



City Mental Health
Alliance UK

Mental health difficulties in children and young people

A toolkit for parents

Contents

About this toolkit	3
Mental health in children and young people	4
The developing brain	6
Early years (0-5 years)	7
Adolescence, teenage and beyond (12-20 years)	8
Mental health awareness	9
Good habits	10
Common triggers	11
Feeling different	12
Spotting the signs that your child is struggling	13
Suicidal thoughts	14
One young person's experience	15
Taking action	16
How to speak to your child if they're struggling	17
What to do if you are worried	18
Parenting in difficult times	19
One parent's experience	20
Conditions and treatments	21
Common mental health conditions	22
Treatments and therapies	24
Appendix 1	25
Sources of support your child can access	
Appendix 2	26
More trusted sources of specialist information and support	

About this toolkit

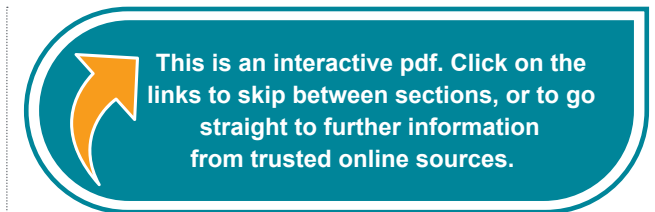
The City Mental Health Alliance has partnered with PwC UK, the Bank of England and Morgan Stanley to create a toolkit for parents concerned about their children's mental health.

If your child is going through a mental health crisis and you need help now, skip to [What to do if you are worried](#), on [page 18](#).

It is worrying and stressful for any parent to see their child having difficulty with their mental health, and when you search for information it can be hard to know where to start.

That's why we've compiled this toolkit; to provide an overview of the key topics, signpost to further information from trusted sources, and share insights from parents and young people who have been through it. This toolkit will help you to:

- understand good mental health and mental health difficulties in children and young people
- be aware of why and when difficulties can arise and what to look out for
- know how to help your child if they are struggling
- know when and how to get professional help
- understand that you need to look after yourself, too.



We are grateful to our contributors, who have donated their time and expertise to help us compile this toolkit, and check the information within it:

[Pears Maudsley Centre for Children and Young People](#)

[Place2Be](#)

[YoungMinds](#)

Introduction



Mental health in children and young people

Mental health refers to the way we think, behave and feel. Like their physical health, our children's mental health can change over time, and any child or young person can experience mental health difficulties.

In 2020, one in six children (16%) aged five to 16 had a probable mental health disorder* up from one in nine (11%) in 2017. We don't know for sure what factors caused the increase, but living through the Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had an impact.

Beyond Covid-19, most children have challenges in their lives that could pose a risk to their mental health. Some people are genetically more prone to a mental health condition if it runs in the family.

However, most children also have things in their life that balance out those risks and help them to bounce back from difficulty. These are called resilience factors. They could include a strong relationship with a trusted person, enjoyment of school, interest in sports or other activities, good friendships, having spiritual or religious faith.

Everyone has a unique combination of risk and resilience factors and, as parents, we can support our children to get into good mental health habits and build up their defences.

Nevertheless, we can't prevent our young people from struggling sometimes. That's why it's important to recognise the signs of mental health difficulty, to know how to support your child to cope, and when and how to seek extra help.

No parent wants to see their child struggling with any illness, and mental ill health can be really upsetting and frightening because it can make our loved one sad, fearful, angry or unpredictable.

If you're going through this right now, remember that:

1. You and your child can get through this.

Lots of young people experience mental health difficulties and come out the other side. Modern therapies and treatments – if they need them – are really effective.

2. You are not alone. Every situation is unique but right now there are thousands of families in the UK with a child with mental health difficulties, and thousands more who have been there in the past. So reach out for support, whether it's from friends and family, or charities and chatrooms.

We can't prevent our young people from struggling sometimes. That's why it's important to recognise the signs

*Mental Health and Young People Survey of 3,570 children and young people in England, and their parents. NHS Digital.

The developing brain



Early years (0-5 years)



We are born with billions of brain cells – many more than we need.

To begin with, our brain cells are only loosely connected. As we interact with our environment in early life – for instance by playing with others, climbing, drawing and painting, being read to, feeling safe and loved – the brain cells that we use a lot develop stronger connections. The cells that aren't used are eventually discarded.

This 'pruning' is a normal process in early development as our brain – guided by our experiences and our genes – gets rid of the cells it doesn't need. This helps the brain become more efficient and ready to process complex information.

Research shows that persistent adversity in early life – such as ongoing abuse or neglect – can have a profound impact on the developing brain. However, we also know that many factors determine brain development and, with the right help, the impact of negative experiences can be reduced.*

A lot of brain development takes place in the first five years of life, but different parts of the brain develop at different rates. The prefrontal cortex (the part of our brain behind the forehead), which is involved in impulse control, among other functions, is not fully developed until age 25. That's why younger children need help to understand and manage strong feelings.



