



## Identifying Mental Health Concerns in Children Ages 6-11 and How to Help Them

By Sydney Glende, LBSW, MS, LAPC (ND), LPC (MN)  
Village EAP Counselor

Parents and caregivers may be seeing behaviors in their children that aren't common for them. To some extent, this is to be expected. Living through a pandemic is difficult, and kids are adjusting to a different way of life. Some behavior changes or symptoms of anxiety are typical. But how can you decipher if your child is adjusting in a healthy way, or if there is a more pressing concern on the horizon?

Some general warning signs that may indicate a more serious mental health concern or behavioral problem in children include:

- Persistent sadness (for two or more weeks)
- Difficulty managing emotions (having outbursts, impulsivity, extreme irritability or aggressiveness)
- Frequent stomachaches or headaches
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty sleeping
- Weight loss
- Changes in eating habits
- Sexual behaviors that are not developmentally appropriate
- Behavior that interferes with school or social interaction (avoiding or missing school, changes in academic performance, withdrawing from others/isolation, drastic mood, behavior, or personality changes)
- Self-injury or talking about death or suicide

When it comes to distinguishing whether your child has a mental illness or behavioral problem, it can be helpful to also know a little more about child development. Some common emotional and social changes that happen in children ages 6-11 include: wanting more independence from parents and family, thinking about the future, understanding more about their place in the world, and paying attention to friendships. Kids in this age group want to be liked and accepted by friends, and they may also be experiencing more peer pressure. Around ages 9-11 they may also become more aware of their bodies as puberty approaches, which can lead to body image and/or eating problems.

Whether you've seen warning signs or not, there are several ways you can support your child. If you feel you need more support, remember that you are not alone. Professional help is just a phone call or click away.

### **Ways to help reduce your child's stress levels include:**

- Help them slow down, relax, and rest.
- Encourage and participate in exercise. This will produce endorphins that relieve stress and contribute to better sleep.
- Make sleep a priority, and make sure they are getting enough. Children ages 5-10 need 10-11 hours each night, children ages 11-17 need 8 ½ to 9 ½ hours.
- Serve regular nutritious meals and snacks, including fruits and vegetables.
- Keep them hydrated.
- Encourage your children to talk versus bottling up emotions.

- Show affection for you child and spend one-on-one time together if possible. Talk to them about their thoughts, feelings, accomplishments, challenges they are facing or may face, and friendships.
- Help you child develop their own sense of right and wrong and talk with them about risky things that friends might pressure them into.
- Talk to your child about your expectations of their behaviors and give explanations for those expectations. It can be especially beneficial to use discipline to guide and protect your child, instead of punishment to make them feel bad about themselves. You can discuss what consequences they can expect right up front, and use incentives, rewards, and praise to help them think about and feel good about what they do well and their accomplishments.
- Teach your child how to effectively manage their stress. Use activities such as deep breathing, counting, coloring, painting, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, mindfulness, reading, or play. If you're concerned that your child isn't effectively managing their stress, has a mental illness, or behavioral problem, further treatment generally includes psychotherapy and/or medications.
- Keep regular routines as much as possible and be a role model by taking care of yourself, too.

## The Importance of Self-Care for Caregivers

As a parent or caregiver, it will be important for you to take care of yourself, especially if you want your children to do the same. If you're a caregiver of someone with a mental illness, it can be difficult to find time for yourself, and when you do, you may be preoccupied by what you "should" be doing instead. But learning to make time for yourself without feeling you're neglecting the rest of your family is crucial.

It's impossible to take care of others if you are not taking care of yourself first. You can do this by following what you'd like your children to do: exercise, eat well, get enough sleep, avoid drugs and alcohol, and practice relaxation exercises.

Utilizing your social supports, coping skills, and improving your healthy thinking habits may also be helpful. Practicing gratitude is another thing to consider, as it's been proven beneficial for mood improvement and has lasting effects on the brain. Ways to practice gratitude include gratitude journal writing, writing a letter, visiting someone you appreciate, saying or sending a thank you, or taking a gratitude walk, appreciating nature along the way. The point is not what you do, or how often you do it, but that you are taking the time to care for yourself and enjoy some time doing the things you love.

Maybe you've tried these things already and continue to struggle, or you've had difficulty finding the motivation to start. Remember that you are not alone and there is no shame in reaching out for professional help. A Village EAP counselor can help provide additional support and work on ways to cope with stress in more healthy ways, for you or your child, at no cost to you. Call The Village EAP at 1-800-627-8220 to schedule your appointment today!

## References

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