

How to reduce your child's risk of depression and clinical anxiety

Strategies for parents of primary-school aged children



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These guidelines are a general set of recommendations on how you as a parent can reduce your child's risk of developing depression or clinical anxiety. These recommendations may also be useful for parents whose child is already experiencing some symptoms of depression or anxiety. We recognise that each family is unique, so you may need to adapt these strategies to your specific situation.



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY PROBLEMS?

What is depression?

The word depression is used in many different ways. People may feel down, sad or blue as a result of life situations or events. However, everyday 'blues' or sadness is not clinical depression. People with the 'blues' may experience a temporary depressed mood, but they generally manage to cope and recover without treatment. What we are trying to prevent is *clinical depression*. Clinical depression (otherwise referred to as *depression* throughout these guidelines) involves feeling down or irritable for at least two weeks and stops a person from enjoying things they ordinarily like, or from taking part in usual activities (such as socialising with friends or playing sport). When this happens, other symptoms also develop. These may include feeling worthless, not sleeping well, not being able to concentrate, having an increased or decreased appetite, or thinking of suicide. The symptoms are severe enough to interfere with everyday life. For example, they make it hard for the person to focus or perform well at school, or to get along with friends and family.

What is clinical anxiety?

Everybody experiences anxiety at times. When people describe their anxiety, they may use terms such as: anxious, nervous, on edge, stressed, worried, tense or scared. Although anxiety is unpleasant, it can be quite useful in helping a person to avoid dangerous situations and motivate them to solve everyday problems. However, anxiety can become a problem if it is severe, long-lasting, and interferes with a person's life. *Clinical anxiety* (also known as anxiety disorders) refers to symptoms of constantly feeling nervous, anxious or on edge, and not being able to stop or control worrying. The anxiety is strong enough to cause trouble at school or in personal relationships (such as with family, friends), or to make it difficult to get on with day-to-day activities.

Source: Kelly, C., Kitchener, B., & Jorm, A. (2013). *Youth mental health first aid: A manual for adults assisting young people* (3rd ed.). Mental Health First Aid Australia: Melbourne, Australia

What does depression look like in children?

The child may show some, but not necessarily all, of the following changes over a period of weeks or more:

- withdraw from usual community, sporting or social involvement
- no longer want to spend time with friends outside of school
- avoid social situations
- be consistently quieter than usual in social situations
- seem irritable or angry and may fight more than usual with siblings and other family members
- lash out or throw tantrums or cry more than usual
- out of character and unexplained sadness or crying
- no longer seem to enjoy things they used to like, and may seem less excited/enthusiastic about things in general
- not be able to pay attention for long and seem to daydream or stare off into space more than usual
- struggle to make simple decisions
- fall behind in their schooling and struggle to keep on top of their workload
- seem to lack energy and move slower than usual
- feel a constant sense of guilt and worthlessness
- complain of recurring headaches, stomach aches, nausea or other physical pains without a clear medical cause
- not eat as much as usual, or begin to eat a lot more than usual
- show changes in sleeping patterns (such as sleeping more than usual, becoming difficult to wake or having difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep, having nightmares).

Sources: Achenbach, T. (2001). *The Child Behaviour Checklist For Ages 6-18*, ASEBA, University of Vermont, 1 South Prospect St., Burlington, VT 05401-3456, 6-1-01 Edition - 201.

Kids helpline. Depression. What is depression? Updated: 28 October 2013 <http://www.kidshelp.com.au/grownups/news-research/hot-topics/depression.php>

WHAT DOES CLINICAL ANXIETY LOOK LIKE IN CHILDREN?