More information from the UK Trauma Council, on [how the brain adapts to adversity in childhood.](#)



Place2Be has advice on [how to cope when your child is having a meltdown.](#)

Mental health difficulties in young children

Difficulties at this age can include anxieties and phobias, issues with toileting, feeding or sleeping.

Some children may experience challenges with behaviour at school. This can lead to them refusing to go to school or being excluded, withdrawing or not speaking, difficulties with friends and excessive worrying.

According to the NHS, around one in seven children of primary age in England had a probable mental health difficulty in 2020. For some children these resolve with time, while others may need more support.



The National Centre for Children and Families explains many of the [difficulties seen in young children.](#)

*J Bick and C Nelson 2016. *Early Adverse Experiences and the Developing Brain. Neuropsychopharmacology* 41(1) 177-196

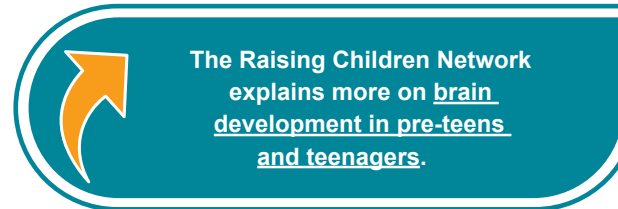
Adolescence, teenage and beyond (12-20 years)

Apart from the early years, no other period of our lives comes with as many changes in the brain as our pre-teens and teens.

The adolescent and teenage brain is growing and changing rapidly. This is when unused cells in the thinking and processing part of the brain are pruned away and the remaining connections are strengthened.

The brain's emotional and reward system – when we experience feelings of pleasure in response to something we enjoy – becomes much more sensitive at this time. But the prefrontal cortex – responsible for decision-making, planning ahead, thinking about consequences and controlling impulses – is the last to develop.

All this change adds up to make teenagers more prone to taking risks and making impulsive decisions, as well as expressing more and stronger emotions.



Mental health difficulties in adolescents and teenagers

In 2020, one in six children aged between five and sixteen years had a probable mental health disorder.*

Behavioural disorders are common in young adolescents, but can be due to neurodiversity such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) rather than mental health problems.

Emotional disorders such as depression tend to emerge a little later.

Globally, depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents.**

> [Skip to more information about specific mental health conditions.](#)



*Mental Health and Young People Survey of 3,570 children and young people in England, and their parents. NHS Digital. **World Health Organization 2021. Factsheet on Adolescent mental health. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>

Mental health awareness



Good habits

A parent's first instinct is to protect their child from difficult feelings, but no-one can escape stress, risks, adversities and challenges altogether; they are part of life. Our role is to help our children build their coping skills, show them how we cope, help them learn how to talk about their feelings and ask for help if they need it.

Healthy habits

The things we encourage and support our children to do to look after their bodies are also vital for their mental health. Eating well, exercising and getting enough sleep are key.

- Place2Be has [tips for tackling issues around sleep and bedtime](#).
- YoungMinds has a [young person's guide to sleep problems](#).
- CUES-Ed has a [guide for children 7-11 about looking after ourselves](#).

Building resilience

As parents we can do all sorts of everyday things that make our children more able to cope with, and bounce back from, difficulties; from creating consistent routines to helping them challenge themselves.

- Place2Be has [advice on raising a resilient child](#).
- MindEd for Families has information on [building confidence and resilience](#).

Role-modelling

You can help to show your child that it's OK to have strong feelings, that it's possible to cope with and manage them, and that you can do things to look after yourself.

- YoungMinds talks more about [looking after yourself as a parent](#).
- Place2Be offers tips on [how to manage strong emotions when you argue with your child](#).



Communicating

It's useful to get into the habit of talking about feelings with your children, so that if they experience mental health difficulties, the lines of communication are already open. 'Check in' with them every so often, while you're doing things together.

- YoungMinds has a brilliant [list of conversation starters you can download](#).
- Listening is a skill. Place2Be has great advice on [how to be a good listener](#) to your child.

Safe internet use

It can feel overwhelming keeping track of the latest internet sensations, gaming trends and social media platforms, but there's lots of information out there to help. Talk to your child about the importance of switching off and recognising how online content can make them feel.

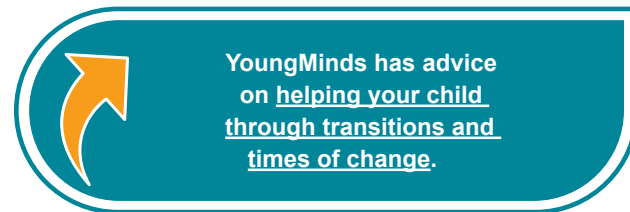
- [Net Aware](#) is a parents' guide to many of the apps, games and social media sites your child probably uses.
- YoungMinds has a guide to [helping your child have healthy social media habits](#).
- Place2Be has a [guide to safe and responsible gaming](#) in primary years.
- [Thinkuknow](#) has games and guidance on safe internet use for children of all ages, and parents.
- YoungMinds has a [guide for parents on how to talk to children about gaming](#).

