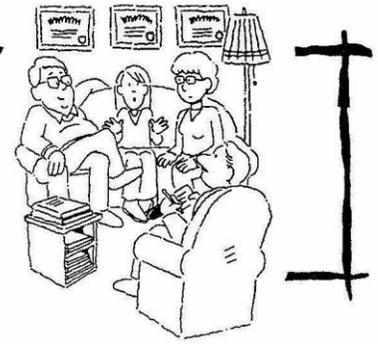


Your Child's Mental Health:

When to Seek Help and Where to Get Help



Have you noticed a recent change in your child's behavior? Is he having trouble getting along with friends? Is he failing school? Is his new behavior affecting your family?

Your pediatrician may suggest that your child see a mental health or behavioral specialist. In many cases, a child psychiatrist, psychologist, clinical social worker, counselor, or pediatric developmental and behavioral specialist can help your child.

In the United States, 1 in 10 children and teens has serious emotional and behavioral problems. Many others have symptoms that may lead to problems that are more serious if not treated.

Read more to learn about getting help, risk factors, mental health professionals, insurance and payment issues, ways to talk with your child, and additional resources. The result can be less stress and greater happiness for you, your child, and your family.

When to seek help

Let your pediatrician know if your child has one or more of the following signs or symptoms:

- Poor or delayed language development
- Problems listening or behaving
- Excessive activity (hyperactivity)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty with friends and other children
- Chronic sadness, irritability, or grumpiness
- Difficulty sleeping or excessive sleeping
- Eating disorder (eating too much or too little)
- Frequent worrying and fearfulness
- Extreme shyness
- Reluctance to attend school
- Suicidal thoughts
- Substance abuse
- Aggressive and/or risky behavior
- Sudden change in behavior or school performance

Risk factors

Almost always, no one is to blame for a child's mental health difficulties. However, certain situations may increase a child's risk for emotional problems. These include

- Family stress, such as a move, job loss, or birth of a baby
- Chronic sickness or medical condition in the child or another family member
- Grief and loss caused by death, parental separation, or divorce
- Remarriage and step parenting
- Exposure to violence, either within or outside the family
- Foster care

- Frustration with schoolwork
- Peer pressures

Where to get help

Successful treatment for your child depends on appropriate health care, as well as the involvement and support of the entire family.

There are many types of professionals trained to help children and their families with emotional and behavioral problems. Your pediatrician can help you select the best type of care for your child. With your permission, your pediatrician can also coordinate care to make sure that the needs of your child and family are met, especially when a mental health professional is involved in treatment.

Mental health professionals include the following (license and practice requirements may differ from state to state):

- **Child and adolescent psychiatrists.** Licensed physicians trained in psychiatry. These doctors have additional special training in treating children, teens, and families. They can evaluate your child, prescribe medicine if necessary, and provide a full range of treatments for emotional and behavioral problems, as well as psychiatric disorders.
- **Child and adolescent clinical psychologists.** Licensed doctoral (PhD)-level specialists trained to diagnose and treat children and teens with learning, behavioral, and emotional difficulties. These specialists have advanced training and experience in treating depression, anxiety, conduct disorders, and complications related to medical illnesses or treatment.
- **Master's-level psychologists or mental health counselors.** Master's-level specialists who can administer psychological tests. They can also provide individual and family counseling. In some states, these specialists may be independently licensed to practice and are known as "psychologists." In other states, they may practice only under the supervision of a doctoral-level licensed psychologist or psychiatrist.
- **School psychologists.** Specialists with a doctoral or master's degree who work with children at school. School psychologists evaluate and counsel children with learning, emotional, and behavioral problems.
- **Licensed clinical social workers.** Master's- or doctoral-trained mental health professionals who specialize in diagnosis and treatment of behavioral and emotional problems. Social workers also provide counseling to children and families. They help families deal with physical, mental, or emotional illness and disability, and improve their problem-solving and coping skills.
- **Developmental-behavioral pediatricians.** Pediatricians trained to help children with developmental, learning, and behavioral disorders, as well as emotional and physical growth. They can also help children and families manage problems that involve childhood illness or disability. They can prescribe medicine, if needed, and typically work with other doctors and counselors to meet families' needs.

Talking to your child about therapy

Your child may not want to see another doctor or counselor, or understand why. She may feel fearful, embarrassed, or defensive about her problems ("It's not my fault!" "I'm not crazy, am I?").

It's important to talk with your child before her first visit to a new doctor or counselor. If your pediatrician has made the referral, it's natural for this discussion to occur in the doctor's office with your child. If not, you should talk about it at home. How much information your child needs and when you share it will depend on her age and maturity. A younger child will need only a little information, 1 to 2 days before the first appointment, to reduce "worry time."

Your teen may need more information, either at home or in the pediatrician's office. Let her know that you are aware of her struggles. Also, tell her that counseling will make her life easier. For instance, she'll get along better with friends and classmates and experience less stress, fear, and other symptoms. Make sure she knows that what she tells her doctor, or counselor is private and will remain confidential.

