

How Do I Support a Child Who Is Feeling Depressed?

When your child is feeling discouraged, how can you help?

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Everyone feels sad or discouraged at times. As a parent, you may see changes in your child's behavior without fully understanding the reason why. Here are some things to watch for and ways to help your child.

SPOTTING POTENTIAL CONCERNS

If your child is more angry or sad for more than two weeks, you may wonder if he or she is experiencing depression. Depression may look different for children and youth than it does for adults. When your child is feeling down or depressed, symptoms may include:

- Significant changes in behavior.
- Grades in school drastically dropping, like going from A's to F's.
- Changes in friend groups, often moving to friends who are not positive.
- Boredom.
- Loss of interest in activities.
- Changes in sleeping habits, including too much or too little sleep.
- Trouble focusing.
- Fatigue.
- Not caring about the future.
- Complaining of aches and pains with no physical source.
- Comments or thoughts about death or suicide.
- Changes in eating.



When a child becomes depressed, parents may feel like it's their fault or that they've done something wrong. Remember that depression doesn't always start because of what someone did, and it can't be stopped by telling the child to stop feeling depressed. Depression in children often comes from feeling overwhelmed. As a parent, do your best to remain calm and focus on listening and validating. You can emotionally coach your child and patiently guide him or her to develop coping skills to help manage strong emotions.

HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD

Build a stronger parent-child bond

If you notice some of the symptoms listed earlier, help your child feel supported and loved. Look for ways to improve the bond with your child. This can help your child to better cope with stressful situations. Some ways to develop the parent-child bond include:



- One-on-one time.
- Talking and listening.
- Reassuring your child things will get better.
- Offering praise.
- Pointing out strengths.
- Expressions of love.
- Serving your child.

Seek support from others

Although you are responsible to help your child, don't try to go it alone. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has said: "If you had appendicitis, God would expect you to seek a priesthood blessing *and* get the best medical care available. So too with emotional disorders. Our Father in Heaven expects us to use *all* of the marvelous gifts He has provided in this glorious dispensation."¹

Seek help from Heavenly Father through prayer, as well as support from family and friends, Church leaders (including Aaronic Priesthood or Young Women leaders), and potentially a trained mental health

professional.² If you decide to seek professional help, choose a therapist who has experience working with children and can understand the concerns you have for your child. It's important for you to engage in treatment with your child and, in many cases, attend therapy with him or her.

Your child's doctor is another resource you can turn to for help. The doctor can prescribe medicine when it is needed to manage the symptoms of depression.

Add structure to life

It's important for your child to have structure. If your child knows what to expect and when, he or she will feel more stable and will be more capable of adapting. Here are some ways to add structure to your child's day or week:

- Decide on a regular bedtime.
- Get up at the same time every day.
- Share the schedule for the day with them.
- Limit screen time.
- Be physically active—going for a family walk is great.
- Engage in spiritual growth together, including regular gospel study and family prayer.
- Eat meals together as a family every day.

Encourage your child to join in family activities like playing a game or watching a movie together. It can also be helpful to model self-care and teach your child ways that he or she can take time for self-care. You may choose to exercise or do mindfulness activities together with your child or as a family.

Remember there can be a genetic link with depression, and so your own struggles may cause you to feel discouraged as you address your child's depression. If you have symptoms of depression, it is important to manage those symptoms and seek professional help if you begin to feel overwhelmed. If you aren't caring for yourself, you will find it more difficult to support your child in his or her struggles. ■

NOTES

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Like a Broken Vessel," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2013, 41.
2. Justin K. McPheters and Rebecca M. Taylor, "Is Therapy Right for Me?" (digital only) *Ensign*, Feb. 2020.