

Building Emotional Resiliency in Children

Olivia Radocchia, C. Psych. Assoc.

Being sad is normal

Feeling sad is a part of growing up, and it is normal for children to experience feelings of sadness from time to time. There are many situations in a child's life that can cause them to feel sad, such as tension with friends or at home with family, bullying at school, and sometimes children can feel sad for no reason at all, like Hugo. Sadness in children is characterized by cognitive changes (pessimism, thinking difficulties, thoughts of worthlessness), affective changes (lack of pleasure in activities they enjoy, irritability, withdrawn and passive) and biological changes (low energy and fatigue).

Most often, with time and a little encouragement from family and friends, a child's sadness will subside. However, there are times when it becomes more than just feeling 'sad' or 'down'. This is when, as a parent, it is important to monitor your child for signs of depression.

When it's more than being 'sad'

Depression is a mood disorder that causes chronic feelings of sadness or worthlessness in children. Mood disorders affect the way you feel, which then affects the way you think and act. Although unhappiness triggered by events is not uncommon in children, it normally goes away when circumstances change. However, a child with depression doesn't recover when events change; their dark mood and lack of interest in things they used to enjoy will persist.

It is important to keep in mind that one of the main things to look for is that the sadness is having a serious impact on the child's life, and these changes are showing up not only at home, but also at school (grades and social interaction) and with friends.

If you are concerned about your child's sadness, it is always a good idea to monitor the signs you are seeing in a journal. This way, you will have information on hand if you need to speak to your family doctor or another professional about your concerns.

Here are some signs of depression in children:

- Persistent sad or irritable mood (depression in children can sometimes show itself as irritability rather than sadness).
- Cries easily
- Frequent physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches etc.)
- Frequent absences from school or poor performance in school
- Feeling bored and does not engage in many activities
- Does not often look happy seems withdrawn
- Does not seem to be interested in, or take pleasure from activities and toys they used to enjoy
- Increased irritability, anger or hostility
- Significant weight loss or decrease in appetite (more than 5 percent of body weight in a month)
- Insomnia (not being able to sleep) or hypersomnia (over-sleeping)
- Sluggish movements
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Speaks negatively about themselves and others
- Has difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- In more severe cases, thoughts of death or harming themselves (necessary?)

Tips on Reading “Hugo and the Sad” With Your Child

As parents and/or teachers, there are some helpful guidelines we can follow to ensure your child is benefitting as much as possible from the story. Engaging the child more interactively in the process of reading the book will help them to relate more to Hugo and the strategies he uses to feel better.

- Before starting the book, talk to them about the general topic and have them talk to you about their own experiences with sadness and how they feel.
- Have the book read aloud (either by the child or yourself)
- Engage in some discussion with the child about the story e.g.
 - What was the story about?
 - How did the story make you feel?
 - What problem did Hugo have? And how did he solve it?
 - If you’re feeling sad too, what can you do?
- Encourage the child to colour or draw on one of the “My Sad” pages.

The Importance of Building Resilience

There are many factors that can help a child to become more resilient in the face of negative emotions and situations. These positive factors are referred to as **protective factors**, and

children with more protective factors are less likely to develop mental illness. Children are also faced with **risk factors**, which are factors that negatively impact a child's well being.

Risk factors can include: poverty, severe relationship problems within the family, parental mental or physical illness, death of a loved one, low self-esteem, illness, and bullying, among others.

Protective factors are essential to building mental and emotional resilience in children. Resiliency is another word for a child's ability to 'bounce back' after encountering negative situations, negative emotions, or risk factors. Protective factors include: strong and caring relationship with family, easy temperament, positive self-esteem, good social and emotional skills, economic security, and good health, among others.

There are some ways to increase protective factors for a child.

- It is important to make sure the child has strong relationships with adults that they can trust; be a good listener for the child and encourage them to communicate with you.
- Help the child keep a healthy lifestyle, including healthy eating, and exercise/extracurricular activities (such as sports).