It's important that your child not feel that the problem is hers alone or her fault. Let her know that the entire family will support her and help her get well. Sometimes counseling can and should begin with the entire family, not the child alone. This may be especially helpful if your child is resistant. In any case, it's usually best to talk about the appointment as something that will happen; if you ask if she would "like to go," she may feel she has the chance to refuse.

Tell your child that seeking help is a great sign of strength—it says, "I deserve to feel better." Let her know that mental health professionals don't solve problems; instead they build on a person's strengths, empowering them to manage their own problems

- **Child neurologists.** Licensed physicians with specialized training in diagnosing and treating children with problems of the nervous system. These specialists assist in determining whether a child has a brain condition that affects learning and behavior and in choosing treatment for this type of condition. Child neurologists can prescribe medicine and are very helpful when a child needs medicine for both a brain condition and a behavioral problem.
- **Psychopharmacologists.** Physicians or nurses with specialized training in the prescription of psychotropic medicine for the treatment of children with mental illness or severe behavioral problems. They may be child psychiatrists, child neurologists, pediatricians, or nurse clinicians with a special interest in children with severe behavioral problems.
- **Other mental health professionals.** Counselors, nurses with specialized training, and family therapists who have expertise in helping children and teens with mental health problems. They can also help families provide support and care for their children.
- **Community mental health resources.** Mental health professionals and services offered through health departments, public mental health programs, religious organizations, non-profit counseling agencies, colleges, and medical centers.
- **Family organizations and support groups.** Local and national organizations offering a range of resources including brochures, books, or information posted on the Internet; public speakers and conferences; and support and advocacy groups.

Insurance and payment issues

It's important that you know exactly how much your insurance company will pay. Your insurance package may provide limited coverage for mental health services. It may help to ask your insurance company the following questions:

- Does my pediatrician need to formally recommend that my child see a mental health professional before the cost of the visit is covered? Or do I need approval through a separate process specifically for mental health services?
- Do I have to choose a doctor or counselor from an approved list? Does the list include professionals with expertise in children and their families?
- Are certain disorders excluded from coverage?
- Is there a lifetime or annual limit for mental health coverage? If so, what is it?
- Exactly how much of the cost of mental health services will I need to pay?

More resources for you and your child

Your pediatrician may direct you to other resources if you don't have health insurance, if your health care plan doesn't cover mental health care, or if your health care plan doesn't provide enough mental health coverage to meet your family's needs.

In some communities, mental health centers or family service agencies charge based on what you are able to pay. Medicaid or the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)—publicly funded programs to cover the medical costs of low-income children—also covers some mental health costs. In some states and for some diagnoses, these or other funds may be available, even if you have private insurance, for mental health services not covered by your health insurance.

If you have trouble obtaining or filling out a Medicaid or SCHIP application, ask your pediatrician's office for help. For more information about Medicaid or SCHIP contact the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services at 877/267-2323 or www.cms.hhs.gov.

Self-help organizations may also offer counseling and support to children and their families. These organizations operate drop-in centers and sponsor gatherings for group discussions on specific topics, such as substance abuse or attention and learning problems. Your child's school may have guidance counselors and other professionals with training in behavioral health assessment and treatment. Clergy can also provide help. It's important to talk about each of these options with your pediatrician.

Privacy issues

The law protects your privacy related to mental health but allows your doctor to share information with other professionals involved in your child's and family's treatment.

Tips on dealing with insurance companies

When speaking with or writing to an insurance company, keep these 5 points in mind

1. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
2. Keep good communication records, including with whom you spoke and on what day and time.
3. Be polite.
4. Be patient.
5. Be persistent

Remember

Parents and pediatricians play an important role in a child's mental health care.

It's common for parents and families to feel as if their child's problems are their fault. Many people are also afraid or embarrassed about a child's need for mental health treatment. While these feelings are normal, it's important that you not blame yourself for your child's problems. Your pediatrician, along with one or more mental health professionals, can help you better understand your child's behavior. They can guide you and other members of your family to help in the healing process.

If you are separated or divorced from your child's other parent, it's important to establish a plan for including the other parent in your child's assessment and treatment. Your pediatrician will help you decide whether scheduling visits together or separately, sharing reports, or making phone calls can best do this.

It's very helpful for you to continue to talk with your pediatrician and with the doctor or mental health professional who is working with your child.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

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In some cases, you will need to sign special forms authorizing the release of information. This may include medical, family, school, and social history records. You can decide whether to give out this information.

At a certain age (which varies by state), your child may legally consent to or refuse care. Your pediatrician can help explain these laws and how they affect your child and your family.

Please note: Listing of resources does not imply an endorsement by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The AAP is not responsible for the content of the resources mentioned in this brochure. Phone numbers and Web site addresses are as current as possible, but may change at any time.

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