



Is she just sensitive... or
showing a sign of needing help?

See the signs. Heal the hurt.



Understanding Children's Mental Wellbeing: A Guide for Parents

See the Signs. Heal the Hurt.

Half of all mental health conditions emerge before age 14, yet signs of a struggling child often go unnoticed. Our nationwide survey of 1600 Australian parents found that 1 in 3 don't feel they can confidently recognise signs of poor mental health in their child. If parents miss the signs, their wider network may also. Moreover, if children feel unheard or if they're unsure about talking to their parents, these challenges could carry into their adult years, making them harder to address. While some behaviours are just part of growing up, some tend to signify an underlying issue. In those cases, recognising signs and seeking help in time can really make a difference. We've created this resource guide to help you see the signs that your child might need help and to know where to go from here.

What is mental health?

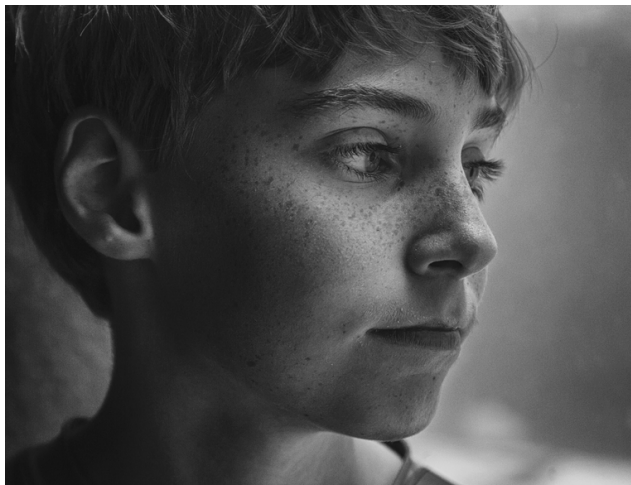
Mental health is all about how we feel and think, and how we act. It's about being able to handle tough situations, manage our feelings, and deal with different parts of life in a strong and flexible way.

How do I know if my child is struggling with their mental health or if it's typical childhood behaviour?

It can sometimes be challenging to distinguish between typical childhood behaviours and signs of underlying mental health concerns. While children naturally go through various emotional and behavioural changes as they grow, the 12 indicators listed below are examples that suggest there may be a need for closer attention:

Indicators of potential mental health struggles

- 1. Duration and intensity of adverse emotions:** Prolonged sadness or hopelessness lasting weeks.
- 2. Functional Impairment:** Consistent academic decline and difficulty completing tasks.
- 3. Sudden Changes:** Abrupt shifts like aggression or withdrawal after events may suggest emotional struggles, as do altered patterns in eating or sleeping.
- 4. Isolation and Withdrawal:** Avoiding social interactions, especially if this was rarely the case previously.
- 5. Extreme Reactions:** Overreacting to minor issues or displaying a response that isn't proportionate to the situation.
- 6. Regression:** Reverting to outgrown behaviors e.g: bedwetting, thumb-sucking, baby talk.
- 7. Persistent Fear or Worry:** Ongoing intense fears or excessive reassurance-seeking.
- 8. Tics or Repetitive Behaviours:** Observed repetitive physical actions such as throat-clearing and hand-washing rituals or repeatedly checking doors and switches.
- 9. School Refusal:** Strong resistance or avoidance of school attendance accompanied by distress.
- 10. Self-Harm or Suicidal Thoughts:** Self-harming or expressing thoughts of self-harm or suicide.
- 11. Excessive Concern About Appearance:** Obsession with appearance and compulsive grooming.
- 12. Perfectionism:** Striving for flawlessness, intense fear of mistakes or extreme reactions to outcomes.



Possible causes of mental health issues

Several factors can contribute to mental health challenges in children. Genetics may play a role, with some conditions having a hereditary component. Environmental factors, such as exposure to trauma, toxic stress, family conflicts, or significant life changes, can trigger emotional responses. Neurodevelopmental conditions, like Attention-deficit/Hyperactivity or Autism Spectrum Disorders, can also influence a child's mental well-being. Additionally, a history of bullying, social isolation, or academic pressures can impact a child's emotional equilibrium.

Common mental health diagnoses in children: Understanding these conditions can provide insight into your child's experiences.

- **Anxiety disorders:** Including Generalised Anxiety Disorder and Social Anxiety Disorder which often manifest as excessive worry, fear or avoidance of certain situations.
- **Attention-deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder:** ADHD involves attention challenges, impulsivity, and hyperactivity affecting academics and social life. Emotional regulation issues are common, leading to intense and disproportionate reactions, struggles with anger management and difficulty adapting emotions.
- **Eating disorders:** These include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder, which usually emerge during adolescence and are marked by abnormal eating patterns, excessive exercise and distorted body image.
- **Depression and other mood disorders:** These are associated with persistent feelings of sadness, irritability, and changes in sleep and appetite. Bipolar and borderline personality disorders also fall into the mood disorder category although they are rare in children and teens.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):** This can result from exposure to traumatic events, leading to distressing memories, nightmares, and heightened anxiety. Children who have experienced bullying are also vulnerable to developing PTSD.
- **Schizophrenia:** While schizophrenia is less common in children, its early signs may include hallucinations, delusions, and disorganised thinking.

How do healthcare professionals diagnose mental health conditions in children?