Common triggers

Any child can experience difficulty and distress with their mental health at times, and it's often a direct response to what is happening in their life.

Children and young people go through all kinds of changes as they grow up. The current generation of young people has even had to come to terms with a pandemic.

Change is a normal part of life, but it can be hard to cope with. Helping your child to understand the changes that are going on, and acknowledging the feelings they are having, can play an important part in helping them to get through their difficulties. Being their anchor – remaining calm, consistent and reliable – is especially important during times of change.



School transition

Starting primary school, changing schools, or moving up to secondary school are big steps in your child's life. Place2Be suggests some things you can do to help them prepare and cope with it.

- [Helping your child when they start or change primary school.](#)
- [How to support your child if they struggle when you say goodbye at the school gate.](#)
- [Helping your child as they transition to secondary school.](#)

Family separation

During a break-up, or while you establish co-parenting routines with your ex-partner, your child will need a lot of reassurance. It's important they don't feel they have to take sides.

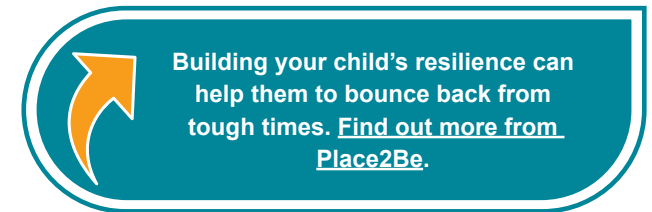
- YoungMinds has [a guide for parents on divorce and separation.](#)
- Place2Be provides [information if you're going through a break-up and want to support your child.](#)
- Place2Be also has [advice on co-parenting after separation or divorce.](#)

Bereavement

You'll want to take your child's pain away, but when someone (or a pet) that they love has died you can't do that. It's important to allow them to grieve.

- Place2Be has [advice for parents of primary age children when someone dies.](#)
- YoungMinds has [information on grief and loss in young people.](#)

Helping your child to understand changes, and acknowledging their feelings, can help them to get through difficulties



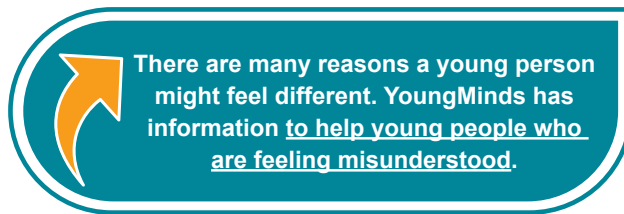
Other triggers

Your child may experience mental health difficulties at other times, due to things that are going on in their life, or the way they feel about themselves. Place2Be and YoungMinds have useful information on other common triggers, such as:

- [exam time and results day](#)
- [being bullied \(information \[here\]\(#\) and \[here\]\(#\)\)](#)
- [unhealthy perfectionism](#)
- [having friendship issues](#)
- [sexuality](#)
- [traumatic events.](#)

Feeling different

As children grow up, they learn about who they are and how they fit into the world. Feeling like they don't fit in can lead to real distress. Being teased, bullied or excluded for being different can make this distress a lot worse.



Ethnicity

Children from black and minority ethnic groups may experience discrimination and an increased stigma around mental health issues in the community. This can negatively affect mental health.

- YoungMinds has [a guide for parents on racism and mental health](#).
- Place2Be provides advice on [how to talk to your child about race and discrimination](#).

Disability

Having additional needs or disabilities can lead to a child experiencing challenges that lower self-confidence, make it harder to make friends and increase social isolation. These factors make children with disabilities more likely than their non-disabled peers to experience mental health problems.

- Read a [real story from a young person living with disability](#), from YoungMinds.

Neurodiversity

The term neurodiversity covers a wide variety of often hidden differences in how the brain has developed, including Autism Spectrum Conditions, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and Tourette's syndrome. For some people neurodiversity can mean they are better at some things than most people, but additional support or adjustments may be needed for the things they struggle with, and to combat exclusion.

Your child may have noticed they have differences, and benefit from better understanding themselves, including their unique pattern of needs and strengths. Neurodiversity can bring with it a greater risk of experiencing some mental health problems.

- YoungMinds has [a guide for young people on ADHD and mental health](#).
- And [a guide for parents on autism and mental health](#).

LGBTQ+

Gender identity and sexual orientation both take shape through childhood and adolescence. Supporting your child to understand their gender identity and sexuality will give them confidence in who they are without guilt, shame or fear of rejection from family. However, LGBTQ+ children and young people can experience prejudice, discrimination and bullying. They may also experience gender dysphoria: the distress when someone's assigned gender does not match their identity. These factors mean they may be more likely to experience difficulties with their mental health.

- YoungMinds has [a guide for young people on sexuality and mental health](#).
- Place2Be has [information on supporting your child through the different stages of sexual development](#).

