

# Depressive Symptoms: Tips for Teachers

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## Key symptoms of depression in children

Depressive disorders in childhood are characterised by persistent low, sad, or irritable mood, and loss of interest or pleasure in activities. To reach a clinical diagnosis, these key symptoms must be present for at least two weeks — though children can show more variable moods and the picture may not always be clear-cut.

Associated symptoms include:

- Poor concentration and indecisiveness.
- Fatigue or low energy.
- Guilt or self-blame; low self-confidence.
- Changes in sleep or appetite (either increased or decreased).
- Physical agitation or a noticeable slowing down of movement.
- Self-harming or suicidal behaviour.

In younger children, depression often presents as irritability, separation anxiety, phobias, or unexplained physical complaints such as headaches or stomach aches. Children who have experienced bereavement, family breakdown, bullying, or difficulty keeping up with schoolwork are at greater risk.

## What to look out for at school

A child does not need to meet all the clinical criteria for depression for a teacher to notice something is wrong. Watch for children who seem sad or withdrawn, cry easily, are uncharacteristically aggressive, avoid friends and play, or are struggling to follow their schoolwork.

## What teachers can do

- **Talk and listen:** children will often say directly that they are unhappy when asked. They may also be able to tell you what is making them feel that way.
- **Move them forward in the class:** bringing a withdrawn child from the back of the classroom to the front can help them feel more connected and supported.
- **Allow extra time:** decision-making and completing tasks is harder when a child is depressed. Build in extra time even for straightforward work.
- **Offer regular praise:** consistent, specific encouragement helps rebuild self-confidence.
- **Assign a buddy:** pairing a withdrawn or unhappy child with a supportive peer during breaks and lunchtimes can reduce isolation.
- **Build in physical activity:** incorporating movement into the daily classroom routine benefits depressed children and the whole class.
- **Liase with parents or carers:** ensure they are aware of concerns and can support healthy eating, exercise, and sleep at home.

## When to refer

If symptoms persist or worsen, refer to the school's designated mental health lead, the local support team, or CAMHS. Seek parental or carer permission at each stage — during watchful waiting, when providing classroom support, and at the point of referral.

Depressive disorders in childhood can be successfully treated. Psychological therapies including CBT are effective, and in older children medication may also be beneficial.

## Further resources

- Royal College of Psychiatrists (leaflets on childhood depression): [rcpsych.ac.uk](http://rcpsych.ac.uk)
- NICE Guidelines for Depression (including child and parent guides): [nice.org.uk](http://nice.org.uk)
- YoungMinds: [youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk)
- Place2Be: [place2be.org.uk](http://place2be.org.uk)