very important to the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

You may not realise it, but you are already protecting your children's mental health and wellbeing just by:

- showing your affection, interest and care for your children's wellbeing
- encouraging your children to talk about their feelings and to work out problems even when it is difficult
- comforting your children when they are distressed or anxious
- spending time with your children, working on projects and taking part in activities together
- being aware of your children's needs and differences at different stages of development
- providing consistent care and avoiding erratic or harsh discipline
- spending time individually with each of your children, and
- trying not to involve your children in your arguments and seeking help early if you are not able to resolve conflicts between family members.

Helping children and young people who have an emotional or mental health problem starts with listening. Acceptance and belonging are very important. Encourage your children to talk to someone they trust and be ready to listen yourself, but do not force them to talk. Praise and notice their achievements, especially small ones, and avoid criticising and pointing out shortcomings. Try to work out when your children need space and when they would benefit from company, and do things with them that they enjoy. Don't forget to care for yourself and ask for help when you need it.

If a young person is receiving professional help for an emotional or mental health problem you can still play a critical role in their recovery. To help a young person at such a time, let them know you care about their wellbeing and are there to support them.

Create a calm atmosphere at home and reduce family conflict, provide healthy food, encourage your children to do things they enjoy and remove possible means of self-harm.

Some young people will refuse all help or will not acknowledge they have a problem. If so, you should seek advice and assistance on your own. If the situation seems serious, seek help promptly. This could mean breaking a confidence but it is sometimes necessary.

When to get help

Parents and other family members are often the first to notice changes but may find it difficult to talk about them. They may also be embarrassed about seeking help or not know where to go for help. Instead they may decide to wait, hoping that problems will sort themselves out. But for most mental health problems, seeking early help has the best results. If you are unsure about your child's health, it is best to seek professional advice.

As a first step, you may prefer to talk to someone you trust such as your general practitioner, someone in your local community health centre, your child's teacher, school counsellor, or your religious adviser. Effective help for children and teenagers generally involves short-term counselling or therapies. These are usually based in the local community with as little disruption to school and family life as possible.

What to look for

There is no single cause of mental health problems, but some things that may contribute include loss and grief, discrimination, alienation from school, violence, abuse and family difficulties.

The following are some signs of mental health problems in children and young people. If they last more than a few weeks, it may be time to seek professional help.

- Inability to get along with other children
- Marked fall in school work
- Marked weight gain or loss
- Changes in usual sleeping or eating patterns
- Fearfulness
- Lack of energy or motivation
- Irritability
- Restlessness, fidgeting and trouble concentrating
- Excessive disobedience or aggression
- Crying a lot
- Spending less time with or avoiding their friends
- Feeling hopeless or worthless
- Reluctance to go to school or take part in normal activities
- Overuse of alcohol and other drugs

If children or young people have persistent thoughts about hurting themselves or wanting to die, they need urgent professional help.

Where to go for help

In an emergency contact:

- Emergency services - phone 000
- your general practitioner, or
- your local hospital emergency department.

24-hour telephone services include:

Lifeline

Phone: 13 11 14 (for the cost of a local call)

Kids Help Line

Phone: 1800 55 1800 (free call)

Other places to go to for help include:

- your general practitioner
- your child's school counsellor
- the local community health centre, and
- the local mental health service.

Remember your State or Territory Health Department can also help with information on the services available in your area.

Additional copies of this brochure are available from the Health Priorities and Suicide Prevention Branch, Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing by calling 1800 066 247 or faxing 1800 634 400. Website: www.mentalhealth.gov.au.

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