The child may show some, but not necessarily all, of the following changes over a period of weeks or more:

- fear certain situations or worry constantly and unnecessarily about things
- dwell on negative thoughts
- seem self-conscious, highly sensitive to criticisms and easily embarrassed
- need constant reassurance
- seem excessively shy and avoid social situations
- not want to go to new places, meet new people or try new activities
- cling to parents when they try to leave the child at school or in an appropriate social situation
- cry every day before school because they don't want to go, refuse to go on school trips or take part in extracurricular activities
- out of character and unexplained sadness or crying
- have difficulty concentrating
- show nervous habits, like biting fingernails, thumb-sucking, or repeating certain behaviours
- seem constantly on edge, jumpy or easily scared
- appear to be trembling, restless or breathing rapidly
- develop excessive attachment to physical things, for example a particular toy, and throw tantrums when this is removed
- complain of recurring headaches, stomach aches, nausea or other physical pains without a clear medical cause
- not eat as much as usual, or begin to eat a lot more than usual
- show changes in sleeping patterns (such as sleeping more than usual, becoming difficult to wake or having difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep, having nightmares)
- start to show behaviours that they have previously outgrown.

Sources: Achenbach, T. (2001). The Child Behaviour Checklist For Ages 6-18, ASEBA, University of Vermont, 1 South Prospect St., Burlington, VT 05401-3456, 6-1-01 Edition - 201.

Kids helpline. Anxiety. What is anxiety? Updated: 17 November 2011 <http://www.kidshelp.com.au/grownups/news-research/hot-topics/anxiety.php>

You can reduce your child's risk of developing depression and clinical anxiety

There is a range of factors that influence whether or not a child develops depression or clinical anxiety, including a few which parents have some control over (see box: What are the risk factors for depression and clinical anxiety?). This means there are things you can do to help reduce your child's risk of developing these problems.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS FOR DEPRESSION AND CLINICAL ANXIETY?

It may be useful for parents to know what factors can increase a child's risk of developing depression or clinical anxiety, as well as what can maintain these problems. Changing or reducing the impact of these risk factors may prevent depression and anxiety problems from occurring or persisting.

Risk factors for depression

- A history of depression in close family members
- Being female
- Being a more sensitive, emotional or anxious person
- Adverse experiences in childhood, such as lack of care or abuse
- Family poverty and social disadvantage
- Being part of a social-cultural minority group (such as a sexual minority or gender diverse group, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander)
- Learning and other school difficulties
- Recent negative events in the person's life, such as being a victim of crime, death or serious illness in the family, having an accident, bullying or victimisation
- Parental separation or divorce
- Lack of a close, confiding relationship with someone
- Long-term or serious physical illness
- Having another mental health condition such as an anxiety disorder, psychotic disorder or substance disorder

Depression can also result from:

- the direct effects of some medical conditions, such as vitamin B12 deficiency, hypothyroidism, hepatitis, glandular fever, HIV, and some cancers
- the side effects of certain medications or drugs.

Risk factors for clinical anxiety

Anxiety is mostly caused by perceived threats in the environment, but some people are more likely than others to react with anxiety when they are threatened. People most at risk are those who:

- have a more sensitive, emotional nature and who tend to see the world as threatening
- have a history of anxiety, including marked shyness
- are female
- experience a traumatic event.

There are some family factors that increase risk for clinical anxiety:

- experiencing physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, neglect, or having overly strict parents
- a family background which involves poverty or a lack of job skills
- a family history of anxiety disorders
- parental alcohol problems
- parental separation and divorce.

Anxiety symptoms can also result from:

- some medical conditions such as hyperthyroidism, arrhythmias, vitamin B12 deficiency
- side effects of certain prescription and non-prescription medications, including those used to treat attention deficit disorders.

Sources: Kelly, C., Kitchener, B., & Jorm, A. (2013). *Youth mental health first aid: A manual for adults assisting young people* (3rd ed.). Mental Health First Aid Australia: Melbourne, Australia

beyondblue (2010) *Clinical practice guidelines: Depression in adolescents and young adults*. Melbourne: beyondblue.

Establish and maintain a good relationship with your child

Show affection and acceptance

The presence of a caring adult in a child's life will help to reduce their risk of developing depression and clinical anxiety. Respond consistently to your child in a warm, loving, supportive and respectful way. Show your child regular physical affection (such as hugs), as well as regularly telling them that you love them, adapting this to your child's age.

Provide regular encouragement to help them feel good about themselves. Don't expect your child to live up to all your ideals and expectations, but rather accept them for who they are. Don't make your approval contingent on your child's success.

