

Learn about...

Mental Disorders in Children and Youth

Kids and teens are constantly changing. As we grow, it's normal to change as we learn new things and our bodies and minds mature into our adult selves. So with all these changes going on, how can we tell which changes are normal? At what point should we start worrying that our child's fears or teenager's mood swings are more than just "growing pains"? It can be hard to tell. For many kids, these changes aren't just a part of growing up; they're symptoms of a mental disorder.

What is it?

It may surprise many people to know that mental disorders are common in children and youth. About one in seven young people in BC—or 15%—will have some form of mental disorder at any given time. Because so many mental disorders—about 70%—show up before the age of 18, they can have a huge impact on a child's development. Mental disorders can affect how well kids do in school and how they form relationships with other kids and adults. Mental disorders, if not treated early, can be disruptive enough to a kid's normal development and affect them for the rest of their lives. Below are

some common mental disorders that affect children and teens:

- **Anxiety disorders** are the most common disorders affecting children and youth. At any time, more than 6% of kids have some form of anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders can cause kids to be extremely afraid of things or situations that other kids are usually not afraid of.
- **Attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder (ADD or ADHD)** affects about 5% of children at any given time. ADD /ADHD makes it very difficult for kids to focus their attention. A child with the disorder is also more impulsive and harder to settle down than other children.
- **Conduct disorder** is a disorder that affects about 4% of children. It leads children to be extremely aggressive and destructive toward other people, pets or property. They may also seem like they don't care about important but basic rules, such as by doing things like regularly skipping school or running away from home.



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“At what point should we start worrying that our child's tantrums or teenager's mood swings are more than just “growing pains”?””

Could my child have a mental disorder?

It can be hard to tell the difference between normal changes as a child grows, and the symptoms of mental illness. Has your child:

- Shown changes in their behaviour? (e.g., an active child becomes quiet and withdrawn or a good student suddenly starts getting poor grades)
- Changed how they feel? (e.g., a child may show signs of feeling sad, anxious, guilty, angry, fearful, irritable or hopeless)
- Started avoiding places or situations they didn't use to avoid?
- Recently complained of physical problems like frequent headaches or stomach aches, problems eating or sleeping, or a general lack of energy?
- Started suddenly keeping to themselves?
- Started to use (or is using more) alcohol or other drugs, especially when alone?
- Shown signs that they're having trouble coping with regular activities and everyday problems?
- Shown little regard for the feelings or property of others?
- Expressed terror or disgust over their weight, or changed how they eat, in unhealthy ways?
- Started making odd or repetitive movements beyond regular playing?
- Deliberately hurt themselves or talked of suicide?

If your child is showing one or more of these changes, and it's interfering with their daily life, the best thing to do is talk to them about how they're feeling and then talk to your family doctor to rule out other explanations. Then, it's important to connect to other supports in the school and community. Keep in mind that all talk of suicide must be taken seriously.

- **Depression** is a mood disorder that shows up most often during the teenage years. Nearly 4 % of young people in BC have depression. Depression can affect a child or youth's attitudes and mood, making them feel unusually sad or irritable for more than two weeks at a time.
- **Psychosis** is a condition that involves loss of contact with reality. It affects 3 % of the total population but most often appears during adolescence and early adulthood. It can be seen on its own or with some of the disorders mentioned in this fact sheet.
- **Bipolar disorder** is a mood disorder that will affect about 0.1 % of young people. It usually starts during the teenage years. Bipolar disorder can cause a young person's moods to change back and forth between extremely high moods, called mania, and extremely low moods, called depression.
- **Eating disorders** are more rare in children with about 0.1 % affected, but the risk increases with age: 2 % of young males and females aged 15-24 are at risk for an eating disorder. Eating disorders involve a distorted body image along with seriously harmful behaviours to manage food and weight, making it difficult to nourish oneself properly.
- **Schizophrenia** affects about 0.1 % of young people, and usually shows up between the ages of 15 and 25. Schizophrenia causes people to lose touch with reality and makes it hard for them to think and speak in an organized way.
- **Suicide** often co-exists with mental illness. Suicide continues to be the leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year-olds and suicidal thinking or attempts are also alarmingly common. A BC survey found that in one year, 7 % of youth had made a suicide attempt, 11 % had planned a suicide and 16 % seriously thought about suicide.

