

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Back to School

Helping Our Kids Enjoy a Safe and Healthy Return

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Many children face typical emotional challenges returning to the classroom or college settings. Schools are expected to return in person this fall, with medical professionals agreeing that the benefits of in-person learning outweigh the concerns of contracting COVID. However, for some students returning to school, managing in-person socializing, academic expectations and changing COVID-19 guidelines have increased anxiety and other mental health challenges. Since the pandemic began, rates of psychological distress among young people, including symptoms of anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders, have increased. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and Children’s Hospital Association have declared youth mental health a national emergency¹.



1 in 5 kids experience a mental health problem²



70% of teens see anxiety and depression as a major problem among their peers



Suicide is now the second-leading cause of death among 10 to 19-year-olds



4 out of 10 students report that bullying, substance abuse and alcohol consumption are problems for students they know

Source: Data from AACAO.org²

How to Spot Warning Signs

It may be difficult to differentiate between typical or “normal” behaviors in young adults and what might be the signs of a mental illness. The best approach for identifying signs of mental illness is communicating with them and looking for any unusual behavior. Here are some changes to look for if you suspect your child or teen may struggle with their mental health³:



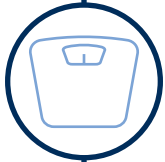
Excessive fear or worrying



Sleeping too much or not enough, always tired



Anger, aggression, withdrawal or other behavior changes



Changes in appetite, dramatic weight loss or gain



Multiple physical ailments, such as headaches and stomach aches



Risky behavior, including substance abuse as an unhealthy coping mechanism



Feeling sad or low and crying all the time



Thinking about death and suicide

Parents and Caregivers

Talking to your child about emotional topics, such as their mental health, can feel uncomfortable for many caregivers. This can be due to the stigma often attached to mental illness, lack of information or even fear of possible blame. Many experts explain that it may seem much easier to talk about other medical problems, such as food allergies, asthma or diabetes. There is typically more clinical information available about those conditions, they are easy to diagnose with medical tests and people seldom think they are anyone's fault.

Families and caregivers play a critical role in providing safe, stable, nurturing environments for young people to thrive. Below are recommendations from *The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory Report--Protecting Youth Mental Health* for how families and caregivers can engage with youth on mental health topics, help them become more resilient and address emerging mental health challenges.

- Be the best role model you can be for young people by taking care of your own mental and physical health.
- Communicate at a level that is appropriate to the child's age and development. Watch their reactions during the discussion.
- Encourage children and youth to build healthy social relationships with peers.
- Look out for warning signs of distress and seek help when needed.
- Try to minimize negative influences and behaviors in young people, such as drugs and alcohol.
- Ensure children and youth have regular check-ups with a pediatrician, family doctor or other health professional.
- Be a voice for mental health in your community.
- Be attentive to how children and youth spend time online.
- Foster strong, safe and stable relationships with supportive adults.



Employers

When a child or teen has a behavioral health problem, the issue can create added stress, and the toll on the parent can significantly impact how they function in the workplace. Parents or caregivers are faced with navigating the youth mental health landscape and advocating for their child. Employers need to be aware of the growing mental health crisis among children and teens, as it can directly impact employers' medical spending and working parents' job performance. A recent survey found that 53% of working parents report having to miss work at least once a month to help with their child's mental health².

Below are some recommendations for how employers can support the mental health of employees and their dependents³.

- 1 Provide access to comprehensive, affordable and age-appropriate mental health care for all employees and their families, including dependent children.
- 2 Create a workplace culture that affirms the importance of the mental health and well-being of all employees, including new hires and their families.
- 3 Other ways of providing support include sharing educational resources on how to recognize early symptoms of common behavioral health issue—like ADHD, anxiety or depression.
- 4 Create policies that address underlying drivers of employee mental health challenges, including both home and workplace.



Additional Sources of Information:

Since the pandemic, families, educators, health care professionals, employers and community organizations have recognized the unprecedented need to support youth mental health and well-being and have taken action to do so. Together, they will continue to support and advocate for the mental health of children and youth.

- ▶ American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP): www.aacap.org
- ▶ American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP): www.aap.org
- ▶ American Psychological Association: www.apa.org
- ▶ National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI): www.nami.org
- ▶ National Mental Health Association (NMHA): www.nmha.org
- ▶ On Our Sleeves: www.onoursleeves.org

1 https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Talking-To-Kids-About-Mental-Illnesses-084.aspx

2 AACAP.org/AACAP/Families

3 <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

4 <https://www.onoursleeves.org/>



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