Take time to talk

Let your child know that you care about them and will always be there if they need you. Show this by giving them your full attention and spending one-on-one time with your child on a regular basis. Make sure you are available if your child wants to talk. Be patient when listening to your child.

Be involved and support increasing autonomy

Be involved in your child's life

A lack of parental involvement, interest and emotional support in a child's life increases their risk of depression and clinical anxiety. Be involved in the various aspects of your child's life and engage in fun activities together. Know who your child's friends are, take an active interest in what your child is doing at school and monitor their performance. It is also important to monitor your child's activities on social media, so that you can limit exposure to age-inappropriate material or any bullying.

Help build your child's confidence by setting up experiences that build on their strengths and encouraging them to try new things. If your child does not already have a favourite hobby or interest, work together to find something your child enjoys. Keep in mind that children need to be exposed to a variety of things to find out what they like or are good at.

Being involved in your child's life also means that you are more likely to notice any changes in behaviour or mood that may indicate depression or clinical anxiety.

Avoid over involvement and encourage autonomy

Excessive control over a child's activities, thoughts and feelings can increase their risk of depression and clinical anxiety. Being over-protective of a child gives them the message that the world is a dangerous place. It is important that children be allowed to take age-appropriate risks, attempt difficult tasks, and learn from their mistakes.

Demonstrate that you trust your child by giving them responsibility that is appropriate to their age and maturity, such as encouraging them to help out around the house. Allow your child to gradually become more independent at managing their own daily tasks, such as dressing appropriately, preparing food and tidying up.

Encourage your child, but do not force them, to do new tasks that are a challenge to them. If your child tries an activity and is not at first successful, encourage them to try again. Give your child the opportunity to lead the way in some activities. Provide guidance and support for your child rather than solving their problems for them.



Encourage supportive relationships

Encourage your child to build supportive relationships, such as with extended family, friends and other adults, including teachers and coaches. This can reduce a child's risk of depression and clinical anxiety. Expose your child to situations where they can interact with other people in a safe environment, such as parks, community organisations and clubs. Try to set a good example by building strong positive relationships with your own family and friends.

If your child is struggling to make connections with other people, talk to them about any difficulties they may be having.

Establish family rules and consequences

Establish rules and consequences for your child's behaviour. Ensure that they clearly understand what the rules for their behaviour are, and the consequences of breaking them. It is important that parents provide a united message regarding family rules and discipline.

Involve your child in developing rules for them to follow, in an age-appropriate way. Adjust these rules over time to support and encourage your child's developing sense of autonomy. If your child feels that a particular rule is unfair, check that they fully understand it. Even if you can't or won't make the situation easier for your child, try to see situations from their point of view as best you can and validate how they are feeling.

Make sure you follow rules and laws yourself in order to set a good example for your child.



Encourage good health habits

Provide your child with a secure, structured and predictable environment by developing and maintaining daily routines.

Encourage your child to have good health habits around diet, exercise, sleep and screen time, as this may reduce their risk of developing depression and clinical anxiety.

- **Diet** – Provide your child with nutritious meals at regular intervals, including a nutritious breakfast. Also, as best you can, limit the amount of junk food available to them.
- **Exercise** – Make sure your child gets some sort of daily exercise. Physical activity can also be a good way of managing feelings of depression and anxiety.
- **Screen time** – Limit the amount of time your child spends watching television, playing video games or using the computer.
- **Sleep** – Make sure your child gets enough sleep and practises good sleep hygiene (see box: How to practise good sleep hygiene).

To encourage good health habits in your child, it is important to demonstrate these yourself.

HOW TO PRACTISE GOOD SLEEP HYGIENE

'Sleep hygiene' refers to habits that help you have a good night's sleep. Encourage your child to:

- go to bed and get up at the same time each day (even on weekends)
- wind down with relaxing activities before bedtime
- get out of bed and do something non-stimulating, like reading a book, if they can't sleep. They should go back to bed when they are feeling drowsy.
- keep their bedroom quiet and at a comfortable temperature
- not read or watch TV in bed
- not nap during the day no matter how tired they feel.

