



Spotting Mental Illness in Children

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Since you work so closely with children in your after school programs, you can be a great first line of defense for early detection of mental illness, or mental health issues.

Understanding what to look out for and tracking these signs over time can really make a world of difference for a child. You can be the person that ensures a child is being supported at home for their possible mental illness, and ensure they are not alone in their struggles.

Most Common Mental Illnesses in Children:

According to the Mayo Clinic, these are the most common mental illnesses found among children:

- **Anxiety disorders.** Anxiety disorders in children are persistent fears, worries or anxiety that disrupt their ability to participate in play, school or typical age-appropriate social situations. Diagnoses include social anxiety, generalized anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders.
- **Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).** Compared with most children of the same age, children with ADHD have difficulty with attention, impulsive behaviors, hyperactivity or some combination of these problems.



- **Eating disorders.** Eating disorders are defined as a preoccupation with an ideal body type, disordered thinking about weight and weight loss, and unsafe eating and dieting habits. Eating disorders — such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder — can result in emotional and social dysfunction and life-threatening physical complications.
- **Depression and other mood disorders.** Depression is persistent feelings of sadness and loss of interest that disrupt a child's ability to function in school and interact with others. Bipolar disorder results in extreme mood swings between depression and extreme emotional or behavioral highs that may be unguarded, risky or unsafe.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).** PTSD is prolonged emotional distress, anxiety, distressing memories, nightmares and disruptive behaviors in response to violence, abuse, injury or other traumatic events.
- **Schizophrenia.** Schizophrenia is a disorder in perceptions and thoughts that cause a person to lose touch with reality (psychosis). Most often appearing in the late teens through the 20s, schizophrenia results in hallucinations, delusions, and disordered thinking and behaviors.



Other Mental Health Issues Include:

- Behavioural and emotional disorders in children
- Bipolar Affective Disorder
- Dissociation and Dissociative disorders
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Paranoia
- Psychosis

Types of mental health issues and illnesses

These mental illnesses above are less commonly found in young children, as they are typically diagnosed later in life, but it is still helpful to be aware of them.

Signs of Mental Illness in Children:

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, many children and youth will exhibit different moods, thoughts and behaviours at various times that can be part of normal childhood development. These include:

- Getting significantly lower marks in school
- Avoiding friends and family
- Having frequent outbursts of anger
- Changes to sleeping or eating habits
- Acting out or rebelling against authority
- Drinking a lot and/or using drugs
- Not doing the things they used to enjoy



- Worrying constantly
- Experiencing frequent mood swings
- Not concerned with their appearance
- Obsessed with their weight
- Lacking energy or motivation
- Increased risk-taking behaviour
- Feeling very down

However, these above characteristics and behaviours may be signs of an underlying mental health concern or disorder if they:

- Are intense
- Persist over long periods of time
- Are inappropriate for the child's age
- Interfere with the child's life

It is important to track these behaviours over time if you are beginning to suspect a child you are working with may have a mental illness, or mental health issues. Any of these signs in isolation may not be indicative of mental illness, however, if these signs occur in conjunction with other signs and/or occur over an extended period of time, they may be an indicator of mental illness. If you believe a child you are working with might have a mental illness, it may be a good idea to reach out to a trusted adult in the child's life to inquire with them about it.

Sources:

Child and Youth Mental Health: Signs and Symptoms
Mental illness in children: Know the signs