“As I started to realise my attraction to men, my response was to push this down and deny it. I developed a hard exterior and did everything I could to avoid seeming ‘different’. It wasn't until I eventually came out to my parents three years later that I started to realise I was depressed. Coming out and being accepted for who I am gave me the space to start understanding my emotions and discuss them with my parents and friends.”

— Young professional

Spotting the signs that your child is struggling


It is normal for a young person to feel angry, sad, worried or stressed sometimes. These feelings can be expressed in all sorts of ways, such as:

- sudden changes in behaviour
- negative thoughts and low self-esteem
- arguing and fighting
- sleep problems
- avoiding school and activities, withdrawing or being 'clingy'
- complaining about aches and pains
- overactivity
- wetting the bed, when previously dry at night.


Often these feelings, and the behaviours they cause, pass with time. It can sometimes be hard to know when difficult feelings go beyond that, but signs that are a cause for concern include:

- Difficulties that last a long time.
- Persistent 'out of character' behaviour.
- If your child is hurting themselves (see panel).
- If your child is having suicidal thoughts ([see page 14](#)).
- If another child's safety is at risk.
- Difficulties that are interfering with a child's development.
- If the situation is overwhelming for parents or carers.

You know your child, so you're well placed to recognise if their negative feelings or unhelpful thoughts are becoming overwhelming. At this point, you might need to seek some extra help.



MindEd for Families' website may help you if you're unsure if certain behaviours should be a concern.



Need help now?
Go straight to **What to do if you are worried**, on **p18**

Self-harm

Some young people self-harm as a way to deal with difficult feelings, express something that is hard to put into words and to reduce overwhelming thoughts and have a sense of control.

It's natural to feel incredibly worried and upset if you believe or discover that your child is self-harming, but keep in mind that they can get through it - many young people who self-harm do recover. There is a lot of information and advice out there to help you understand self-harm and support your child.

- YoungMinds has [a guide for parents on self-harm](#).
- Place2Be has [an article on how to support a young person who is self-harming](#).
- Mind has [a website section about self-harm, including case studies](#).
- Harmless – a specialist self-harm and suicide prevention charity – [has information for friends and family, as well as resources for the individual](#).

Suicidal thoughts

Lots of young people will have thoughts about suicide at some point. This doesn't mean they are going to attempt suicide, but it does mean they need help and support.

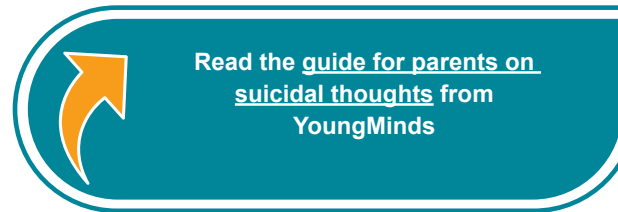
It's not always easy to know if your child is having suicidal thoughts. Many young people will keep it to themselves. While these won't apply to everyone, certain changes in behaviour may be warning signs:

- expressing feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, sadness, guilt or shame
- spending lots of time alone and withdrawing from friends and family
- losing interest in things they usually enjoy
- giving away their possessions
- seeming agitated or behaving in ways that seem out of character
- eating or sleeping more or less than usual
- using drugs and alcohol to help them cope when they're struggling
- self-harming.

Talking about suicide

It can feel really difficult to raise the subject of suicidal thoughts with your child. But talking about it does not make it more likely to happen, and it may help them.

A young person who is thinking about suicide often feels very alone with their dark thoughts, so feeling like they're able to share their worries may help them feel less isolated.



Read the [guide for parents on suicidal thoughts](#) from YoungMinds

Using the word 'suicide' yourself lets them know that it's okay to talk about it. Don't be afraid to ask directly whether they are thinking about suicide.

- The young suicide prevention charity Papyrus has advice on [how to start a conversation about suicidal thoughts](#).

If your child tells you they are having suicidal thoughts:

- Take their feelings seriously.
- Reassure them that you're really glad they've told you and that they're not alone.
- Don't try to fix or downplay their feelings – empathise with just how bad things are for them.
- Think together about what's making them feel this way.

After the conversation, seek professional help (skip to What to do if you are worried, on [p18](#))

If your child doesn't want to talk to you, you can't make them. Consider whether there is another trusted person they might talk to, and make sure they know there are organisations they can contact day or night (find these in [Appendix 1](#)).

The biggest sign that someone is at risk of attempting suicide is if they have made plans, for example thinking about how, when or where they would do it, or researching methods online.

In this case, seek urgent professional help: call 999 or take them to A&E.

If the situation is not immediately life-threatening you can call for urgent advice from your local [NHS mental health helpline](#) (England only), or a crisis number, if you have been given one by a health professional.

“It's hard to ask anyone, let alone your own child 'do you feel like you want to take your own life?'. But becoming a mental health first-aider at work made me realise we mustn't be afraid to have the conversation. If your child says yes, try not to react from a place of fear and upset and try to fix it, but listen and acknowledge what's being said.”