Source: Morgan, A. J., & Jorm, A. F. (2009). Self-help strategies that are helpful for sub-threshold depression: A Delphi consensus study. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 115(1), 196-200.

Minimise conflict in the home

Living in a home where there are frequent angry and aggressive interactions, whether verbal or physical, increases a child's risk of depression and clinical anxiety. On the other hand, avoiding dealing with difficult issues altogether is not helpful either. As far as possible, try to make the family environment a supportive and safe place for your child.

Avoid negative responses to your child's behaviour

Negative responses such as criticism, ridiculing and shaming are poor ways of handling behaviour problems in a child and can increase their risk of depression and clinical anxiety. It is

important to note that sometimes a child can misbehave as a way of getting attention from a parent, even if it is negative attention, particularly where the child is not getting enough attention in other ways.

Instead of criticising your child in a personal way (e.g. "You're such a messy child"), comment specifically about their actions (e.g. "You need to pick up all these toys on the floor before you go out to play"). Encourage your child to also evaluate themselves in this way, rather than judging themselves as a person. If you are finding it difficult not to use negative responses with your child, try developing a plan, when you are in a calm frame of mind, for helping your child change any patterns of behaviour that are causing concern.

Minimise conflict with your partner

Frequent and intense conflict between parents increases a child's risk of depression and clinical anxiety. On the other hand, dealing with conflict effectively in front of your child helps them to learn that although conflict is inevitable, it can be dealt with successfully. This can be achieved by not criticising your partner in a personal way (e.g. "Your father will always be a good for nothing"; "Your mother is so selfish"), but only in terms of things they do (e.g. "Your father is so grouchy when he is working too hard"; "I get mad at your mother when she takes this long"). If you do have conflict with your spouse or partner, don't ask your child to take sides.

If your partner is aggressive or violent, you should seek immediate professional help. Have a safety plan that is called into action when there is a threat of abuse. Call the police in an emergency and seek medical attention if needed.

If you have left an aggressive relationship, but the situation is still volatile, make sure the police and your child's school or day care have a copy of all court orders, including restraining orders, custody and access orders, as well as a picture of the abusive partner.

If you find that you are engaging in aggressive or violent behaviour towards your family, seek immediate professional help.

Be a good role model for handling conflict

Try to set a good example by remaining calm during any family conflict. Be a good role model for your child by being assertive in everyday situations, and teach your child the skills of compromise and negotiation. Make the time to listen to other family members' concerns and be willing to compromise. Ensure that each family member gets a chance to speak and try to reach mutually agreeable resolutions where possible.

If you do find yourself in a heated argument with another family member, try to demonstrate anger control by slowing down and taking time to calm yourself. If you feel that you are going to lose control of your emotions during a conflict, try to remove yourself from the situation until you feel calm. Don't allow family members to engage in name-calling or other personal attacks. Discourage siblings from putting down or teasing each other.

If you are dealing with enduring family conflict, seek appropriate professional help.

Aggression and abuse

It is important to note that physical, emotional or sexual abuse of children increases their risk of depression and clinical anxiety. Avoid using physical punishment and verbal aggression with your child. If you do find that you are behaving aggressively towards your child, seek help from a mental health professional.



Help your child to manage emotions

Help your child to label their emotions

Young children often don't have the vocabulary to effectively express or label their emotions. Help your child to label their emotions by labelling your own feelings in front of your child so that they learn to attach feeling words to behaviours. This will help your child to feel less overwhelmed by strong emotions. If your child is feeling overwhelmed or anxious, let them know that this is a normal feeling and that everyone feels like this at times.

Help your child develop an optimistic outlook

Encourage your child to notice and enjoy the lighter side of life. Teach your child about how positive and negative ways of thinking can affect how they feel and note any habitual way your child has of responding that may be self-defeating, such as "I could never do that". Instead, encourage your child to use realistic and optimistic self-talk, such as "I can get through this".

