

Helping Kids Be Healthy Inside and Out

What parents should know

by Rona Maynard

When your child wakes up feeling out of sorts, you trust yourself to know the difference between a bad day and the latest bug sweeping the school.

You're drawing on a lifetime of learning from parents, relatives, friends and the media, plus intimate knowledge of your child.

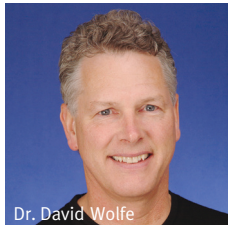
It's not so easy for parents to distinguish a possible mental illness from the normal ups and downs of growing up. Suppose your child has trouble making friends. Is he just shy or could he be suffering from anxiety, the most commonly diagnosed mental illness in young people?

Chances are your memory bank isn't much help. Mom likely never knew that kids can suffer from a mental illness. The subject rarely comes up when parents gather at the playground. Centuries of ignorance and stigma create an uneasy silence that nobody wants to break. So if you're worried, you may feel as if no one else understands.

Nearly one in five Canadian children and adolescents will suffer from a mental disorder serious enough to hold them back emotionally, socially or academically¹. Early intervention can head off needless pain and equip a young person with coping skills that last for a lifetime. But fewer than 10 per cent of kids who need specialized mental health treatment are actually getting it.

A child in trouble must have an advocate: you

As with any physical illness, you have parental instinct on your side. Says Dr. David Wolfe, RBC Chair of Children's Mental Health Advisory Panel at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and chair of the RBC Children's Mental Health Project, "You know your kid. If he's been a fairly happy kid and is suddenly struggling at school and losing friendships, you have to ask if something's going on."



Dr. David Wolfe



Here's how to keep a sense of purpose and perspective while helping your child get back on track.

- **Assess the situation** Is your child's problem internal, such as depression, or environmental, such as bullying? A child who seems cheerful at home but panics at the thought of school is more likely to be facing an environmental problem.
- **Talk to your child** Be specific. Kids clam up at questions like "Is everything okay?" You might ask, "Is anyone hurting you? It's okay to tell me. I'm here to help you." Don't rush this conversation. A child who shares a confidence and doesn't feel heard may not raise the issue again.
- **Get the big picture** Talk to the teacher, a coach or anyone else who knows your child. Have they noticed anything different lately? What seems to trigger it? Listen for observations, not amateur diagnoses (a teacher can tell you that your child is clowning instead of paying attention, but only a specialist can tell you that the reason is ADHD). Once you've covered the bases, consult your family doctor.
- **Have hope** Most kids get better with the right treatment, and your role is no less important. What boosts your child's spirits or relieves her stress? Listening to a favourite song? Writing in a journal? Help him find the tools and encourage him to use them.

LAUGHING FOR MENTAL HEALTH

A child's pain casts a shadow on a home. What helps?

Ron Myers, a Toronto psychotherapist from Ceridian Canada who counsels kids and families, comes straight to the point: "Fun!" Myers is a firm believer in water fights and food fights. Agree on a time limit, set clear rules and cut loose. Myers also urges families to plan a sit-down dinner once a week, no matter how frantic life gets. "Kids talk first," he says. The more you listen, the better you'll know them.

Rona Maynard is an author, speaker, mental health advocate and former Editor of Chatelaine

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Visit www.rbc.com/childrensmentalhealth and test your knowledge of children's mental health. For every completed quiz, we'll give \$2 to Kids Help Phone².

PHASE OR ILLNESS?

At the worst moment on a bad day, any child looks not unlike a child with a mental illness. But a healthy child will be back on track within two weeks or less, with no harm done to friendships, family life or school performance. In other kids, a disabling pattern sets in. Be alert for these warning signs:

- Mood changes such as deep sadness or withdrawal;
- Extreme behavioural changes such as hurting or threatening others;
- Fears or worries that interfere with daily life;
- Trouble concentrating, especially at school;
- Sudden loss of weight or appetite, indicating a possible eating disorder;
- Abuse of drugs or alcohol to self-medicate;
- Endangering or harming oneself, a spectrum of behaviours from cutting to suicide attempts. If your child is talking of suicide, don't wait and see — take immediate action. If your child threatens, call 911.



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