

## Ages 8-12

Children spend even more time away from home during these years. Continue your routines or look for ways that disrupted routines can be restarted.

- ◆ Make sure your children continue to go to school. Try to stay involved in schoolwork and school events.
- ◆ Pay attention to and encourage their relationships with other children their age.
- ◆ Tell your children that doing homework is important. Let them know that you think attending school is important.
- ◆ Plan a specific conversation with your child (see *Tips For Having a Family Conversation* below).



## Ages 13-18

Adolescents spend much of their free time with friends and outside of the home. It is important that they know you are actively involved as a parent. Their routines also need to be continued or reestablished.

- ◆ Get help with this important job from your partner or others. It is difficult to set and enforce limits with adolescents when you feel tired and overwhelmed.
- ◆ Look for signs that your adolescent is doing ok. Are they eating and sleeping? Or do they seem down and blue? If they seem to be having a hard time too, ask your pediatrician for help.
- ◆ Plan a specific conversation with your teen (see *Tips For Having a Family Conversation* below).

## Tips for Having a Family Conversation

Family conversations are a useful way of getting difficult issues out in the open. As children grow up, parents may find that it can be difficult to talk to their kids, especially about sensitive topics such as divorce, depression, or death. Plan to talk more than once. It often takes time for families and children to process and understand sensitive subjects. If you want to have a family conversation, the following rules are helpful:

- Start by planning with your partner, if you have one, what you would like to say to your children.
- *Emphasize the positive* - that things will get better. Make a list of the positive things in your lives at the moment.
- Talk about what you are doing to deal with depression- understanding it, getting treatment and taking care of yourself.
- Don't hesitate to ask your pediatrician for help in planning this conversation. It may also be helpful to talk to one of your child's teachers.
- Emphasize that the child did not cause your problem. Tell the child that he/she should not feel guilty or responsible.
- Adolescents are better able to understand complicated explanations. For example you can explain that "Depression resulted from experiencing many losses". Adolescents also need to know that they should feel free to pursue their own lives.

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.

Developed by The Center to Enhance Child Health at the Dartmouth Medical School, Hanover, NH, in collaboration with William Beardslee, M.D., Children's Hospital, Boston, MA. Copyright Trustees of Dartmouth College 2004

# Guide for Parents when times are tough



**P**arenting is a tough job but when a parent is not feeling well the job of parenting can become more difficult and even overwhelming. Stressful life events such as financial difficulties, divorce, illness or death can make you feel down, sad or blue and sometimes result in depression.

**Depression is a common, but treatable problem during the parenting years.**

Below are some tips to keep in mind as you seek further guidance:

- ◆ When times are tough, remember that help is available. Seek help if you feel you need it. You do not need to be alone with depression.
- ◆ Remember that it may take some time for things to improve. If you are trying to make changes or are prescribed treatment, stick with it.
- ◆ Even though things are not going well in your life, you can still be a very good parent.

**O**ne's depressed mood can affect parenting but certain actions have been shown to help children when parents are feeling down. It is important not to let guilt or embarrassment stop you from reaching out for help. Research has shown that the most helpful actions are those that build children's self-esteem so your mood will not effect them.



**S**tart by asking the question, "How are my children doing?" Remember to ask others who spend a lot of time with your children such as teachers and caregivers. If your children are doing

well, you can continue to help maintain their self-esteem. If you are worried about them, ask your pediatrician for help in figuring what is wrong and then how to best help them.

**T**he way children understand information and emotion depends a great deal on their age. The following sections give age-specific suggestions on parenting that should be helpful any time, but especially when the going gets tough.

**S**ome general tips are:

- ◆ Take care of yourself. This will make it easier to care for your children. Make sure to get a little fresh air or exercise everyday if possible.
- ◆ Pay attention to parenting. Try not to let your distress disrupt your children's lives. Reassure them that usual routines will continue.
- ◆ Make sure your children know that what you are feeling is not their fault.
- ◆ Don't try to parent alone when you are not feeling good about yourself. Get help from your family and friends. Look for a teenager or college student who is good with children to help you out. Having a few hours a week to exercise, pursue a hobby, or to attend treatment will help you feel better about yourself and in turn help your parenting.

## Ages 0-3

- ◆ Talk to your infant as you perform daily tasks such as getting dressed or making dinner. Explain what you are doing as they watch you. Singing and reading with energy will increase your child's interest. Playing games such as peek-a-boo and hide and seek with toddlers and preschoolers invites their participation.
- ◆ If your infant or child seems overly excitable, try toning him or her down quietly by reading together. Put on soothing music you enjoy and play quietly together. Activities such as play dough or water play can also be soothing to a toddler or preschooler.
- ◆ When you are with your infant or child, play music you enjoy listening to. This will make you feel good, and this good feeling will be felt by your young child.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to ask for help so you can take a break. You are less likely to have energy to interact with your infant or toddler when you are feeling down or overwhelmed.
- ◆ Children younger than 3 most often will not understand explanations about why parents are not feeling good. What they will understand is connecting with their parents in positive ways describe above.



## Ages 4-7

These years are ones of tremendous growth for children. They will spend more time away from home in child care, kindergarten, and in elementary school.

- ◆ Try to stick to your family's routine. When things are stressful around the house, family routines (such as meals together, calming activities in the evening, reading together and even play dates or going to school) may be disrupted. Routine provides security and stability to family life.
- ◆ Attempt to continue or resume pleasurable activities you shared with your child before things got tough. Try to build gradually back to where you were by doing a few activities during the week that you used to do.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to ask for help so you can take a break. Children in this age range require a lot of care.
- ◆ Simple explanations are best. You can tell your child that you are not feeling well and most children can understand that parents need to rest. What children really need is repeated reassurance that routines will continue. More explanation about what you are feeling can be given as things get better.

