

# When Should I Seek Professional Help for My Child?

*When does distress turn into something you need to take more seriously and seek specialized help?*

Everyone experiences distress from time to time. Children and teenagers can go through spells where they seem very upset. However, people who struggle with a mental health disorder tend to experience distress more regularly and more strongly. When should you think about going to a professional for guidance? Below are a few characteristics that can help in figuring out the extent of your child/adolescent's distress\*. Always seek immediate help if a child engages in unsafe behavior or talks about wanting to hurt him or herself or someone else.

## Typical Distress

The upsetting symptoms should last a few hours or a few days.

- After a breakup your adolescent cries for a few days
- Complaining of a stomachache after eating too much ice cream
- Has a temper tantrum when they are tired

Difficulties take place in one setting (school, home, friends, community).

- Before a test/presentation you get the feeling of butterflies in your stomach (school)
- Misbehaves at home but follows the rules at school

Generally, your child is doing well across most settings (such as school, friends, family relationships, work).

- Feels betrayed by a friend; however, continues to hang out with the family, school performance stays the same
- Is usually a good student but experienced a recent decline in grades due to a change in teachers
- Has a few friends in the neighborhood and one friend at school but hangs out with family

## Distress that may require professional guidance

**PERSISTENT** The upsetting symptoms last longer. Generally, we think about more days than not for 2 weeks or longer.

- Crying regularly without knowing why
- Complaining about frequent stomach aches or headaches with no known medical cause that keep them from attending school
- Has frequent tantrums or are intensely irritable much of the time
- If your child is (consistently) not meeting the milestones for his or her age, or you feel there could be a problem with their development

**PERVASIVE** Difficulties take place in more than one setting (school, home, friends, community).

- After a "poor" grade on exam, feeling worthless or hopeless all the time (school, home, friends) and not engaging in regular activities
- Doesn't like to eat at parties and at school for fear of gaining weight
- Throws severe tantrums at home and at preschool

**INTERFERES WITH NORMAL FUNCTIONING** Symptoms get in the way of everyday life (such as school, friends, family relationships, work).

- Is spending more and more time alone, and avoid social activities with friends or family
- Has lost interest in activities that they used to enjoy doing
- Is not interested in playing with other children or has difficulty making friends
- Is experimenting/engaging in alcohol or drug use and is not engaged with family/friends or shows a decrease in school or job achievement

\*Note this is not intended to replace a specialized medical assessment

# When Should I Seek Professional Help for My Child?

---

## *References*

---

Website: [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

National Institutes of Health

NIH Publication No. 18-4702

Revised 2018

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/children-and-mental-health/index.shtml>

The University of Michigan Health System © Copyright 2003-2016 Regents of the University of Michigan

[http://campusmindworks.org/students/when\\_to\\_get\\_help/knowning-when-to-see-professional-help.asp](http://campusmindworks.org/students/when_to_get_help/knowning-when-to-see-professional-help.asp)

Dr. Carlos Konishi Ph.D. – Blog “What You Need to Know About Taking a Child to Therapy”

<http://www.tinyoranges.com/>

<https://www.choc.org/news/what-you-need-to-know-about-taking-a-child-to-therapy/>