Back to School Blues

It’s that time of year again—the carefree days of summer fade and the hectic routine of school begins. Many children, even those who look forward to school, may moan and groan about doing homework. They may worry about friends and what their teachers expect. They may feel discouraged or “down.” They may have what is commonly called the “back to school blues.”

Sometimes the term “back to school blues” explains a child’s feelings and behavior. But other times, the diagnosis may be more serious: depression. Just like adults, kids can experience depression at any time. It may not be clear what has triggered it, but people can and do recover from depression.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Center for Mental Health Services, one in five children and adolescents has a mental health disorder. Depression is much more than “the blues,” and it often goes unrecognized. Left untreated, depression can result in problems at school, such as failing grades and social isolation.

Depression can change how a child thinks, feels, and acts. Depression can impact:

How a child thinks—

- Indecision, lack of concentration, or forgetfulness
- Threats to run away from home
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide

What a child feels—

- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, or excessive guilt
- Persistent sadness and/or crying
- Lack of enthusiasm or motivation; boredom
- Increased irritability or agitation
- Frequent physical complaints (e.g., headaches and stomachaches), but the aches and pains don’t seem to get better

How a child acts—

- Decreased energy level and chronic fatigue
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits (i.e., significant weight loss, not sleeping)
- Play that involves excessive aggression toward self or others, or that involves persistently sad themes
- Withdrawal from family, friends, and activities that were once enjoyed
- Outbursts of shouting and complaining
- Reckless behavior
- Missed school or poor performance

If you suspect that your child may be suffering from depression:
• Get accurate information from libraries, hotlines, the Web, and other sources.
• Know the warning signs for depression and keep notes on how often, how severe, and how long troubling behaviors last.
• Take your child to see a mental health professional or doctor for evaluation and diagnosis if she is exhibiting several of the warning signs. The evaluation may include a variety of tests and consultation with other specialists.
• Ask questions about treatments and services.
• Participate in planning a treatment plan, which may include counseling, ongoing evaluation and, in some cases, medication—with careful monitoring by the prescribing professional. The treatment plan is best developed with your family and, whenever possible, the child.
• Talk to other families in your community or find a family network organization.

Concerns about school can sometimes trigger depression, but effective treatments can help students. A child’s mental health is critical to his success and happiness—at school with teachers and friends and at home with family members.

Check in with her often to make sure her school moans and groans are typical youth complaints and not a sign of something more serious.

Source: SAMHSA

Additional Resources

American Psychological Association, Topic: Children, last referenced 7/21/08.

Mental Health America, last referenced 7/21/08.

National Parent Teacher Association, last referenced 7/21/08.

Signs of depression can be hard to spot—and it’s easy to miss them or dismiss them as something else. Stomachaches, trouble sleeping, and not wanting to talk to or hang out with friends all can be signs of depression. Be on the lookout for symptoms like these and talk with your child about how he’s feeling. If you suspect that something may be wrong, make an appointment with a health care professional.