Know how to talk about strong emotions and sensitive topics

Teach your child to communicate about their feelings by asking them how they feel and encouraging them to talk openly. Don't dismiss or trivialise your child's emotional responses, as this can be interpreted as an indication that how your child is feeling is unimportant. Avoid responding to your child's emotions in a way that can lead them to believe that their emotions are wrong and that they are bad for having them, such as saying things like "Why are you crying like a baby?" or "You're such a scaredy cat!".

If your child is going through significant life changes, you may need to communicate with more than usual patience and empathy. Furthermore, if your child has been exposed to a distressing event, talk with them about this, giving them age-appropriate information.

It is important to note that stories on television, movies and news programs that seem fine to adults may cause anxiety to some children.

Help your child to set goals and solve problems

Encourage your child to work towards their goals

Encourage your child to set realistic goals and follow through with them. Help them to see temporary problems as obstacles that can be overcome, and to persist in working towards their goals. Celebrate your child's successes and the things learned along the way. However, it is also important to praise your child for their efforts, not just their achievements.

Help your child to solve problems

Help your child learn how to solve problems so that they will be better able to do this for themselves when they are older. This can be done by giving your child choices and some sense of control, where possible, so they can practice decision-making.

Take note of your child's successes in overcoming obstacles, and remind them of these when they are feeling discouraged. When your child does succeed in overcoming an obstacle, make sure to comment favourably. If your child fails, help them to interpret failure as a learning experience.

Set a good example for your child by persisting and not procrastinating with tasks that may be difficult, unpleasant or boring, and by adopting a positive attitude towards challenging situations in your own life.

Help your child to manage problems at school

Get to know your child's teacher and communicate with them regularly about how your child is going. Encourage your child to approach a trusted school staff member about any problems they have at school.

Bullying increases a child's risk for depression and clinical anxiety. It refers to repeated and intentional use of words or actions against a person or a group of people that causes distress and risk to their wellbeing. If your child is being



bullied, teach them strategies to deal with this. To the best of your ability, work with your child and their school to address any bullying behaviours.

Support your child when something is bothering them

Be available for your child when they are facing difficult situations or feeling upset. Let them know that you are willing to listen and talk with them about what is bothering them. If you are unsure how to talk to your child about depression, try telling them that you've noticed their sadness and want to help. Children are more likely to talk openly with you about their feelings if you are accepting and do not judge or over-react to what they tell you. Listening and showing empathy can be enormously comforting when something is bothering a child.

Help your child to manage anxiety so that it doesn't become a problem

Children who continually experience circumstances that they cannot manage will eventually begin to feel overwhelmed. You can help prevent this from occurring by:

- making sure your child has time to rest, relax and recharge their batteries – find out which activities your child finds relaxing and ensure that they have sufficient time to do them
- allowing your child to make choices and have a sense of control over things. However, it is important to also help your child accept that they will not have control over everything that happens in their life
- not burdening your child with your own problems.

If a child does become anxious, it is important that they learn to manage this appropriately so that it doesn't develop into clinical anxiety. You can do this by:

- listening to them talk about any negative feelings
- trying to identify the cause of these feelings and checking with your child to see if you have understood correctly

- helping your child to understand the importance of facing their fears and let them know you're proud of their ability to act in the face of considerable anxiety – never punish, tease or put down your child for feeling anxious or afraid
- rewarding or praising your child whenever they take steps to manage their anxiety, and encouraging them to do the same for themselves
- encouraging your child to not let anxiety stop them from doing things that they are capable of doing
- helping your child learn strategies that they can use to calm down when they begin to experience spiralling emotions (such as, deep breathing, counting to 10 or visualising a soothing place)
- setting a good example by staying calm when your child becomes anxious. Be patient when helping your child overcome a fear – if you find yourself becoming impatient with your child's anxiety, remind yourself of how daunting it can be to face one's fears.

Encourage professional help seeking when needed

If you feel that you may need more help in raising your child, attend a parenting course or seek professional help.

Seek help for depression or clinical anxiety

If you notice a sudden, persistent change in your child's mood or behaviour, encourage them to talk about what is on their mind, and really listen to what they are saying. Try to ascertain whether your child's low mood is due to a specific, temporary situation, or a more serious, persistent problem. If your child's problems do persist, it is important to seek professional help as soon as possible.

