

# Signs That Your Child May Need a Therapist

Learning new strategies to meet the challenges of growing up

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All kids have emotional ups and downs: Periods of moodiness, trouble with [friends](#), dips in academic performance. But during the [coronavirus pandemic](#), feelings of quarantine isolation, not to mention the ever-changing remote-versus-in-person learning may have your child struggling with tough emotions even more.

How do you know if your child is struggling with something more serious? And when should you seek professional help?

Pediatric psychologist [Kristen Eastman, PsyD](#) weighs in on when it might be time for your child to see a therapist.

## Some struggles are normal

Dr. Eastman says as kids develop, some struggles are to be expected.

"Some moodiness, [anxiety](#), social and school difficulties are expected as kids grow up," says Eastman. "I call them bumps in the road." She says it's important to remember that these bumps are usually temporary and can present opportunities for your child to build new skills to add to their toolbox.

"The pandemic is one such bump in the road – albeit a huge one – but it can and will be overcome," Dr. Eastman says.

## **Teachable moments: Building resiliency during the pandemic**

Dr. Eastman says while the pandemic has definitely presented challenges for many children and families, how we respond to these challenges is more important than the problem itself.

She says now is a time for parents to listen and validate their child's experience. "In most cases, if you offer support, sensitivity and patience, your child can figure it out."

Dr. Eastman says validation is key whether it's during a pandemic or not. "You'll be surprised how far validating your child's experience can go in helping them feel heard," she says. "Then they're more receptive to talking about how to get through it."

But during the pandemic, the unpredictability can be a lot for some families.

"The impact of frequent changes like going from quarantine-to-remote learning, then in-person learning, and back and forth between them all produces unpredictable variables outside of our control, which is hard for many families." She says the limitations involved with social distancing can be tough on kids, too.

"Many children feel quite isolated, and it requires extra effort and creativity to stay connected," she says. "Many kids experience anxiety during these times and, in some cases, depression as a result of all of this."

Dr. Eastman says things can be particularly difficult for those children experiencing significant transitions during this time, such as starting school for the first time or graduating school without the proper adjustment or closure for these milestones.

It's natural for parents to want to quickly jump in and try to problem-solve, but children just need to know they're heard and understood. She suggests

using validating phrases like, "I see this is really hard for you," or "I notice you've been struggling lately."

But Dr. Eastman warns to be mindful of how you approach your kids during this time too. "Sometimes the parent's own anxiety about COVID-19 may heighten their child's anxiety."

## **The positive side**

Despite the negatives about the pandemic, Dr. Eastman likes to focus on some positives. She says there have been unexpected opportunities for growth and creativity during this time.

"Kids who were too shy to make phone calls before are now skilled at Zoom calls and FaceTime. This was hard at first but through practice and continued exposure, new skills have been built that will last a lifetime," she offers.

Another positive that's come from this time period she notes is families have been forced to slow down their busy lives. "The pandemic has allowed families to reinvent their time together, often resulting in increased quality time, newfound hobbies and a genuine appreciation for a simpler life," she says.

Dr. Eastman also notes the newfound creativity that's come from this period as a positive.

"Kids and families have had to be creative to stay busy and stay connected," she says. "Things like Zoom yoga, virtual family game nights and virtual play dates require thinking outside the box to stay engaged to the people and activities that matter," she says. "These experiences are building resiliency that will serve your child well when faced with other challenges down the road."

## **When to seek help**

Sometimes, what seems like a normal childhood difficulty can sometimes turn into something more serious. And with the [coronavirus](#) thwarting many normal activities of school and extracurricular activities, adjustment difficulties may be more common for kids.

Dr. Eastman says you should be concerned if your child:

- Has problems in multiple areas of life, such as family relationships, academic performance, leisure activities and friendships.
- Makes comments like "I wish I weren't here," or "Nobody would care if I ran away."
- Has repetitive, self-destructive behaviors such as hair-pulling or skin-picking.
- Starts feeling bad about themselves, less confident or less effective.
- Withdraws from family, friends or activities they used to enjoy.
- Has a significant change in [sleep habits](#) or appetite.
- Shows excessive worry about the future.
- Engages in negative behavior more frequently.
- Talks about or engages in any kind of self-harm.
- Talks explicitly about [suicide](#).
- Expresses hopelessness.

Dr. Eastman also recommends that parents trust their gut. "You know your child best. If something just doesn't feel right, trust that instinct. It's better to go and get something checked out if you're not sure."

## **How to reach out**

Don't be afraid to broach the topic with your child, says Dr. Eastman.

"Often if you just say to your child, 'Does this feel like something we need to get some help with?' they'll say, 'Yeah, it does,' " she notes.

Parents are often surprised by how willing their children are to get extra help.

That help is as close as your pediatrician, or virtual support can be a readily available option right now making access even easier for families.

"Pediatricians are often very good at helping parents differentiate what is and isn't normal, and can offer reassurance," Dr. Eastman says. If necessary, [your pediatrician](#) can refer you to a counselor who is a good match for your child and recommend other resources.

Parents sometimes assume that mental health treatment will mean medication or hospitalization for their child. "But even when problems aren't severe, some extra support can help your child and even you as a parent learn new coping skills and different strategies for handling problems," Dr. Eastman says. "We need to de-stigmatize the idea of mental health treatment."

Whether your child needs help navigating normal developmental challenges or is dealing with something more serious, seeking help can make life easier and happier for all of you.