



# How to Talk About Mental Health With Your Child and Their Pediatrician

By Jeffrey D. Shahidullah, PhD & Rebecca A. Baum, MD, FAAP

Children, teens and families are navigating difficult times. Sometimes it can be hard to tell whether day-to-day stress is getting the best of us, or when something more serious may be going on. In either case, talking with your child's pediatrician is a great place to start.



## Starting the conversation

Many pediatricians check for mental health concerns at well-child visits ([/English/family-life/health-management/Pages/Well-Child-Care-A-Check-Up-for-Success.aspx](#)). The doctor may ask your child questions or ask them to fill out a questionnaire that checks in about how they're doing. As your child gets older, it's important for them to have the opportunity to talk privately ([/English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/One-on-One-Time-with-the-Pediatrician.aspx](#)) with their pediatrician. This also lets them practice talking with the doctor, which is a skill they'll need as a young adult.

As a parent, you can also bring up concerns about your child's mental health, either at a well-child visit or whenever concerns arise. It's often a good idea to talk with your child ahead of time. Consider starting the conversation by assuring, "I care about you and want to make sure I understand how you're feeling. Your doctor is someone who can help."

## What to look for in your child or teen

It's normal for your child to experience difficult thoughts, feelings and emotions. When these issues occur more than usual and begin to get in the way of regular functioning, it could be a sign of something more serious.

Here are some signs ([/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Signs-your-Teen-May-Need-More-Support.aspx](#)) to look for that may signal the need for additional support.

- Feeling "on edge" or "wound up" most of the time
- Worrying about things for no reason or having negative thoughts that are hard to control
- Feeling panicky or having physical symptoms like headaches, stomach pains, rapid breathing, fast heartbeat or diarrhea
- Avoiding activities because of fear or anxiety ([/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/help-your-child-manage-fears-and-anxieties.aspx](#))
- Changes in sleep habits ([/English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/My-teen-is-having-more-trouble-falling-asleep.aspx](#)) (trouble sleeping or being tired during the day)



Changes in eating habits (eating too much or too little)

Being quick to give up on challenging tasks

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- Struggling with schoolwork
- Spending more time alone
- Feeling sad or irritable
- Feeling guilty about things
- Talking about death or suicide (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/which-kids-are-at-highest-risk-for-suicide.aspx>)

## How your child's pediatrician can help

Talk with your child's pediatrician if you have noticed signs or symptoms that concern you. Even if you're just wondering if something is "normal" for your child's developmental level, your child's pediatrician is an ideal source of support. You can also talk with the nursing staff or do a telehealth visit (</English/family-life/health-management/Pages/How-Telehealth-Can-Enhance-Mental-Health-Care.aspx>).

Your child's pediatrician can also help you sort out whether talking with a mental health professional may be a good idea. They can help determine which issues they can support in their office versus when to see other mental health professionals, such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker or licensed professional counselor.

## What else can parents do?

Even though mental health concerns are common, they may still carry stigma in our society. Help fight this stigma by letting your child know that you love and support them, no matter how they're feeling. Let them know that we all sometimes struggle and that help is available.

As with other conditions, your child's pediatrician is a trusted source of information who can help you and your child through difficult times.

## More Information

- Teen Mental Health: How to Know When Your Child Needs Help (</English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/Mental-Health-and-Teens-Watch-for-Danger-Signs.aspx>)
- Childhood Grief: When to Seek Additional Help (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/Grieving-Whats-Normal-When-to-Worry.aspx>)
- How Telehealth Can Enhance Mental Health Care (</English/family-life/health-management/Pages/How-Telehealth-Can-Enhance-Mental-Health-Care.aspx>)
- Talk About Mental Health (<https://www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/parents-caregivers>)(MentalHealth.gov)

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