— Parent

One young person's experience



I first noticed I was struggling with my mental health when I was about 14 years old..I remember feeling a strange mix of angry and lonely at the same time. I'd get home from school exhausted... lie-ins at weekends got longer, my mood got worse, and I gradually came to believe 'I'm just not a happy person'.

Looking back, there were a couple of clear causes. Firstly, I was becoming a perfectionist, and had attached a lot of my self-esteem to my performance at school. As the work got harder, perfect marks became less attainable. This made me sensitive – inclined to stropiness and anger – and spiralled into feeling very isolated and unhappy.

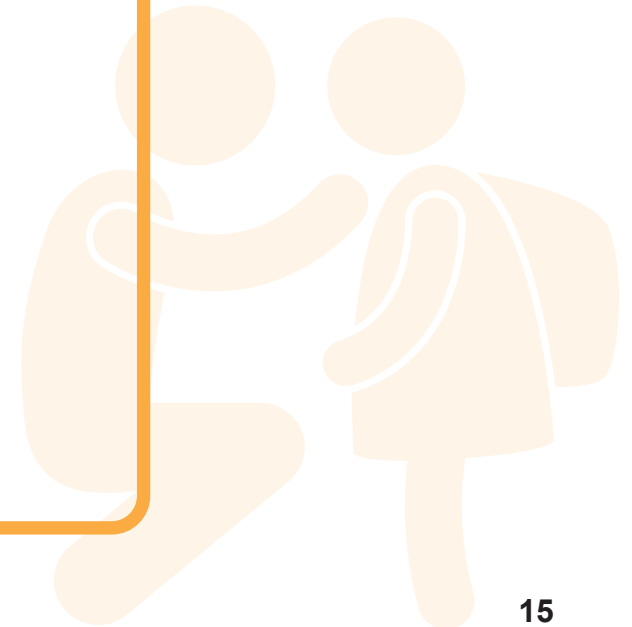
The second cause was I started to realise my attraction to men, my response was to push this down and deny it. I developed a hard exterior and did everything I could to avoid seeming 'different'.

It wasn't until I eventually came out to my parents three years later that I started to realise I was depressed. Coming out, and being accepted for who I am gave me the space to start understanding my emotions, and discuss them with my parents and friends.

Those conversations with my parents were the main reason that I was eventually able to seek help with my mental health. The most useful thing they did was listen – over the course of many chats they let me talk about my emotions, and listened without judgement.

My GP diagnosed me with moderate anxiety and depression... it gave me the language to communicate how I was feeling and understand my behaviour.

Now five years since my diagnosis, I feel like a whole different person. I hope that young people going through a similar thing at the moment know: things start getting better as soon as you start to talk.



Taking action



How to speak to your child if they're struggling

When you know your child is struggling with their feelings, talking to them about it can be hard. You might not know where to start or when is the best time.

Here are some tips from YoungMinds and Place2Be for starting a conversation:

- Avoid conversations at the height of distress. Reassure your child that you are there for them right now, but wait for a calmer time to talk about the cause.
- Sometimes talking while doing an activity together can feel less pressured and intense. Doing something physical can also help to release feelings of anxiety.
- If your child doesn't want to talk right now, reassure them that they can talk to you at any time.
- If your child always finds it hard to talk, give them the opportunity to communicate in other ways that aren't face-to-face, such as instant messaging.

For young children, [My Emotions Activity Book](#) may help them open up about how they're feeling.

As parents, we want to take the pain away, but it's important to avoid dismissing your child's experience by saying things like 'don't worry'. Show them that you're really listening and that you believe what they're telling you about their feelings and fears.

- Tell them what you've noticed, e.g. 'you seem a bit wobbly/sad/down/angry lately, I'm wondering if you're worried about something'.
- Saying 'it's understandable that you're feeling...' helps them know they are entitled to those feelings. It's different from 'I understand', which puts you in the role of an expert.
- Let them know that you love them, you're there for them and you can help them get support if they need it.
- Ask them if there's anything you could do that they would find particularly helpful.
- Give them hope by reassuring them that things can change, and they can feel better.
- While you'll want to ask lots of questions to find out as much as you can about your child's difficulties, that can feel like an interrogation. Sometimes it's better to focus on the here and now, and what would help moving forward.
- Try to stay calm and be patient.

YoungMinds [has more ideas for ways to get the conversation started and advice on how to talk about mental health.](#)

“ *The most useful thing my parents did was listen – over the course of many chats they let me talk about my emotions and listened without judgement. They made it clear they were happy to talk, and tried their best to understand how I felt and what was going on.”*

– Young professional

What to do if you are worried

If you are worried about your child's mental health, reach out for some extra help. Getting support early can be very beneficial, so don't wait until things have become very serious. There are lots of different services and there will be something out there that can help you and your child.

If you are in a crisis

If you are worried that your child is at immediate risk of harm, or is not safe, call 999 or take them to A&E. A mental health emergency is as serious as a physical one.

