



How to Tell The
Difference Between

ADHD, Anxiety, & Depression

A Guide for Parents

You're not alone.

Have you noticed something feels off with your child or teen, but you're not sure what it is? Or maybe you're wondering what's really behind their emotional outbursts, the daily power struggles, or a sudden change in behavior?

ADHD, anxiety, and depression can impact kids of all ages, resulting in challenging behaviors and big emotions. These conditions can look similar, especially in children and teens – so it's easy to feel overwhelmed trying to figure out what's going on.

But you're not alone. Recognizing these signs is the first step toward getting the right support for your child.



Why It's Important to Know the Difference

Understanding whether your child is dealing with ADHD, anxiety, or depression is essential because each condition requires a unique approach—what works for one may not work for another.

Misidentifying or overlooking symptoms can lead to frustration, ineffective strategies, and unnecessary stress for both you and your child.

But getting the right support early can help your child feel understood, empowered, and equipped to navigate their emotions and behaviors.

Reminder

You don't have to figure everything out on your own before seeking help. A therapist or psychologist who specializes in child or teen therapy can help determine what's really going on and provide tailored strategies to best support your child's unique needs.



What is ADHD, Anxiety, & Depression?

ADHD

A lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder that primarily affects focus, impulse control, executive functioning, and activity levels. Kids with ADHD may struggle with organization, following instructions, emotional outbursts, or sitting still.

ANXIETY

A mood disorder characterized by excessive worry, fear, or nervousness. It often appears as physical symptoms (stomachaches, headaches), sleep issues, and avoidance of stressful situations.

DEPRESSION

A mood disorder that involves persistent sadness, lack of motivation, and withdrawal from activities. It can also show up as irritability in children and teens.



(But there's more you should know...)

While these conditions are distinct, they can also overlap.



A child with ADHD may feel anxious about school due to struggles with organization, or a child with depression may have trouble focusing. **Untreated ADHD can also lead to depression and anxiety.**

People with ADHD are 3x more likely to develop a mood disorder and about 40% of children with ADHD also have anxiety.





Spotting the Signs

Depending on your child's age, ADHD, anxiety, and depression will look a little different. For example, young children may have difficulty managing emotions and behaviors, while school-aged kids might struggle with social interactions, academic performance, or confidence. As they grow, these challenges can shift, with preteens and teens experiencing more internalized struggles, changes in motivation, or difficulties with responsibility and independence.

Every kid is unique, but you can use the checklists below to help you recognize some common signs based on your child's age.

Spotting the Signs

of *ADHD* in children & teens

The earliest signs of ADHD can appear as young as 3 or 4 years old. ADHD is a lifelong condition that greatly benefits from early intervention, including specialized therapy for skill building and parent support.

AGES 3-4

- ☐ Dislikes activities that require paying attention for more than 1-2 minutes
- ☐ Nearly always restless - kicks/jiggles feet, twists around when seated
- ☐ Extreme difficulty with transitions - meltdowns when switching tasks
- ☐ More aggressive or impulsive than peers - grabs, hits, or climbs without thinking
- ☐ Delayed speech or talking a lot more/making more noise than peers
- ☐ Consistent difficulty following simple directions
- ☐ Tends to be very fearless and accident prone

AGES 5-9

- ☐ Easily frustrated, experiences frequent emotional outbursts
- ☐ Excessive fidgeting, squirming, or tapping when seated
- ☐ Frequently forgets instructions or loses items
- ☐ Struggles to complete tasks or schoolwork without getting distracted
- ☐ Acts impulsively (blurts out answers, interrupts conversations)
- ☐ Has trouble sitting still during meals or in class

AGES 10-12

- ☐ Difficulty staying organized with school assignments
- ☐ Procrastinates or struggles with time management
- ☐ Has difficulty waiting their turn in conversations or games
- ☐ Frequently daydreams or “zones out”
- ☐ Acts impulsively (blurts out answers, interrupts conversations)
- ☐ Has trouble transitioning between tasks or following multi-step directions

AGES 13-18

- ☐ Struggles with time management, frequently late or misses deadlines
- ☐ Trouble prioritizing tasks or breaking down large assignments, procrastinates
- ☐ Impulsively makes decisions without considering consequences
- ☐ Frequently loses personal belongings (keys, phone, homework)
- ☐ Easily overwhelmed by schoolwork or daily responsibilities
- ☐ Difficulty regulating emotions, experiences intense frustration or mood swings
- ☐ Feels restless, frequently moves around even in settings where it's inappropriate



When to seek help

You don't need to wait for your child's symptoms or behaviors to worsen to ask for help. Early intervention can prevent things from getting worse and help your child feel better quickly.

