

A Parent Response Toolkit

How to help your child through common issues

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Disclaimer

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Anxiety

Many kids have fears and worries, and feeling sad and hopeless from time to time is a part of growing up. However, when kids don't outgrow the fears and worries that are typical in young children, or when there are so many fears and worries that they interfere with school, home, or play activities, it could be a sign of an anxiety disorder.

Examples of different types of anxiety disorders include:

- **Separation anxiety:** Being very afraid when away from parents
- **Phobias:** Having an extreme fear about something specific, such as heights, snakes, or shots
- **Social anxiety:** Being extremely afraid of interacting with other people
- **General anxiety:** Being worried about bad things that might happen in the future
- **Panic disorder:** Having repeated episodes of sudden, unexpected fear along with symptoms like heart pounding, breathlessness, or feeling dizzy, shaky, or sweaty

Recommended actions

- **Offer support.** Let your child know you're there for them — fully and unconditionally. Tweens and teens don't like to feel patronized or crowded, so let your child drive the conversation.
- **Don't try to get rid of their anxiety — help them manage it.** No parent wants to see their child unhappy, but the best way to help kids overcome anxiety isn't to try to completely get rid of stressors that trigger it. It's to help them learn to identify, tolerate, and find ways to reduce their anxiety.

- **Remind them that bad things can happen, but they can overcome a lot.** You can't guarantee that a child's fears are unrealistic — failing a test, getting teased, or messing up a piano solo. But you can express confidence that they'll be okay even if those things do happen. They'll be able to manage these bumps in the road, and when they realize this, their anxiety may lessen.
- **Encourage a healthy lifestyle.** Mental and physical health are closely intertwined. Make sure your child is eating nutritious food, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep.
- **If your child needs additional help,** talk with an appropriate physician or mental health professional.

Helpful resources

- [Childhood Anxiety Disorders](#)
- [What to Do \(and Not Do\) When Children Are Anxious](#)
- [How to Help A Child Struggling With Anxiety](#)



Body image

As tweens and teens mature, it's common for them to begin comparing themselves to their friends and peers. But sometimes the pressures to conform to “ideal” body standards can cause kids to lead unhealthy lifestyles — or even develop disordered thoughts surrounding their physical appearance.

Warning signs of an unhealthy relationship with one's body include:

- Obsessing over calorie counts or nutritional information
- Over exercising
- Avoiding social situations that involve food
- Restricting certain food groups
- Going to the bathroom immediately after eating
- Overeating in private

Recommended actions

- **Help establish healthy eating habits.** Make a routine of eating healthy, balanced meals as a family. Discuss foods in terms of how healthy they are, not how “good” or “bad” they are.
- **Reassure your child.** Tell them that you love and support them unconditionally, no matter what they're going through. Use this as an opportunity to discuss filtered life versus real life — draw attention to the fact that much of what they see online has been staged or edited in some way.

- **Talk to them.** Express your concerns and explain any steps you might be taking (like setting up a doctor’s appointment). Don’t worry about convincing them they have a problem — just talk to them honestly. Try using a formula like, “I am concerned when I see you running to the bathroom after dinner.”
- **Get help when needed.** If your child is engaging in disordered eating, talk to their school counselor or physician — eating disorders can cause a wide range of medical issues. Early detection, initial evaluation, and effective treatment are important steps that can help someone with an eating disorder move into recovery more quickly, preventing the disorder from progressing to a more severe or chronic state.

Helpful resources

- [Eating Disorders in Teens](#)
- [National Institute for Mental Health](#)
- Visit the [National Eating Disorders Association](#) website for a [free screening tool](#) to determine if your child may need additional help.



Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying happens when someone harasses, threatens, or embarrasses another person online. It includes aggressive or cruel online communications such as texts, direct messages, and social media posts. Some cyberbullies also share personal information, pictures, or videos designed to hurt or shame their targets.

