



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 079 | Emotional and mental health

Depression in young children

What it means

Depression can occur in young children, although its expression differs from that in adults. Persistent loss of pleasure, sadness, or irritability can affect play, relationships, sleep, and learning. Diagnosis requires a developmentally informed assessment; a short period of upset or difficult behavior alone does not establish depression. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Risk can involve genetic vulnerability, temperament, stress, loss, trauma, and family or environmental circumstances. Sleep problems, physical illness, developmental needs, and other mental health conditions may contribute to similar symptoms. Depression should not be attributed to a single family action or inferred from one behavior. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

A child may stop enjoying favorite play, seem persistently sad or irritable, withdraw, have unusual guilt or negative self-statements, or show changes in sleep, appetite, energy, and activity. Younger children may express distress through behavior rather than words. Persistence and change from usual functioning matter. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

An infant or early childhood mental health professional reviews development, relationships, health, stressors, and functioning across settings. Caregiver interviews, observation, and age-appropriate measures help assess the pattern. Medical review considers physical contributors. Screening tools identify concern but do not replace a diagnostic evaluation. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Treatment in young children centers on developmentally appropriate psychological care, often involving caregivers and the parent-child relationship. Approaches may support emotional understanding, regulation, and enjoyable engagement. Family and educational supports address practical stressors. Medicines are not a routine first treatment for preschool depression; any use needs careful specialist assessment and monitoring. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Maintain predictable routines and offer gentle opportunities for connection and enjoyable play without demanding cheerfulness. Listen to the child's words and behavior, and describe concerns clearly to the care team. Support caregiver well-being and follow the agreed treatment plan. Take statements about harm seriously, even in a young child.

When to seek help

Seek professional assessment for persistent loss of pleasure, withdrawal, or major changes in functioning. Immediate danger or self-harm behavior requires urgent crisis or emergency help; ensure an adult remains with the child.

Questions for your care team

- Could depression or another condition explain this change?
- Which caregiver-involved therapy is appropriate?
- How should we respond to statements or behavior about harm?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss depression in young children. Depression can occur in young children, although its expression differs from that in adults. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: Myth: very young children cannot experience depression. Their symptoms require age-appropriate assessment.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Anhedonia: reduced ability to enjoy previously enjoyable activities.
- Psychotherapy: structured psychological treatment.
- Caregiver-involved treatment: therapy that includes adults caring for the child.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Children and Mental Health: Is This Just a Stage? - National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

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

[2] Treatment for depression in young children

<https://www.nih.gov/news-events/nih-research-matters/treatment-depression-young-children>

[3] Psychotherapies - National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/psychotherapies>