

FOCUS

on Early Childhood Mental Health



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Depression in Preschoolers

Surely preschoolers can't be depressed? What do they have to be depressed about? Such thinking has been common until recently when health care professionals are beginning to recognize that depression is not limited to teenagers and adults, but also affects children including very young children. Since as many as two percent of preschool children are depressed enough to need treatment, it's important to consider it as a possible contributor to behavior or attention problems. Risk factors include a family history of depression, significant loss, like the death or prolonged absence of a caregiver, or other traumatic incident.

Symptoms indicating possible depression:

- Prolonged sadness and irritability; low energy and self-esteem
- Preoccupation with death or death/suicide themes in play
- Eating and sleeping problems
- Lack of interest in toys and activities and general "joylessness"
- Withdrawal from people and activities; dulled look (lack of affect or emotion)
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches

How to help:

- Take it seriously when the symptoms are frequent and/or last longer than two weeks
- Seek professional help as soon as possible
- Learn more about childhood depression
- Help the child feel protected and loved and try to spend more time with him or her
- Indicate that you understand he or she is feeling sad

We don't know why depression seems to be affecting younger children, and some people may believe that the normal ups and downs of childhood are mistakenly being labeled as "depression." Depression in older children and teenagers is very real, however, and we might be able to prevent more serious major depression if we can recognize and treat it earlier in life.

Resources:

Touchpoints: Birth to Three, by T. Berry Brazelton, pp. 249-252

Handbook of Infant Mental Health, by Charles Zeanah, pp. 408-420

"Can Preschoolers Be Depressed?" by Pamela Paul, *New York Times*, August 25, 2010

"Is Your Preschooler Having Emotional Problems?" <http://parenting.kaboose.com/age-and-stage/preschooler/is-your-preschooler-depressed.html>