Here are some common warning signs that your child may be experiencing cyberbullying:

- Hesitancy to use devices — or stopping altogether
- Getting emotional before, during, or after using a device
- Being secretive or avoiding discussions about online behavior
- Avoiding school or social activities
- Changes in grades, mood, behavior, sleep, or appetite

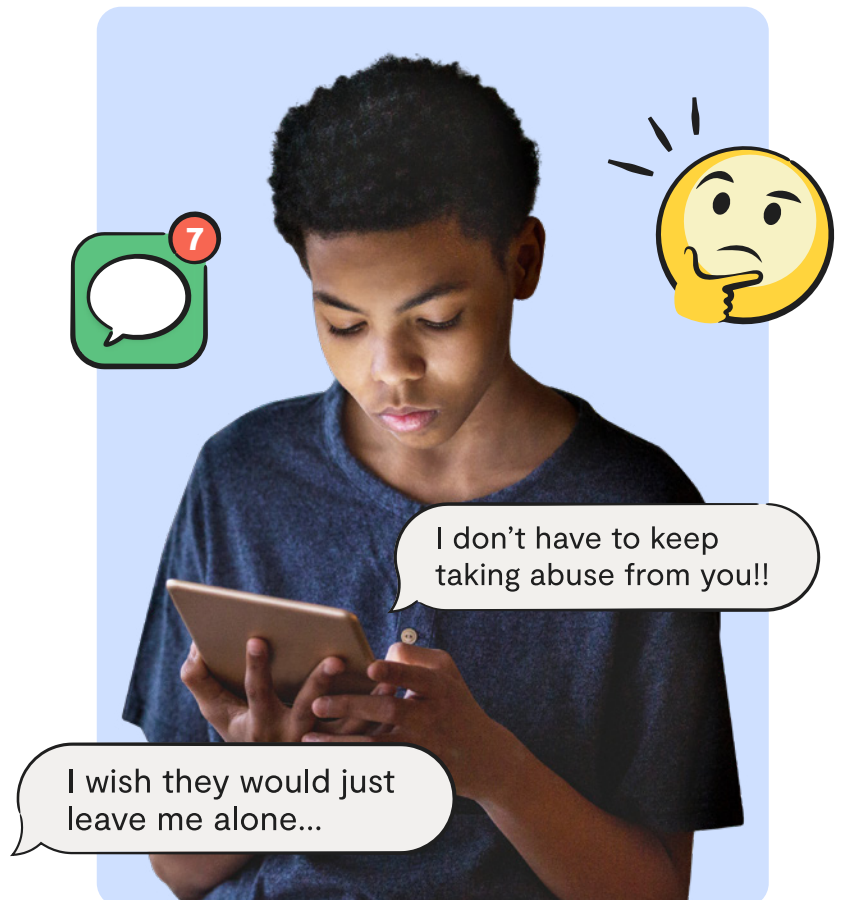
Recommended actions

- **Reassure your child** that you love and support them unconditionally.
- **Don't automatically take away their device.** Show your child that they won't be punished if they tell you the truth about what's happening.
- **Learn about cyberbullying laws in your state.** While there is no federal law against cyberbullying, the laws in every state (except Alaska and Wisconsin) have specific references to it. Check out the [cyberbullying laws](#) where you live.

- **Document everything.** Work with your child to keep a log of all harmful messages. This will be useful should you need to report these events to your child's school or to law enforcement. **Be sure to include:**
 - What happened and when
 - The names/usernames of all bullies and witnesses
 - What websites/platforms (e.g. Instagram, text messages, etc.) were used
 - The content of the messages, including screenshots if possible
- **Block the bully.** Instruct your child to unfriend, unfollow, or block the individual(s) antagonizing them.
- **Assess the scope of the problem.** Talk to your child to see if they are being bullied offline as well. Consider contacting their school to see if they have additional insight.

