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# FACTS FOR FAMILIES

Fact No. 4 (11/95)

## THE DEPRESSED CHILD

Not only adults become depressed. Children and teenagers also may have depression. Depression is defined as an illness when the depressive condition persists.

Significant depression probably exists in about 5 percent of children and adolescents in the general population. Children under stress, who experience loss, or who have attentional, learning or conduct disorders are at a higher risk for depression.

The behavior of depressed children and teenagers differs from the behavior of depressed adults. Child and adolescent psychiatrists advise parents to be aware of signs in their youngsters such as:

- persistent sadness;
- an inability to enjoy previously favorite activities;
- increased activity or irritability;
- frequent complaints of physical illnesses such as headaches and stomachaches;
- frequent absences from school or poor performance in school;
- persistent boredom, low energy, poor concentration; or
- a major change in eating and/or sleeping patterns.

A child who used to play often with friends may now spend most of the time alone and without interests. Things that were once fun now bring little joy to the depressed child. Children and adolescents who are depressed may say they want to be dead or may talk about suicide. Depressed adolescents may abuse alcohol or other drugs as a way to feel better.

Children and adolescents who cause trouble at home or at school may actually be depressed but not know it. Because the youngster may not always seem sad, parents and teachers may not realize that troublesome behavior is a sign of depression. When asked directly, these children can sometimes state they are unhappy or sad.

Early diagnosis and medical treatment are essential for depressed children. For help, parents should ask their physician to refer them to a child and adolescent psychiatrist, who can diagnose and treat depression in children and teenagers.