

Managing Childhood Depression

caregiver's guide

Caregiver support is critical to the treatment of childhood depression. Although there is no quick fix for depression, caregivers play an important role by maintaining a supportive environment and teaching healthy habits. This info sheet describes habits and skills that foster children's mental well-being.

Routine

Kids thrive with routine. Following a daily routine reduces stress by creating predictability, among other benefits. Begin by doing a few important tasks—such as meals and bedtime—at the same time, and in a similar way, every day. Think of routines as an outline for the day, rather than a minute-by-minute schedule. A good routine leaves room for free time, such as talking, playing, and just hanging out.

Behavioral Activation

Depression causes children to lose interest in normal activities. Consequently, they become less active, which causes depression to worsen. Make a point to schedule enjoyable activities every day. Even simple activities such as playing outside, board games with family, and cooking together are helpful.

Sleep Hygiene

Sleep problems associated with depression include trouble falling asleep, restless or poor quality sleep, and feeling tired during the day. Improve sleep quality by turning off screens an hour before bed, winding down with relaxing activities, and following a regular schedule with consistent sleep and wake times. Stick to these habits even during weekends and on special occasions.

Socializing

Kids who are depressed may lose interest in seeing friends or socializing. Although it may be tempting to let your child stay home, this will reinforce their isolation. Schedule social visits and phone calls, or help your child choose organized activities, such as sports or classes. If these activities are overwhelming, start small and gradually add more over time.

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A Chance to Talk

Like adults, sometimes kids just need to talk. Make it part of your routine to spend a few minutes talking about your child's day. The goal is to check in, ask how your child is doing, and learn what is happening in their world (even if you already know). Avoid judging or giving advice, unless it's requested. Just listen.

Relaxation Skills

Between school, homework, peers, siblings, and chores, kids have a lot of stress. Relaxation skills such as deep breathing, mindfulness, and progressive muscle relaxation are an excellent way for your child to manage their stress. Practice these skills every day for the greatest benefit.