What can I do about it?

Unfortunately, only one in four kids and teens in Canada who need mental health treatment get it. There are many reasons for this trend. For example, parents and caregivers can have mixed feelings about getting their children help for their mental illness. They may worry about being blamed for their child's change in behaviour, or they worry about what treatments may be tried. Young people are also the age group least likely to ask for help, so they may go to great lengths to try and hide their symptoms. The good news is that about 70% of childhood mental disorders can be treated successfully by getting help early. The kind of treatment that works best for your child will depend on your child's needs. Talk to your doctor.

- **Counseling:**

- › *Cognitive-behavioural therapy*—helps young people recognize and change thinking patterns and behaviours that are not good for their mental health
- › *Family therapy*—can help you look at what you can do as a family to help your child through their mental disorder, and manage behaviours.
- › *Interpersonal therapy*—helps young people to feel more comfortable interacting with others
- › *Educational interventions*—can help your child by teaching them ways to cope with their disorder while in the classroom.

- **Medication:** There are many different types of mental health medications that are being prescribed to kids including medications for mood, for anxiety, for psychosis and for hyperactivity. If you aren't comfortable with your child taking medications, then express your concerns to your doctor. They can explain which medications, if any, would be right for your child and go over the benefits and risks of medications with you. For young people, medications are usually not the first type of treatment considered. If they're suggested, they are usually meant to work in connection with other treatments or supports.

- **Support groups:**

- › For teens, groups of others who've gone through or are going through similar experiences (sometimes called peer support groups)
- › Groups for family members of someone with a mental illness, including children, to meet other families in similar situations

Who does it affect?

Just as with adults, mental disorders can affect kids and teens from all family types and cultural backgrounds. Kids and teens in certain circumstances though, can be at higher risk for mental disorders and may also face additional barriers to getting help. Some of these situations include:

- Young people with a family history of mental illness
- New immigrants and refugees
- Aboriginal children and youth
- Young people who've gone through a major life change such as moving to a new city or new school
- Young people who have experienced or witnessed trauma, such as abuse, a car accident, a natural disaster, etc.
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered youth
- Young people with substance use problems



Where do I go from here?

Many parents and other caregivers want to get help for a young person with mental health problems, but don't know how or where to do it. Navigating the range of services in BC for child and youth mental health—including support from your child's school, family doctor, and community mental health services—can be difficult. Resources to help you find help, available in English only, are:

F.O.R.C.E. Society for Kids Mental Health

Visit www.bckidsmentalhealth.org or call 604-878-3400 (in Greater Vancouver) or 1-800-661-2121 (toll free in BC) for support, advocacy and information, primarily for family members of younger kids.

Kelty Resource Centre

Contact this BC resource centre at www.bcmhas.ca/keltyresourcecentre or 1-800-665-1822 (toll-free in BC) or 604-875-2084 (in Greater Vancouver) for information, referrals and support for children, youth and their families in all areas of mental health and addictions.

AnxietyBC

Visit www.anxietybc.com for quality information and tools for parents to help their children manage anxiety, and anxiety disorders.

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca. See our section on Families for fact sheets on child and youth mental health problems and helpful tip sheets on finding help and what to expect when you do find help for your child. Some of these sheets are also available in Chinese and Punjabi. Also see our Family Toolkit. The

Toolkit is full of information, tips and self-tests to help you support a family member with a mental disorder. It includes a special section on supporting a young person.

Your Local Crisis Line

Visit www.crisiscentre.bc.ca/distress/other.php or at the front of your local phonebook under Emergency & Important Numbers > Distress Centres > Crisis Line. Many are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Resources available in many languages:

*For each service below, if English is not your first language, say the name of your preferred language in English to be connected to an interpreter. More than 100 languages are available.

HealthLink BC

Call 811 or visit www.healthlinkbc.ca to access free, non-emergency health information for anyone in your family, including mental health information. Through 811, you can also speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you're worried about, or a pharmacist about medication questions.