If your child's symptoms persist for more than a few weeks or impact daily life, it's a good idea to talk to a child or teen therapist.

Spotting the Signs

of *Anxiety* in children & teens

It's normal for kids to feel worried or scared sometimes, but when anxiety sticks around for weeks or starts getting in the way of daily life, it might be an anxiety disorder. With the right support, children and teens with anxiety can learn to self-regulate, face fears, and thrive socially and emotionally.

AGES 3-4

- ☐ Extreme clinginess - refuses to be separated from parents
- ☐ Intense fear of new places or people - takes excessive time to warm up
- ☐ Frequent meltdowns related to fear - tantrums over minor changes
- ☐ Fear of sleeping alone or wakes frequently due to nightmares
- ☐ Frequent stomach aches, headaches, or unexplained nausea
- ☐ Overreacts to loud noises or panics around large crowds
- ☐ Avoids group play

AGES 5-9

- ☐ Excessive worry - frequently asks "what if" questions about the future/dangers
- ☐ Fears making mistakes - erases schoolwork repeatedly, avoids trying new things
- ☐ Overly self-conscious - worries how others see them, avoids speaking in class
- ☐ Frequent stomach aches or headaches with no medical explanation
- ☐ Difficulty falling asleep, frequent nightmares, or early waking
- ☐ Avoids social situations - resists playdates, group activities, or parties
- ☐ Difficulty separating from parents - lingers at drop-offs, calls home frequently

AGES 10-12

- ☐ Perfectionism – gets extremely upset over minor mistakes
- ☐ Avoids school-related stressors or procrastinates due to fear
- ☐ Withdraws from activities once enjoyed due to fear of failure or embarrassment
- ☐ Excessive worry about friendships – constantly fears rejection or being left out
- ☐ Repetitive behaviors or rituals – double-checking things, excessive handwashing
- ☐ Frequent irritability or mood swings – easily frustrated or angered
- ☐ Sensitive to criticism – takes feedback personally, struggles with resilience

AGES 13-18

- ☐ Avoids social situations – fears judgment, avoids group settings, isolates
- ☐ Panic attacks – intense fear, rapid heartbeat, dizziness, or shortness of breath
- ☐ Excessive worrying about the future or making the wrong choices
- ☐ Overanalyzing conversations – replays social interactions
- ☐ Perfectionism – procrastinates or avoids work due to fear of imperfection
- ☐ Difficulty making decisions – second-guesses choices, needs reassurance
- ☐ Frequent nausea, dizziness, sweating, or trembling



When to seek help

You don't need to wait for your child's symptoms or behaviors to worsen to ask for help. Early intervention can prevent things from getting worse and help your child feel better quickly.

If your child's symptoms persist for more than a few weeks or impact daily life, it's a good idea to talk to a child or teen therapist.

Spotting the Signs

of *Depression* in children & teens

Depression can affect kids at any age, but it often goes unnoticed because it doesn't always look like adult depression. While it's normal for kids to feel sad or moody sometimes, ongoing sadness, hopelessness, or irritability that doesn't seem to go away could be a sign that your child or teen needs additional support.

AGES 3-4

- ☐ Frequent sadness - crying much more than others their age
- ☐ Loss of interest in play or favorite activities
- ☐ Low energy, appearing sluggish or tired more often than usual
- ☐ Difficulty expressing emotions or frequent tantrums
- ☐ Clinginess or excessive need for reassurance from caregivers
- ☐ Changes in appetite - eating much more or much less than usual
- ☐ Sleep disturbances - difficulty falling asleep, nightmares, or sleeping too much

AGES 5-9

- ☐ Withdraws from friends, avoids social interaction
- ☐ Expresses feelings of worthlessness - "I'm not good at anything"
- ☐ Frequent stomach aches or headaches with no medical cause
- ☐ Becomes easily frustrated or irritable over minor issues
- ☐ Loss of motivation, struggles to complete schoolwork
- ☐ Significant changes in eating or sleeping habits
- ☐ Talks about wanting to disappear or not be around anymore - seek immediate help if this occurs