If your child is safe but needs urgent help and you are:

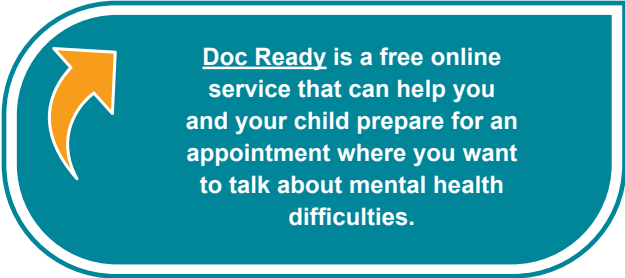
- in England, call your local 24-hour [NHS urgent mental health helpline](#)
- elsewhere in the UK, call NHS 111

The free [YoungMinds Textline](#) is there for young people when they're going through a mental health crisis. Your child can text YM to 85258.

If you're concerned, and need help

It's important to talk to your child about the situation first. But even if they're not ready to talk to anyone else, you can still reach out for advice and support. It can be helpful to tell your child that you are doing this, particularly for teenagers.

Talking to your GP is a good first step. Make an appointment with your family doctor, or ask if any of the GPs at your surgery specialise in young people's mental health. The GP should be able to tell you what support is available near you, and make referrals. This could be to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS, also called Children and Young People's Mental Health Services, CYPMHS).



[Doc Ready](#) is a free online service that can help you and your child prepare for an appointment where you want to talk about mental health difficulties.

CAMHS is a free, NHS-run specialist service that provides support and treatment. It is run by a local team in each area so the types of support they offer, and their waiting times, vary. In some areas you can self-refer. In others you need a referral from your GP.

- There may be other free services in your area. You can search by postcode at [Youth Access](#) or via the [National Centre for Children and Families](#).
- MindEd for Families also has [information about the services available](#).
- YoungMinds has [a guide to getting help for your child](#).

Tell your child's school or college what's going on. They should be able to provide someone - such as a counsellor - who your child can talk to regularly about how they're feeling, if they want to, as well as offering other support.

If you're considering paying for private mental health support, see if your school or GP can recommend someone. YoungMinds has [advice on how to find a private therapist](#) and things to look out for.

Parenting in difficult times

Being a parent is hard, even when things are going well. When your child is dealing with a mental health issue it can be incredibly difficult to stay calm and to think straight.

It is very common for parents and carers to blame themselves or to feel helpless or useless as parents. But remember that thousands of families are going through similar challenges right now – you are not alone, and you can get through this.

- YoungMinds has [a wide range of information and advice for parents](#)

Openness and communication

It is understandable if you want to rush in and do what you think needs doing to rescue your child. However, this can disempower them and exacerbate their difficulties. It's really important to talk to your child about what they think will be helpful and to respect their views, even if you disagree. Your child will need to agree to any approach if it is going to work.

- YoungMinds has advice on [working through problems with your child](#).

No-one can manage mental illness in the family alone. Reach out to friends, relatives, your GP, or specialist organisations for support, advice, or just a listening ear. Gathering support around you helps everyone to be there for the child or young person who is struggling, as well as for other family members.

- [YoungMinds has a helpline, email service and webchat for parents](#). Call them on 0808 802 5544 or chat online via their website. Both services operate 9.30am-4pm on weekdays.
- Check your employment benefits. You may have access to support via an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

If your child is receiving medical support it is important to do everything you can to maintain a positive relationship with their therapists and doctors. Open communication and a collaborative approach between your child, you and the mental health professionals helps ensure the best outcomes.

Self-care

Parenting a child who's going through a tough time is incredibly demanding. You'll have times when you feel completely drained. Don't feel guilty about this, or about getting frustrated sometimes – it's totally understandable because it's really difficult dealing with this kind of situation.

It's important to find ways to look after yourself, so you protect your own mental health and put enough back 'in the tank' to give your child what they need.

- Find [tips for looking after yourself](#) from Place2Be.
- [The Parents Survival Guide](#) from YoungMinds has encouragement and advice.
- MindEd has [information about parenting a child with mental health issues](#).

“It's like the analogy of putting your own oxygen mask on first in an aeroplane. You do need to make sure you're in a good place to be able to support your child. I got some help – counselling – and found it incredibly helpful to talk to someone that wasn't emotionally invested in the situation.”

— Parent



One parent's experience

“

We realise now that the very first symptom of our daughter's mental difficulties appeared when she was aged eight. She just said she couldn't sleep...we didn't pick up that there was wider anxiety, she was ebullient at school and socially, we didn't spot any signs.

It wasn't until she was in Year 7 that other behaviours manifested... I noticed more erratic sleeping, she would have very dramatic and sometimes violent outbursts, lots of arguments, extreme mood swings. She went through a period of not eating, and several months when she said she wanted to change gender.

But by the time she was 14, she had become very closed down. One Sunday we were having a heated discussion in the car on our way to a family lunch, and she told us she was self-harming.

Behind all the behaviours, we knew there was someone in there who was confused and upset. My first port of call was the GP, and after a long wait my daughter got into the CAMHS system and was diagnosed with anxiety and put on the list for talking services.