Helpful resources

- [Cyberbullying Tactics](#)
- [Common Types of Bullying to Watch Out For](#)
- [How to Stop Cyberbullying](#)
- [Cyberbullying at School](#)



Depression

Childhood depression is different from the normal “blues” or everyday mood changes that kids experience while growing up.

Here are some warning signs of potential depression:

- Persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, or worthlessness
- Withdrawal from their favorite activities
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue and low energy
- Physical complaints that do not respond to treatment
- Thoughts or talk of death and/or suicide

Recommended actions

- **Offer support.** Let your child know you’re there for them — fully and unconditionally. Tweens and teens don’t like to feel patronized or crowded, so let your child drive the conversation.
- **Be gentle but persistent.** Don’t give up if your child isn’t ready to talk at first — the conversations can be stressful for them. Be respectful of their comfort level while still emphasizing your concern.

- **Listen without lecturing.** Resist any urge to criticize, pass judgment, or make ultimatums once your child begins to open up. It's important that your child is communicating.
- **Validate their feelings.** Don't try to "talk your child out of their depression," even if their feelings seem irrational to you. Simply acknowledge the pain and numbness they may be feeling. Let them know it's OK not to feel OK.
- **Encourage a healthy lifestyle.** Mental and physical health are closely intertwined. Make sure your child is eating nutritious food, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep.
- **Get help for your child.** It's of utmost importance that you arrange professional help for your child if they need it. Talk with your child's school counselor, their physician, or a mental health professional to help them through their depression.

Helpful resources

- [5 Things You Can Do to Help Your Child with Depression](#)
- [How to Talk to Your Teen About Depression](#)
- [National Institute of Mental Health](#)



Drugs/alcohol

Kids experiment with drugs and alcohol for a variety of reasons — including to fit in, to socialize, to rebel, to feel older, or to deal with emotional and psychological pain. It's important for families to recognize why kids might be drawn to substances to better understand what to do about it.

Recommended actions

- **Reassure your child** that you love and support them unconditionally.
- **Create a contract** establishing rules about drugs, alcohol, and smoking/vaping so your family can be on the same page about what's expected.
- **Discuss the health risks.** Using substances can impact your child's psychological and physical health. Vaping can damage the lungs, drinking may lead to increased risk-taking and potential accidents, and hard drugs can result in a potentially fatal overdose. Many of these substances can also be addictive.
- **Discuss the legal risks.** The consumption of most substances is regulated by age — if not outright illegal. Learn about the laws in your area and make sure your child understands what could be at stake.
- **If your child needs additional help**, talk with a physician or mental health professional if you're worried about addiction.

Helpful resources

- [Substance Use and Addictive Disorders](#)
- [How to Prevent Underage Drinking](#)
- [Why Do Teens Smoke: The Rise of Vaping](#)

Nudity

As your child matures, so too will their interest in sexuality. Nudity — whether their own, a friend's, or a stranger's — might be something they encounter in messages and/or photos/videos. Every child (and family) is different, so make sure you have ongoing discussions about nudity and sexual content in accordance with your values.

Recommended actions

- **Remind your child about the risks** of exchanging messages that contain nudity. Once a message is sent, it can never be retrieved, and it is no longer in your child's control. Remind them that even if they trust the person they're communicating with, phones can be lost, stolen, or collected by the recipient's family.
- **Talk about the enormous pressure** many kids face to share nude photos. Let them know you understand how they could be pushed or dared into sending something they may not be comfortable with and talk about ways to respond if they ever find themselves facing this pressure.
- **Teach your child what to do** if they receive an unsolicited sext. Report the picture or delete it immediately. Make sure they know that it is never OK to forward it to others — it's even possible that they could face charges of distributing child pornography. Give them emotional support if they're upset about an image they've received.