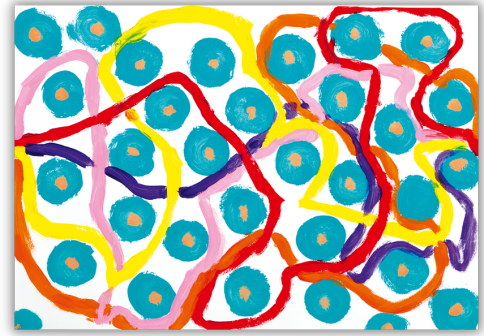
Diagnosing and treating mental health conditions in children involves assessing signs and symptoms, and their impact on daily life. A healthcare professional will evaluate your child and consider:

- Parent and child interviews
- Behavioural observations
- Family history of mental health issues
- Medical history and physical examination
- Developmental milestones and age-appropriate behaviours
- Emotional and social functioning
- Presence of any traumatic experiences
- Duration and intensity of symptoms
- Academic and school functioning
- Interaction with peers and social relationships
- Previous treatments or interventions
- Cultural and contextual factors
- Co-occurring medical conditions or medications
- Standardised assessment tools such as psychological questionnaires and surveys
- Collaboration with other professionals (educators, therapists etc.)
- Exclusion of other medical conditions that may mimic mental health symptoms

What should I do next?

If your child or another child you know needs help right now, call these helplines that are open 24/7:

- Kids Helpline: 1800 551 800
- Youth Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636
- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- NSW Mental Health Line: 1800 011 511
- 13 YARN (Indigenous led crisis support): 13 92 76



The Transcultural Mental Health Line 1800 648 911 is a telephone service available to support people who live in NSW and who are from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The Line operates Monday to Friday between 9:00 am and 4:30 pm.

The Sydney Children's Hospital Network Mental Health and Intellectual Disability Hub is a service that helps children and teens under 18 years old with intellectual or developmental disability.

Emergencies

If someone has attempted, or is at immediate risk of attempting to harm themselves or someone else, call Triple Zero (000) immediately. Alternatively, go to a hospital emergency department, where they may refer you to a mental health service.

Mental health programs

NSW Health provides a range of mental health services and programs for children, teens and their families who need mental health help and support. For Information about the programs and how to access them, please visit: [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services \(CAMHS\)](#).

Alternatively, speak to your GP about your concerns. They may put your child onto a Mental Health Treatment Plan which identifies what type of health care your child may need. This plan also gives you access - subsidised by Medicare - to certain psychologists, occupational therapists and social workers.

What else can I do to support my child?

- **Open Dialogue:** Create a safe space for your child to share their feelings. Encourage conversations that validate their emotions.
- **Home Environment:** Foster a stable, nurturing home. Routines, balanced meals, family time, and proper sleep aid emotional resilience.
- **Peer Connections:** Support your child's social interactions. Peer connections can provide vital emotional support.
- **Coping Strategies:** Teach healthy ways to cope. Encourage relaxation, mindfulness, and emotional and creative expression.
- **Research:** If you've received a diagnosis from a mental health professional, learn as much as you can about that specific condition.
- **School Support:** Educators will have taught numerous students with similar issues throughout their career and will have plans & resources they can access to support your child.
- **Praise Strengths:** As children get older and begin comparing themselves to their peers, they will start to notice differences. Many children worry that there's something inherently wrong with them. Remind your child that they're not alone and point out their strengths and abilities.
- **Parenting Programs:** Accredited programs that are especially tailored for parents of children with mental health concerns can be helpful. [Contact us](#) for recommendations.
- **Self Care:** Navigating your child's mental health can be overwhelming. Prioritise your own wellbeing and don't hesitate to seek support. [Parentline](#) (1300 1300 52) counsellors provide confidential and non-judgmental advice to parents and carers.



I've received a diagnosis for my child. Now what?

Receiving a mental health diagnosis for your child is an important step towards understanding and addressing their needs. It signifies that professionals have identified specific challenges your child may be facing.

The next steps involve developing a tailored treatment plan. This plan may include various therapeutic approaches, such as psychotherapy, counselling, or expressive therapy, depending on their age and needs.

Common treatment options for children with mental health conditions encompass:

Psychotherapy/Counselling: This approach utilises techniques like talking therapy or cognitive behaviour therapy conducted by mental health experts, such as psychologists. Younger children may incorporate drawing or games during discussions, with Expressive Therapy like KidsXpress' creative process being a recommended approach. Treatment duration varies based on factors like diagnosis, severity, response, and therapeutic choice, along with the child's age, development, and underlying factors. Group therapy may also be an option, providing a shared understanding and learning environment among peers, guided by trained professionals.

Family Therapy: Facilitated by a mental health professional like a psychologist, this method employs strategies such as talking therapy for both individuals and entire families.

Medication: A healthcare provider or mental health expert may recommend medications like stimulants, antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs, or mood stabilisers as part of your child's treatment. They will discuss potential risks, side effects, and benefits of using medications before proceeding.

With timely and effective support, children can overcome mental health challenges and build resilience. Early action is key for long-term well-being, and your guidance as parents is crucial for their journey.

KidsXpress: Creating a lifetime of change

Since 2005, KidsXpress has been a pioneer in child mental health, bringing Expressive Therapies to kids across NSW. Over 4000 children have benefited from our support at our Macquarie Park centre and in primary schools around the state, creating a lasting impact on their well-being. With half of mental health issues emerging before age 14, our focus on the primary school years is crucial, as intervening early can shape a brighter future. We hope this guide has been beneficial in helping you to recognise the signs that your child needs help and in knowing what to do next. The under-12 yrs age group has the lowest access to mental health services in Australia and it's our hope to rectify this. Early intervention is the key, and it all starts with seeing the signs.

For more information about what we do please don't hesitate to reach out via email on info@kidsxpress.org.au or by phone on 02 9380 9220.

Follow our Instagram page for daily doses of parenting advice by mental health professionals: [@kidsxpressmentalhealth](https://www.instagram.com/kidsxpressmentalhealth)