Seek help yourself when needed

When you do things to support your own mental health, this can also have a positive influence on your child. If you think you may be depressed, have clinical anxiety, or your use of alcohol or other drugs is affecting your behaviour towards your child, set a good example by seeking help from a health professional. Getting treatment may not only help you but is likely to benefit your child, as children of parents with these problems are at an increased risk themselves.

Parents can also help their child by demonstrating a non-stigmatising attitude towards people with mental health problems.



How these guidelines were developed

These guidelines are based on a systematic review of research evidence and the consensus of an international panel of 44 experts with a minimum of five years of experience in either clinical treatment or research involving parenting and childhood depression or anxiety disorders. Details of the methodology are available upon request via the email address below. The guidelines were produced by researchers from the University of Melbourne, with funding from *beyondblue*.

Although these guidelines are copyright, they can be freely reproduced for non-profit purposes provided the source is acknowledged.

Please cite these guidelines as follows:

Parenting Strategies Program (2014). *How to reduce your child's risk of depression and clinical anxiety: Strategies for parents of primary-school aged children*. Melbourne: *beyondblue*.

www.parentingstrategies.net

Check out the Parenting Strategies website for more helpful parenting resources and support, including personalised feedback on your current parenting.

Enquiries should be sent to:
enquiries@parentingstrategies.net

Resources for parents

Parenting Strategies: Protecting Your Child's Mental Health

www.parentingstrategies.net

Learn some parenting tips to protect your child from mental health problems, and get personalised feedback on your current parenting around these issues.

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au/parents

1300 22 4636

Learn more about anxiety and depression in young people. If you need to talk to someone, find more information or find out where you can go to see someone contact the *beyondblue* Support Service.

Kids Helpline

www.kidshelp.com.au

1800 55 1800

A free, private and confidential, telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25.

Raising Children Network

www.raisingchildren.net.au

The Raising Children website offers up-to-date, research-based material on more than 800 topics spanning child development, behaviour, health, nutrition and fitness, play and learning, connecting and communicating, school and education, entertainment and technology, sleep and safety.

BRAVE Self-Help

<https://brave4you.psy.uq.edu.au>

'BRAVE Self-Help' is an interactive online program that helps young people manage their worry and anxiety. The program can be used on any computer or tablet device and includes up to 10 sessions that the young person can work through at their own pace. Parents can also take part in a separate parent program that will help them learn new ways of supporting their child or teenager with their worries.

Parentline

A confidential telephone counselling service providing professional counselling and support for parents and those who care for children.

The aim of Parentline is to nurture and support positive, caring relationships between parents, children, teenagers and significant other people who are important to the wellbeing of families.

Parentline ACT

(02) 6287 3833 (cost of a local call)

9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Parent Line NSW

www.parentline.org.au

1300 1300 52 (cost of a local call)

24 hours a day, seven days a week

Parentline QLD & NT

www.parentline.com.au

1300 30 1300 (cost of a local call)

8am to 10pm, seven days a week

Parent Helpline SA

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

1300 364 100 (cost of a local call)

24 hours a day, seven days a week

Parenting Line Tasmania

1300 808 178 (cost of a local call)

24 hours a day, seven days a week

Parentline VIC

www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/Pages/parentline.aspx

13 22 89 (cost of a local call)

8am to midnight, seven days a week

Parenting WA Line

www.communities.wa.gov.au/parents/Pages/ParentingWALine.aspx

(08) 6279 1200 or 1800 654 432 (free for STD callers)

24 hours a day, seven days a week



PARENTING STRATEGIES:
Preventing Depression & Anxiety



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Where to find more information

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

☎ 1300 22 4636

✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

eheadspace

www.eheadspace.org.au

1800 650 890

A confidential, free and secure space where young people 12 to 25 or their family can chat, email or speak on the phone with a qualified youth mental health professional.

mindhealthconnect

www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

Access to trusted, relevant mental health care services, online programs and resources.



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