Helpful resources

- [Sexting: What Parents Need to Know](#)
- [What to Do If You Find Something Disturbing on Your Teen's Phone](#)
- [Teenagers Are Sexting — Now What?](#)
- [When Your Teen Won't Stop Sexting](#)

Predatory behavior

As a parent or guardian, you've probably talked to your child about "stranger danger." But predators can also sexually, emotionally, and psychologically abuse children without ever being in the same room with them — although it may eventually lead to in-person abuse.

Online grooming occurs when a predator initiates and cultivates a relationship with a child through the internet, and it can include:

- Sending explicit messages
- Sharing or requesting sexual photos or videos
- Targeted manipulation
- Isolation from family and friends
- Sextortion

Recommended actions

- **Educate your child.** Tell your child not to talk to people online who they don't know in real life. Teach them to recognize red flags like when someone online asks them to share their full name, address, or where they go to school. Remind them to never send pictures to strangers, even if the photos seem innocent.
- **Show your child you support them** if they tell you they've been contacted by a predator. A calm, empathetic conversation will help your child feel comfortable discussing what's going on. Let them know that it's not their fault.

- **Document everything.** Work with your child to keep a log of all predatory activities. This will be very important should you need to report these events to law enforcement. **Be sure to include:**
 - What happened and when
 - The names/usernames of anyone who was involved or witnessed it
 - What websites/platforms (e.g. Snapchat, text messages, etc.) were used
 - The content of the messages, including screenshots if possible
- **Take action.** If your child is in contact with someone you believe is dangerous, have your child block, unfriend, and unfollow them immediately. If someone has tried to convince your child to meet them in real life, report them to the police.

Helpful resources

- [Protecting Your Child From Online Predators](#)
- [Learn the Stages of Online Grooming](#)
- [Recognize the Signs of Sexual Predators](#)



Profanity

Swearing is developmentally normal behavior for kids to experiment with expressing feelings, pushing boundaries, and getting attention. Every family has different rules dictating what kind of language is considered unacceptable, and how you respond to profanity will vary in accordance with your perspective.

Recommended actions

- **Use this as a teachable moment.** Ensure that your child is developing respect for others and that they understand swearing is not appropriate in all contexts — it can even be hurtful.
- **Talk about your family values.** No matter how your family views profanity, explain to your child that there are certain places where it's probably not a good idea, like at school, church, a friend's house, and with strangers.
- **Take action if you're concerned.** If your child is receiving unsolicited messages with inappropriate language, direct them to block, unfriend, or unfollow the sender. Also, talk to your child about cyberbullying if they are consistently sending or receiving messages that include profanity.

Helpful resources

- [Your Child's Social Media Footprint](#)
- [5 Ways to Talk to Your Kids About Swearing](#)

Self-harm or suicidal content

While self-harm can sometimes be associated with suicidal ideation, the two aren't always connected and can often have different symptoms.

Here are some warning signs of potential self-harm in kids:

- Frequent and unexplained cuts, bruises, scars, or burns
- Insisting on wearing long sleeves or pants — even in warm weather
- Increased anxiety, stress, or depression

Here are some warning signs of potential suicidal ideation in kids:

- Talking about being a burden to others
- Sleeping much more or much less than usual
- Giving away prized possessions
- A sudden improvement in their mood
- Reaching out to people they haven't spoken to in a long time
- Uncharacteristically reckless behavior

Recommended actions

- **Offer support.** Let your child know you're there for them — fully and unconditionally. Kids are often confused or uncertain about what they're going through, so it's important to validate their feelings.
- **Remove dangerous objects.** Ensure that weapons and medications aren't easily accessible. Consider putting these items behind a lock or completely removing them from your home.
- **Get help for your child.** If your child has expressed suicidal thoughts, talk with your child's school counselor, their physician, or a mental health professional to help your family understand what underlies those thoughts and to develop a treatment plan.

