



Noticing Mental Health Concerns for Your Child

Individuals and families have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in unique and varied ways. For some, significant changes to daily routines, a sense of isolation and loss, and various other factors may have led to new or increased mental health concerns. Emotional and behavioural difficulties can arise at any time, and can affect anyone.

As families prepare for the return to school, it is important to consider signs that could indicate that your child is struggling with an emerging or escalating mental health problem. Identifying problems early, and providing caring support, goes a long way towards prevention and/or worsening of difficulties.

You know your child best, and can notice changes in their behaviours or emotions. Right now, however, it can be difficult to know whether things you observe are just normal ups and downs associated with the pandemic, part of return to school jitters, or related to an emerging mental health concern.

Here are some ways to consider whether your child might be experiencing a mental health problem, and offer help. While we use the term “child” throughout, we recognize that your child may actually be a teenager or young adult. No matter their age, they are still your child.

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

Parents and caring adults 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 having a negative impact on my child’s ability 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 these concerning behaviours happening more often?
- Are they more intense?
- Are they lasting longer?

Disclaimer: The info sheet is not a substitute for consultation with a regulated health professional. If you are concerned about your child, consult your physician or seek emergency services.



| Signs that may indicate a mental health concern for younger children: | Signs that may indicate a mental health concern for older children and teens: |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • frequently changing mood/emotions • easily hurt feelings, crying, anger • ongoing temper tantrums, throwing things, hitting people, etc. • ongoing sadness and lack of interest in things they normally enjoy • withdrawal from friends and family • increased need for contact and reassurance • little motivation or interest in schoolwork, activities • difficulty concentrating • low frustration tolerance, irritability • increase in headaches, stomach aches, other aches and pains • decreased energy, problems with sleep or appetite changes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • outbursts of anger or distress • frequent irritability • feelings of anxiety and panic • excessive worries and fears about the safety of family, friends, self • increased defiance and opposition • school refusal • use of drugs and/or alcohol • withdrawal from family activities • withdrawal from friends • ongoing negative remarks about self • interest in activities from younger years • declining grades, low motivation to complete tasks • changes in eating and sleeping • frequent talk about death and dying • giving away possessions |

How can I get ready to approach my child if I am concerned?

It can be challenging to talk with your child about mental health problems. However, research tells us that when parents discuss their concerns with them, it opens up the lines of communication and may help improve the situation.

Remember to take the time and prepare yourself for a calm discussion. You may feel anxious about what you are noticing in your child. So, it is a good idea to take a moment to care for your own wellness before you approach your child about this. Perhaps you might take some deep breaths or go for a walk to relax. Or settle your thoughts in a way that works for you (e.g. drawing your attention gently to one thing you see, one thing you hear, and one thing you feel).

How can I talk to my child about mental health?

- Find a quiet time when you are unlikely to have interruptions to begin the conversation.
- Reassure your child that they can tell you anything and you will not get angry with them (even if you get scared).
- Start the conversation by describing changes you have noticed in their mood, behaviour, reactions (e.g. “I have noticed that you seem to be crying more”). If you have had conversations with your child’s teacher about concerns, include comments from the teacher’s observations.

You may wish to do some reading about the signs you are noticing. Look for credible evidence-based information. Here are some websites that you may wish to visit:

CMHO Family Care Centre

<https://cmho.org/familycarecentre/>

CMHA-Ontario

<https://ontario.cmha.ca/mental-health/child-and-youth-mental-health/>

About Kids Health Mental Health Resource Hub

<https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/mentalhealth>

Anxiety Canada

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/>

Wellness Together Canada

<https://ca.portal.gs/>

Mental Health Commission of Canada

<https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English>

Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health

<https://www.cymh.ca/en/projects/covid-19.aspx#English-resources>

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- Share that you wonder about how your child might be feeling, what they might be thinking, what they might be worried about, etc. (e.g. “I wonder if you’re feeling sad about losing your friendship with Rohan.”).
- Allow your child time to reflect before they answer.
- Stay calm and don’t abandon the conversation if your child responds with “nothing is wrong...leave me alone”. this happens, reassure your child that you are there for them. Give your child some time and then try again.
- 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/ 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.
- If your child tells you anything that makes you worried about their immediate safety (e.g. thoughts of suicide), reach out for assistance. Do not leave your child alone if you feel that they are in imminent danger of harming themselves.

Help is available for suicide crisis and prevention.

Call 9-1-1 or get support from a local crisis centre.

Kids Help Phone

(1-800-668-6868), the First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line (1-855-242-3310), and the Canada Suicide Prevention Service (1-833-456-4566) all offer 24/7 support.

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

In non-urgent situations, there are many ways that parents can provide support when their child is experiencing feelings of sadness, anger, worry etc. Here are a few ideas:

- Stay calm. Take care of yourself and your own wellness so you can be in a good place to help your child.
- Try to take pressure off where you can. For example, reduce the number of chores they take on, avoid talking about things causing you stress, try not to expose them to worrisome news in the media.
- Listen to your child as they describe their thoughts and emotions. Just listening, and reflecting back what you hear, goes a long way to helping your child to feel heard and supported. Try not to judge, jump in with quick solutions, or minimize the concern.
- 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.
- Help your child to look for positives and things to be grateful for, even in tough situations. Sometimes when worries overwhelm us, we focus on all that is wrong and forget to remember all the good things, and helpers, that can get us through. You can offer some suggestions and even make a list to post somewhere as a reminder.
- Sometimes when people feel anxious or upset, deep calming breathing can help. It can help us to slow down and think more clearly.
- If your child is experiencing a low mood, one of the best things they can do is to get active. Even 15-20 minutes of physical movement that raises their heart rate can help them to feel better. They can try walking, playing ball, dancing, exercising, or something else they might enjoy. It might be hard to get them moving at first, but once they see that it makes them feel better, it will get easier to get started next time.

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- If you and your child can get outside and into nature of any kind, it can lift their spirits (and yours). Pay attention to the sounds, smells, sights, even if all you can do is take a moment to watch or listen to the birds or trees outside of your window. If you are able to get outdoors, help your child to notice the feel of the sun, the breeze, the rain and the beauty of the earth.
 - If you are able, try to spend one-on-one time with your child each day, even 10-15 minutes, where you are there to just be with them. Follow their lead, and let them pick the activity that you will do together.
 - Consider helping your child to 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 to feel better too.
 - Older children and teenagers might want to check out the [COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#) for other ways to manage stress.

When should I reach out for additional help?

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

Certainly, if your child is engaging in self-harm behavior (e.g. cutting or burning themselves, taking risky actions or escalating substance misuse) or if you learn that they are having thoughts of suicide, seek immediate assistance.

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.

In the community – Contact [Children's Mental Health Ontario](#) to access free, mental health treatment in your area, including walk-in clinics (virtual and in-person), ongoing counseling and therapy, and intensive and specialized treatment. No referrals are necessary.