Activities to do at home

If your child is struggling with sadness, there are some things that you can do with and for your child. If you are still concerned about their mood after a prolonged period of time, see the resource section on 'Next steps'.

- It is important to monitor any changes or progress your child is experiencing (e.g. in a journal)
- Talk to your child: it is important to be non-judgmental, and to let your child know that they can talk to you. E.g. "I've noticed you've been looking sad lately, why don't you tell me how you've been feeling?"
 - Be an active listener and try not to interrupt the child when they are speaking
- Visualization: Talk with the child about situations that might arise, such as if the child feels sad, gets into an argument, or is being bullied, and have them close their eyes and visualize the steps they might take to find a solution to their problem. Some of these solutions may include the following activities:
- Drawing: drawing/colouring/painting can be an effective way for your child to show their feelings, especially if they do not want to talk about it. Encourage them to draw 'The Sad', just like Hugo did.
- The Balloon: With your child you can practice imaging a balloon (they can choose whichever colour they would like) and help them to imagine tying their sadness, or how they envision "The Sad", to the string of the balloon. When they let the balloon go in

their mind, explain to them that the balloon floats away and it takes their sadness with it, so that they don't have to feel sad anymore.

- Check-Ins: It is helpful to check in on a regular basis with your child to see how they are feeling. Below are two examples of interactive ways that you can check-In with your child.
- Mood Thermometer:



Have the child show you where on the thermometer they are feeling.

Using the Mood Thermometer will help the child to express their feelings if they are unable to verbally.

This strategy is also helpful to monitor their emotional well-being over time.

The next steps

If you continue to notice that your child's sad mood has not improved, there are several professionals who can help guide you along the right path with your child and inform you about assessment and treatment options.

- Family doctor/ pediatrician
- At school: school psychologist, social worker, teacher

Common treatment for child depression

Early intervention and treatment is important so that children can get back to their education and other goals as quickly as possible. The type of treatment depends on the severity of the illness and its impact on the child's life.

- Many schools offer programs that build skills, resiliency, and supports. They also offer counseling or referrals to community services.
- CBT: Many children start with counseling like cognitive-behavioural therapy. CBT teaches people how their thoughts, feelings, and actions work together. It also teaches skills such as healthy thinking, problem solving, and stress management.
- Self-care strategies and a healthy lifestyle: eating healthy food, exercising, spending time with others, and making time for fun activities.
- Medication: They may also be prescribed an antidepressant if other options don't seem to help.
 - The decision to use medication can be complicated, especially if the child is young. This option should be discussed with a family doctor.

*This list is only an example of a few interventions and treatments that may be used. A health care professional will be able to provide information on the treatment best suited to your child.

Resources

- CAMH- Growing Up Resilient: Ways to Build Resilience in Children and Youth:
http://www.camh.ca/en/education/teachers_school_programs/resources_for_teachers_and_schools/growing_up_resilient_ways_to_build_resilience_in_children_and_youth/Pages/growing_up_resilient_ways_to_build_resilience_in_children_and_youth.aspx
- The Hincks-Dellcrest Centre- The Sad Child:
<http://www.hincksdellcrest.org/ABC/Teacher-Resource/The-Sad-Child/Sadness.aspx>
- Taking Care: Child and Youth Mental Health- Documentary 'Beyond the Blues: Child and Youth Depression'. Also includes self-help kits:
<http://takingcare.knowledge.ca/splash.html>
- Hot Stuff to Help Kids Cheer Up: the Depression and Self-Esteem Workbook by Jerry Wilde, (ages 9-12)

“This handy guide is designed to give kids the tools they need to work through their depression and self-esteem issues in a way that’s positive and effective. Author Jerry Wilde has used his experience as a school psychologist to create a workbook that is proven effective in giving kids the tools to break out of the rut of feeling bad.”

- http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/parents/resources_parents.php