Helpful resources about self-harm

- [Self-Harm Text Hotline](#)
- [To Write Love On Her Arms](#)
- [Help for Cutting and Other Self-Injury](#)
- [What Parents Need to Know About Self-Harm](#)

Helpful resources about suicidal ideation

- [Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)
- [Learn the Signs of Youth Suicide](#)
- [How Communication Can Help Prevent a Tragedy](#)
- [LGBT Suicide: What Parents Need to Know](#)

Sextortion

Sextortion occurs when kids are coerced into sending sexually explicit material to another person, often under threat of harm to themselves or someone they love.

Recommended actions

- **Keep open lines of communication** with your child. Make sure they know they can come to you if they're receiving online communications that make them feel uncomfortable.
- **Check the laws of your state.** It's illegal in many states for adults to exchange sexual content with an underage child — even if it's just text or chat messages.
- **Document everything.** Work with your child to keep a log of all inappropriate activities. This will be very important should you need to report these events to law enforcement. **Be sure to include:**
 - What happened and when
 - The names/usernames of all perpetrators and witnesses
 - What websites/platforms (e.g. Snapchat, text messages, etc.) were used
 - The content of the messages, including screenshots if possible
- **Get help for your child.** Sexually abusive activities like sextortion can have serious emotional effects on a child. Even if they never had a physical interaction with a predator, they still need support — from you and likely from a school counselor, physician, or mental health professional — as they heal from what they've experienced.

Helpful resources

→ [FBI: What is Sextortion?](#)

→ [Tips for Talking to Your Teen About Sextortion](#)

Sexual content

While it's normal for kids to become aware of their sexuality as they mature, behaviors such as excessively watching porn or sending sexually explicit messages may require your attention.

Recommended actions

- **Ensure your child is developing respect** for others. Share your family's values around sex and emphasize the importance of developing meaningful, respectful relationships.
- **Remind your child about the dangers** of sharing sexual content. Once a message is sent, it can never be retrieved and your child is no longer in control of it. Remind them that even if they trust the person they're communicating with, phones can be lost, stolen, or collected by the recipient's family.

Helpful resources

- [State-by-State Differences in Sexting Laws](#)
- [What Is Age-Appropriate Sexual Curiosity?](#)
- [I Found Porn on My Child's Computer. Now What?](#)



Violence

Kids may not have a good way of processing or understanding the violent content they encounter on the news or stumble upon online. Activities at school may also contribute to their fears, whether it's a school fight, a lockdown drill, a bomb threat, or even a rumor about a school shooting.

Recommended actions

- **Talk about what's happening at school.** Find out what they're experiencing that may be causing them anxiety. Your child will feel better when they talk about what's happening around them.
- **Encourage your kids to tell someone** about what they see and hear. If your child finds out about a potential threat of violence, make sure they know to report it to a trusted adult.
- **Get help for your child.** Talk with their physician or a mental health professional if you're still concerned about violent behaviors or activities.

Helpful resources

→ [Violent Behavior in Children and Adolescents](#)

→ [Talking to Children About Violence: Tips for Parents and Teacher](#)

Weapons

Children often play with Nerf guns or pretend that sticks are swords. However, if you're worried your child is overly interested in potentially deadly weapons or know that they're coming into contact with them, you may need to get involved.

Recommended actions

- **Ask them what they know** about guns and weapons. This will let you know what research they've done already. Use this information to find out why they are interested in weapons and/or violence.
- **Talk to them about the difference** between real life and play. Make sure they know that if they ever see a weapon in real life — especially one they are not familiar with — it's never something to play with.
- **Set a good example.** If you own weapons, always use them carefully — especially around your child. Keep them out of reach and model responsible use.
- **Talk about what your child should do** if someone has a weapon at school. Let them know that if someone shows them a gun or other weapon at school, they should move away from the person quickly and quietly. They should then tell a trusted adult about the incident immediately.
- **If your child needs additional help**, talk with their school counselor, their physician, or a mental health professional to learn more about what kind of support they need.

Helpful resources

- [How to Talk to Kids About Guns](#)
- [Gun Safety for Parents](#)
- [Counseling on Gun Safety in the Homes](#)