

# PARENTING DURING DEPRESSION

## *A Guide for Clinicians*

### Background

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Depression is a common and impairing mental illness that frequently afflicts caregivers, especially women (5-10% prevalence). Women who are raising young children without adequate supports and women in the post partum period are particularly vulnerable with prevalence up to 20%. It is difficult for parents to be effective when depressed. If you find a parent screens positive for depression the following will help guide your response:

- It is important to emphasize to the parent that “You are not alone.” Depression heightens the sense of being cut off and isolated from one’s usual supports. It attacks the sense of self. You can help the parent see that he or she is not alone by emphasizing the resources available from your office, by stressing the availability and helpfulness of treatment, and by assisting the parent to recognize other resources, i.e., their primary care physician, spouses, friends. Those who suffer from depression are often ashamed of the illness and therefore further isolate themselves.
- Encourage the parent to seek help. If not receiving care, encourage them to do so. If they are currently in treatment and have symptoms still, ask if they are getting the help they need. Ask if the treatment is helpful. If not, encourage them to return to their provider.

In addition to treatment for depression, there are four key concepts that are helpful to the parent:

- Children of different ages require different kinds of help when the parent is depressed.
- Help the parent recognize if their children might be depressed. A depressed parent may worry about their child’s behavior and mood. Children of depressed parents are more likely to have depression and other behavior problems.
- It is important to ask specifically if a child feels down or blue, if the symptoms have persisted, and if symptoms interfere with daily functioning. Some children with aggressive or acting out behaviors may actually be depressed. Suicidal thoughts, plans, or suicide attempts are a psychiatric emergency requiring immediate mental health evaluation.
- Depression in parents does not inevitably lead to depression or behavioral problems in their children and there is much that can help both parents and children in this situation. Helping the parent to understand this can be very reassuring.
- Efforts to build strengths and resilience in children can help ward off depression.

### Interview

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As a primary care physician for children, it is helpful to ask the parent about the circumstances leading up to depression and whether he or she has any worries or concerns about the children. Depression is often associated with divorce, bereavement, job loss, or social dislocation. These are difficult for children as well as for adults. The direct approach that pediatricians can use is as follows:

- Ask the parent “How do you think the kids are doing?” looking for areas of strength or areas of concern; i.e., a normally animated infant seems less interactive, or a toddler seems overly angry or aggressive.
- Then ask, “How do you feel you are doing as a parent since you have become depressed?”



# Counseling Tips



Giving parents some tools to build resiliency in their children helps them gain confidence in their ability to parent through depression. Following are some suggestions that pediatricians can use with parents to begin the conversation about encouraging resilience in their children.

- **Remind parents to take care of themselves.** Ask the parent what they are doing to meet their own needs and if they are getting support. Encourage them to take steps to feel better and remind them that this will help them with parenting.
  - *“Try to take just a few minutes for yourself each day. Try reading a book, exercising, or watching a favorite TV show. If you find you don’t have time for this, try asking a friend or family member to stop over once in a while so can get away. Don’t be too hard on yourself. Taking care of yourself will help you feel better and this will help your kids.”*
- **Pay attention to parenting.** If an infant or child seems withdrawn, encourage the parents to engage the child i.e., reading, singing, playing peek a boo or hide and seek. If a child is over stimulated or aggressive, suggest some ways to calm their child and themselves together, i.e., infant massage, or sensory play for toddlers (eg. Playing with playdough, sand or water).
  - *“Very often how a child behaves or expresses him/herself reflects his parent’s moods, especially if parental depression occurs over a long period of time. While you are feeling this way, it may help to focus on activities you and your child can enjoy together. Look for clues from your child. If he/she seems overly excitable try quietly reading together. If your child appears to be withdrawn make an effort to get him/her involved in play. Play dress up together, work on a puzzle together or have the child help you make dinner or even clean the house.”*
- **Help parents participate in children’s activities outside the home.** In particular, parents with depression may be less involved in supporting their children’s activities. Encourage parents to plan activities each day they are home with their child such as attending a playgroup or story time at the local library. Emphasize that consistent daily routines will be helpful for both parent and child.
  - *“The local library has a free story hour on Wednesday’s and Saturday’s that many children and parents attend. That would be a nice way to connect with other parents while encouraging your child to make new friends. Look in your local newspaper for weekend activities. Places like local farms and museums often have fun activities for children on the weekends such as hayrides and puppet shows. Things like that can be fun for your whole family.”*
- **Help parents reestablish their own and their children’s social connections.** Depression in parents often leads to withdrawal and disrupts relationships both within and outside the family. It is important for the parent to make an effort reestablishing social relationships with friends and family. The parent should make sure that the child’s usual activities with friends continue.
  - *“Have you been keeping in touch with your family and friends? Having their support will help you. Friendships with children and adults are also important for your child. Encourage your child to spend time with grandparents or other supportive family members as well as their friends.”*
- **Help the family understand the illness as a medical illness.** If a child is old enough to understand that the parent is not well, you can encourage the family to talk about it. Within the family, it is important that everyone understand that depression is a medical illness. Just as recovery from a medical illness requires explanation, so does recovery from a depression. The parent(s) must assure their children that the depression is not the children’s fault.
  - *“You can explain to your kids that you have been sick, but that you are getting help and will start to feel better. Let them know that just as getting a cold is no one’s fault, becoming depressed is no one’s fault. It takes time to recover, as other illnesses do, and eventually you will get better.”*

A useful reference for parents in thinking about how to help their children understand depression is *When A Parent is Depressed: How to Protect Your Children from the Effects of Depression in the Family*, by Little, Brown and Company, December 2003.