My advice to other parents on the start of this journey is to recognise that there are boundaries to what you can do... I think that even if I'd had all the vocabulary and all the tools and training, as her mum, I still wouldn't be the person she would accept help from.

It still feels precarious and fragile, but [with help] little by little our daughter – now aged 16 – has improved and is in a much better place than she was.

”

Conditions and treatments



Common mental health conditions

Here we outline some of the mental health difficulties seen in children and young people, and signpost further information from trusted sources.

Addiction

Addiction is when a person has no control over whether they use something - such as drugs, drink, gaming or social media - and they have become physically or psychologically dependent on it.

Substance abuse means using a drug or alcohol in the wrong way, but does not necessarily mean the person is addicted. However, addiction can begin as abuse.

- FRANK [has useful advice for parents](#).
- YoungMinds has a [guide for young people on drugs and alcohol](#).

Anxiety

Fear and worry are normal emotions, but anxiety can become a problem if it feels overwhelming or goes on a long time. It can start to impact behaviour, interfering with school, home and social life. It can cause panic attacks.

Some children are more prone to feeling anxious and some children can pick up anxious behaviour from others around them. It can also develop following a stressful or traumatic event.

- YoungMinds has a [guide on managing anxiety](#).
- A free e-booklet [The Anxious Child](#) can be downloaded from the Mental Health Foundation.
- Childline has [information to help children understand and cope with panic attacks](#).

Bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder causes people to experience periods of extremely high or low mood - lasting days or even weeks. In children or young people, bipolar disorder can impact sleep, energy levels, behaviour, thinking and relationships.

- YoungMinds has a guide for young people [about bipolar disorder](#).

Depression

It is normal to feel low at times, but if this becomes overwhelming or lasts for a long time it might be depression. Depression can be due to past or present stressful or upsetting experiences, or it may run in the family.

Depression often goes undiagnosed but it can be treated, and parents can help.

- HelpGuide has a detailed [parent's guide to teen depression](#).
- YoungMinds has [a parent's guide to depression and low mood](#).

Eating disorders

Problems with eating commonly emerge during adolescence and young adulthood. The most common disorders are bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder and anorexia nervosa.

People with eating disorders use eating - or not eating - as a way to cope with difficult feelings. They will eat much less or much more than normal. They may also exercise to excess, or get rid of food eaten for instance by being sick or misusing laxatives. This is known as purging.

- Beat Eating Disorders has a [booklet for anyone supporting someone with an eating disorder](#), as well as lots of other resources.
- Family Lives has a useful [article and case study on eating disorders](#).

OCD

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is a type of anxiety disorder that affects a person's everyday life. OCD has two main parts: obsessions and compulsions. Obsessions are unwelcome thoughts, images, urges, worries or doubts that repeatedly appear in the person's mind and cause them to feel very anxious. Compulsions are repetitive actions or rituals to try and make the obsessions go away. This can become a vicious cycle.

- YoungMinds has [a guide for young people about OCD](#).
- Patient.info has a useful article [on OCD in children and young people](#).
- [OCD Youth](#) is a website for young people and their parents by charity OCD Action.

Personality disorder

A person may receive a diagnosis of personality disorder if they experience significant difficulties in how they relate to themselves and others and have problems coping day to day. It's uncommon for children and adolescents to be diagnosed with a personality disorder, because their personalities are still emerging and evolving.

- Mind has [information about personality disorders](#).
- YoungMinds has a [guide to borderline personality disorder for young people](#).

Common mental health conditions

Psychosis

Psychosis is when a person's thoughts are so disturbed they lose touch with reality. They may hear voices, see or feel things that aren't there, or believe things that are not true.

Some people have a one-off psychotic episode, which could be caused by a stressful event, illness or drug use. In other cases there may be regular episodes, sometimes linked to other conditions such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

Although psychosis can affect people of all ages, it is rare before the older teenage years.

- The Child Mind Institute has a useful [article on signs of psychosis in teens](#) (US site).
- The Royal College of Psychiatrists has [information about psychosis](#) aimed at young people.
- YoungMinds has a [guide to psychosis for young people](#).

PTSD

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after experiencing or witnessing something extremely frightening or distressing. Symptoms can include flashbacks, avoidance of triggers, being very tense and other mood changes. PTSD can be treated.

- The PTSD charity, ptsduk, has [lots of information about the condition and treatment options in children and young people](#).

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a severe long-term mental health condition with a range of psychological symptoms which can include hallucinations, delusions, loss of interest in everyday activities and withdrawal from others. It usually starts between the ages of 15 and 35, but it is rare for it to be diagnosed before adulthood. Effective treatment is available.

- YoungMinds has a [guide to schizophrenia for young people](#).

Recovery from mental health conditions

Getting better can mean different things to different people. With support, many young people will be able to make full clinical recovery, where they no longer have mental health symptoms. Others may achieve good personal recovery, according to what is important to them as individuals. This could be something like feeling in control of their emotions, thinking more positively and having hope for the future, or being able to achieve something that they find difficult, such as going to school.