AGES 10-12

- ☐ Persistent sadness, feeling "empty" or hopeless
- ☐ Avoids activities they used to enjoy, no longer interested in hobbies
- ☐ Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
- ☐ Low energy or frequent complaints of being "tired all the time"
- ☐ Increased irritability, anger, or mood swings
- ☐ Expressing thoughts of self-harm or feeling like a burden - seek immediate help if this occurs

AGES 13-18

- ☐ Withdrawal from friends, family, or activities they used to enjoy
- ☐ Frequent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, or worthlessness
- ☐ Increased sensitivity to criticism, feeling like a failure
- ☐ Loss of interest in appearance or hygiene
- ☐ Changes in appetite - eating much more or much less than usual
- ☐ Risk-taking behaviors - substance use, reckless driving, skipping school
- ☐ Self-harm behaviors - cutting, burning, or scratching themselves



When to seek help

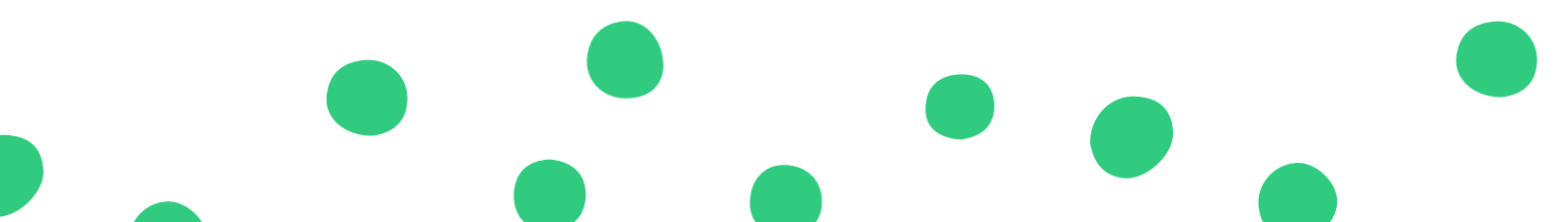
You don't need to wait for your child's symptoms or behaviors to worsen to ask for help. Early intervention can prevent things from getting worse and help your child feel better quickly.

If your child's symptoms persist for more than a few weeks or impact daily life, it's a good idea to talk to a child or teen therapist.



What You Can Do Next

If you suspect your child is struggling with ADHD, anxiety, or depression, here's what you can do:

- 1. Observe & take notes**
 - Write down behaviors, triggers, and patterns. Track when symptoms occur, how long they last, and what seems to help or make them worse. Ask your child's teacher what they've noticed. This info will be helpful if you decide to seek additional support.
 - 2. Talk to your child**
 - Keep communication open and non-judgmental. Instead of asking, "What's wrong with you?" try, "I've noticed you've been feeling [anxious/sad/distracted] lately. Can you tell me more about that?"
 - 3. Get expert support**
 - You don't have to navigate this alone. Consulting a therapist or psychiatrist who specializes in child or teen therapy will help you quickly get to the bottom of your child's behaviors and emotions, and give you age-appropriate strategies to help them thrive.
- 

A large, stylized green leaf graphic with a textured, brush-stroke-like edge, positioned in the top left corner of the page.

Ready for more support?

Take this 5-minute assessment to get personalized recommendations based on your child's needs – and quickly find the right therapist for your family.

GET STARTED

[EMORAHEALTH.COM/START](https://emorahealth.com/start)

A stylized yellow flower graphic with five petals, located in the bottom right corner of the page.A horizontal dashed blue line spanning across the bottom of the page, positioned above the yellow flower graphic.

Sources & More Info

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention | ADHD in Children - cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/
- Kennedy Krieger | Is It ADHD or Typical Toddler Behavior - kennedykrieger.org/stories
- CHADD | Recognizing ADHD in Children - chadd.org
- Child Mind Institute | Understanding Anxiety in Kids - childmind.org
- Cleveland Clinic | Anxiety in Children - my.clevelandclinic.org
- Cleveland Clinic | Depression in Children - my.clevelandclinic.org
- Mayo Clinic | Childhood Depression - mayoclinic.org