

# Learning Links Fact Sheet

## Depression in Children



### What is Depression?

Depression is a mood disorder characterised by persistent feelings of sadness, low mood and loss of interest or pleasure. Children with depression may present with emotional, physical and behavioural changes that interfere with their ability to participate in school, make friends and perform daily tasks.

### Signs of Depression in Children

Children and young people can have difficulty expressing complex emotions, which can make recognising your child's symptoms of depression difficult. Challenging emotional and behavioural changes that persist for several weeks may indicate that your child is experiencing depression. Signs include:

#### Psychological Symptoms:

- Feel sad most of the time
- Feeling hopeless or worthless
- Negative self-talk and low self-esteem

#### Physical symptoms:

- Significant fatigue, loss of energy and motivation
- Changes in appetite such as under or overeating
- Disturbed sleep patterns such as under or oversleeping
- Complaints of stomach pains, headaches or muscle pains
- Regression in toileting, such as bed wetting

#### Behavioural symptoms:

- Lack of interest or pleasure in activities they usually enjoy
- Avoidance of social situations
- Changes in performance at school
- Separation anxiety or increased clinginess to a parent
- Poor concentration
- More easily agitated or upset
- Increased physical behaviours like hitting, kicking and biting
- Tearful

## What Causes Depression in Children?

There are many factors that can cause children and adolescents to develop depression. Risk factors for depressive disorders include:

- **Genetic factors** – children with a family history of mental illness have a greater risk of developing depression.
- **Biological factors** – living with chronic disease, physical illness, disability or conditions such as ADHD and Autism may increase risk of depression
- **Social factors** – children who experience bullying or social disadvantage such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children may have an increased risk of depression.
- **Stressful or traumatic events** – experiencing the loss of a loved one, natural disasters, neglect, physical abuse or sexual abuse increases the risk of depression.

## How is Depression Diagnosed?

A mental health professional such as a GP, psychologist or psychiatrist can diagnose depression using criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). A comprehensive assessment usually involves a questionnaire that covers:

- family history and background
- The child's sleeping and eating patterns
- Changes in the child's behaviour
- Stressful or traumatic experiences
- Self-harm and suicide risk

## Support for Children with Depression

Depression is a serious mental health condition that requires a comprehensive, timely and effective approach to intervention. The most common support options include:

- **Counselling:** A child psychologist can use different approaches such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or interpersonal therapy to reframe negative thoughts, problem-solve and cope with symptoms.
- **Family therapy:** A child psychologist can also work with parents and other family members to develop strategies to support the child and provide support in building positive relationships.
- **Lifestyle changes:** Making changes to diet, exercise and sleep can help children cope the symptoms of depression.



- **Medication:** For children with severe depressive disorders, antidepressant medication may be recommended to treat depression effectively. These medications can have significant side effects so must be prescribed and managed by a medical professional.

## How Learning Links Can Help

Learning Links has more than 50 years of experience supporting children's wellbeing. We offer a range of services and resources to support children with depression.

- **Assessments for depression:** gain a better understanding of complex and severe depressive symptoms and investigate other possible causes.
- **Counselling for depression:** help your child to understand their feelings and develop strategies to manage depression.
- **Family counselling for depression:** parents and carers can get support to better understand their child's support needs and develop strategies for all family members to cope.

## Enquire about our services

Call our friendly Intake team on **1300 003 900** or submit an online enquiry.

[www.learninglinks.org.au/  
service-enquiry](http://www.learninglinks.org.au/service-enquiry)