

healthy MINDS

Emma notes that her teenage son Itu has been behaving differently for a while. They moved to a new home last term and he had to change schools, leaving a close group of friends behind. Since then he's lost interest in sports - which was a real passion before - and seems to have no energy. Itu usually bounces back quickly after upsets so his behaviour is out of character. Emma wonders if she should ask for help but is unsure where to turn.



Anxiety and depression

The two conditions children are most likely to experience are anxiety and depression.

Anxiety occurs when children are distressed or fearful. A child might be anxious in certain situations, for example going to school; or they might be anxious all of the time. Being anxious is often very normal in children and passes. But there are some questions you can ask yourself to work out whether your child might need some professional help:

- does the distress or fear go on, even after possible causes are taken away?
- are your child's worries growing worse over time?
- does your child's behaviour change in other parts of their life, for example, is fear of being separated from a parent stopping them from attending parties?

Kids, like adults, respond to stressful situations, for example, someone close to them dying or the separation of their parents. This is a normal response and with time and support goes away. But sometimes the sadness doesn't go away and starts to affect different parts of the child's life like their friendships, school work, sleep, concentration and energy levels.

Depression is one of the most common mental problems to affect kids, particularly teenagers. It can leave them feeling so low that schoolwork, friendships and family relationships all suffer.

Early treatment is best

Families are usually the first to notice changes in kids' behaviour. They may think that the problem will disappear over time or be reluctant to talk to outsiders about a family issue. Other families, like Ema's, may simply be unaware that help is available.

Seeking help early is best. Treatment is often more successful when it follows soon after a mental health problem is noticed. Through treatment, kids can learn skills that may prevent problems coming back. And there is little disruption to school and family life because early treatment is usually through counselling and community-based services.

If young people talk about wanting to die or hurting themselves, it is likely that they need some help. Take their feelings seriously and find someone you trust who is able to help you support your child. With help, childhood depression is usually temporary. Even longer lasting depression in young people can be managed with the right support.

What can I do?

Good communication with your kids is very important. Talk with them about what's going on in their lives. Ask them how they feel about friends, school, their brothers and sisters. If you are able to keep the lines of communication open, it will be easier to know when things are wrong.

A loving family provides strong protection for kids. To guard them against mental health problems we should:

- show our love for our kids and interest in their wellbeing
- talk to them about their feelings and try to work through problems together. This is really important with teenagers who may have trouble expressing their feelings
- comfort them when they are upset
- spend time with your kids doing the things they like
- make sure discipline is consistent but not harsh.

Who can help?

- Transcultural Mental Health Centre (02) 9840 3800
- Parent Line 13 20 55
- your child's school counsellor
- your local community health centre
- your doctor.

Your doctor will know about local services. Your child's teacher(s), school counsellor and year coordinator are also useful contacts first up.

There are a range of services that have been set up for Pacific families under the NSW Youth Partnership with Pacific Communities. The Pacific Families Program has workers from Tongan, Samoan, Fijian and Maori communities who can assist in a wide variety of issues, and are often able to provide exactly the right contact to deal with your situation. In certain areas of Sydney, the Pacific Education Resource eXchange (PERX) provides ongoing educational support to students and families.

Your local Area Health Service offers a range of community-based services such as paediatricians – doctors who specialise in children's health, early childhood nurses and counsellors. Most of these services are free. Check the white pages in the telephone directory for contact details.

Family Help Kit

NSW Health has put together the *Family Help Kit* with useful information about mental health problems, including:

- child and adolescent mental health problems
- challenging behaviours
- grief and loss
- fears and anxiety
- depression
- suicide prevention
- body image and eating problems.

For your copy of this free kit, phone (02) 9816 0452.