- There are lots of stories of recovery on the YoungMinds website. Go to youngminds.org.uk and search for 'recovery'.
- [Read more about personal recovery](#), from Rethink Mental Illness.

“Five years since my diagnosis of anxiety and depression I feel like a whole different person. It was the start of a slow recovery which continues to this day. It gave me the language to communicate how I was feeling and understand my behaviour. It also validated my feelings and helped me believe that there might be a way to one day feel happier.”

— Young professional



Treatments and therapies

If your child has been referred to a mental health service – or you have self-referred – the specialists there will carry out an assessment. This will confirm whether your child's difficulties meet a mental health diagnosis, and what support or treatment is most appropriate.

The results of the assessment and recommendations will be discussed with you and your child, so you can agree a care plan together.

Talking therapies

Any treatment that involves a person talking to a trained therapist about their difficulties is known as a talking therapy. They come in many different forms, suited to different situations. These are some of the most common for children and young people:

- *Counselling usually involves weekly one-to-one sessions with a counsellor, who will help your child to think about their situation. This is ideal for people who are generally well, but need help coping with a current crisis, and it may even be available at your child's school.*
- *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) supports a young person to look at how they can manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and how changing the way they think can help them feel better.*
- *Family therapy, as the name suggests, involves the whole family. It's used in situations where the family unit is having difficulty, perhaps because one member of the family has a serious problem that's affecting everyone.*

- YoungMinds has [a guide for young people on talking therapies and counselling](#), including real stories.
- The Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice has more [information on family therapy](#).
- The NHS has information about [counselling](#) and [CBT](#).

Medication

There is a lot of evidence that talking therapies work well, but medicines can also help in some cases. For instance, for young people with ADHD, severe depression or anxiety.

- YoungMinds has [a medicines glossary and real stories from young people about taking medication for mental health conditions](#).

Inpatient treatment

Most children and young people who need treatment or therapy will live at home as normal and attend regular appointments with their mental health workers. This is referred to as 'outpatient' or 'community' care.

If a young person needs intensive mental health support, or is at risk of serious harm to themselves or others, they may benefit from a period in hospital. Usually this happens with the agreement of the child or young person. However, if the risk of harm is so high that their doctors think admission is essential, the Mental Health Act can be used to admit the young person against their will.

- There is [a guide to inpatient care for young people](#), on the YoungMinds website.



Appendix 1

Sources of support your child can access

Helplines

- Anyone under 19 can contact [Childline](#) about any problem big or small. They provide support via phone online chat or email. They can provide a BSL interpreter if your child is deaf or hearing-impaired. Call 0800 11 11.
- [The Mix](#) offers support on the phone or online to anyone under 25 about anything that's troubling them. Call 0808 808 4994.
- [No Panic](#) is a specialist youth helpline for people aged 13-20 who experience panic attacks. Call 01952 680835 for a recorded breathing exercise to help you through a panic attack. Or call 0330 606 1174 for their helpline.
- Whatever your child is going through, they can contact Samaritans. Call 116 123.

Textlines

- YoungMinds Textline provides free, 24/7 text support for young people experiencing a mental health crisis. Text YM to 85258.

Communities

- [Kooth](#) has discussion boards, live chat, and an online community.
- [MeeToo](#) is a moderated peer support app, where people of similar age or experience can talk about their concerns or difficulties.

Appendix 2

More trusted sources of specialist information and support

Family separation

- [Gingerbread](#) provides information to help single parents support themselves and their families.

Bereavement

- [Winston's Wish](#) provides practical support and guidance to bereaved children and their families.
- [Hope Again](#) is Cruse Bereavement Care's website for young people experiencing grief.
- [Child Bereavement UK](#) supports children, young people and their parents when a child grieves or when a child dies.

Neurodiversity

- [National Autistic Society](#) offers support to autistic people and their families.
- [Ambitious about Autism](#) supports children and young people with autism.
- [ADHD and You](#) has information and resources to help young people living with ADHD.

LGBTQ+

- [Stonewall](#) provides information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people.
- [MindOut](#) is a mental health service run by and for LGBTQ+ people with mental health issues.

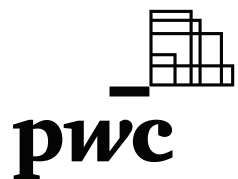
Self-harm

- [Calm Harm](#) is a free app providing strategies to help people manage the urge to self-harm.

Suicidal thoughts

- [Papyrus](#) offers advice and support for young people struggling with suicidal thoughts.
- [Samaritans](#) is a 24/7 support service for anyone in need.

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Place2Be is a children's mental health charity that provides counselling and mental health support and training in UK schools.



The Pears Maudsley Centre for Children and Young People is a partnership between The South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, Maudsley Charity and King's College London, working to transform the understanding, treatment and prevention of young people's mental ill health.

YOUNGMINDS

YoungMinds is a mental health charity for children, young people and their parents, making sure all young people get the mental health support they need.



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