



CHILD MIND®  
INSTITUTE

## What Should I Look For?

Signs and Symptoms of Mental Health Problems in Children During COVID-19

### Anxiety

Anxiety is the most common emotional problem in children, and it is a huge issue during times of stress like the current crisis. Some anxious kids are painfully shy, and avoid things that other kids enjoy, Some have tantrums, and others develop elaborate rituals. Parents should be ready to handle a variety of different expressions of anxiety. Symptoms include:

- Reassurance-seeking (Are we going to be okay? Is grandpa going to be okay?)
- Reluctance to separate from parents
- Physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches
- Moodiness and irritability
- Tantrums or meltdowns
- Trouble sleeping

### Tantrums and Meltdowns

It will come as no surprise to parents that the most common problem that brings young children to the attention of a psychologist or psychiatrist is emotional outbursts—tantrums and meltdowns. Sometimes the inability to regulate emotions is the result of an underlying problem. Some of the common causes of frequent meltdowns are:

- ADHD: Many children with severe temper outbursts also fit the criteria for ADHD.
- Anxiety: Even if kids don't have a full-blown anxiety disorder, they may still be overreactive to anxiety-provoking situations and melt down when they are stressed.
- Learning problems: When your child acts out repeatedly in school or during homework time, it's possible that he has an undiagnosed learning disorder.
- Depression and irritability: Depression and irritability also occur in a subset of kids who have severe and frequent temper tantrums.
- Autism: Children on the autism spectrum are also often prone to dramatic meltdowns. These children tend to be rigid any unexpected change can set them off.
- Sensory processing issues: These challenges, often seen in autistic children and teens as well as many with ADHD, may cause kids to be overwhelmed by stimulation

### Depression

In adolescent depression, the thing people tend to notice first is withdrawal, or when the teenager stops doing things she usually likes to do. There might be other changes in her mood,

including sadness or irritability. Or in her behavior, including, appetite, energy level, sleep patterns and academic performance. Symptoms include:

- Unusual sadness, persisting even when circumstances change
- Reduced interest in activities she once enjoyed; reduced feelings of anticipation
- Involuntary changes in weight
- Shifts in sleep patterns
- Sluggishness
- Harsh self-assessment (“I’m ugly. I’m no good. I’ll never make friends.”)
- Thoughts of or attempts at suicide

### **Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors**

Some young people who are thinking about suicide let people close to them know that they are in pain and are open about needing help. Others hide their feelings from family and friends. If you are wondering if your child is suicidal, experts say that asking him is the best way to find out. That conversation can be lifesaving. There are also these warning signs to watch out for:

- Isolation from friends and family
- Problems eating or sleeping
- Mood swings
- Reckless behavior
- Dropping grades
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Talking about feeling hopeless or trapped
- Talking about being a burden to others or not belonging
- Talking about suicide or wanting to die
- Writing or drawing about suicide, or acting it out in play

### **Tips for Parenting During COVID-19**

- **Don’t be afraid to discuss the coronavirus.** Not talking about something can make kids worry more. Convey the facts and be reassuring.
- **Acknowledge your own anxiety.** And take care of yourself. Remember to “put the oxygen mask on first before you help your child.”
- **Focus on what you’re doing to stay safe.** Kids feel empowered when they know what to do to keep themselves safe.
- **Watch out for signs and symptoms.** Now is not the time to “wait and see.”
- **Go to [childmind.org/coronavirus](https://www.childmind.org/coronavirus)** for our free resources and links to telehealth services.

For telehealth appointments: [childmind.org/telehealth](https://www.childmind.org/telehealth)  
Comprehensive COVID-19 resources: [childmind.org/coronavirus](https://www.childmind.org/coronavirus)