



# STUDENTS EXPRESSING SADNESS

*This information is designed to help teachers respond to students who may be in need of support. It is **not** intended to be used as a diagnostic tool or to replace the use of formal assessments employed by mental health professionals. Additionally, it is important to consider the context of the situation, individual differences, as well as cultural and linguistic factors..*

Teachers are an important part of establishing and maintaining healthy environments for children to learn and grow. Teachers can assist students who are expressing sadness by providing emotional support, promoting positive peer relationships, and connecting students with other professionals in the school who may be helpful resources.

## WHAT IS SADNESS?

- Sadness is the state of feeling unhappy, sorrowful, or mournful in reaction to disappointing events (e.g., disagreements with teachers or peers) or difficult life circumstances (e.g., poverty).
- Typical experiences of sadness are brief and in line with what you would expect based on the event or circumstance. However, in some cases sadness may persist for a longer time, be more intense than expected, or interfere with normal social activities, interests, and/or schoolwork.

## WHAT DOES SADNESS LOOK LIKE IN SCHOOL?

All students experience sadness sometimes, and the behaviors associated with sadness can be different for each individual. Persistent sadness may look like the following for each school-age group:

- **Pre-K, kindergarten, and elementary students** may appear restless or fidgety, engage in aggressive behavior (e.g., pushing or hitting other children), or complain of stomachaches or headaches.
- **Middle and high school students** may demonstrate conduct problems (e.g., lying, cheating, bursts of anger), substance use, truancy, and/or declining academic performance and achievement.
- Other symptoms of sadness across age groups may include frequent crying, excessive fatigue and low energy, social withdrawal, difficulty concentrating, increased sensitivity to rejection or criticism, detachment from historically enjoyed activities or close friends, and feelings of worthlessness or guilt.
- More persistent or severe sadness left unaddressed could lead to more significant symptoms of depression such as changes in appetite, sleep, or hygiene; even greater detachment from favorite activities or friends; aggressive behaviors; or, if left untreated, thoughts of self-harm, suicide, an attempt at either, or even both.

## WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

DO	DON'T
Remain calm, express concern, and offer help. For example, "I noticed you're not acting like yourself today. I'm wondering if you're feeling sad about something?"	Ignore or avoid the student or the issue.
Try to understand the underlying cause of the sadness.	Assume causes or jump to conclusions.
Keep an open mind to the many different reasons that students might appear sad. In the virtual learning environment (VLE), consider that students might act differently when others are in the room with them or because they are in a home setting.	Assume that the reason for sadness is depression.
Help students remember that everyone experiences sadness sometimes and that there are people who can help. You and other students can say, "It is okay to feel sad. What can I do to help?"	Minimize the student's feelings, or suggest sadness is inappropriate.
Encourage different outlets for expressing emotions, such as through music, art, or writing.	Focus solely on verbal expression or conversation.
Remind students that you care about them, their comfort, and their academic and social success.	Emphasize the possible negative outcomes of persistent sadness.
Consult with the student's parents/guardians and with the school nurse or school mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, counselors) as appropriate.	Neglect to inform or involve the student's parents/guardians, school nurse, or school mental health professionals.

## REFER STUDENTS TO FURTHER HELP IF NEEDED.

- Be sure to follow relevant school and district policies.
- Persistent sadness may warrant referral to school psychologist or community mental health providers.

## LINKS TO RESOURCES:

- Psychology Topics ([apa.org/topics/index](https://apa.org/topics/index))
- Depression: Supporting Students at School ([bit.ly/3mdijDC](https://bit.ly/3mdijDC))
- Tips For Teachers: Ways To Help Students Who Struggle With Emotions Or Behavior ([bit.ly/3AQMf2S](https://bit.ly/3AQMf2S))
- How Teachers Can Help Kids Deal With Negative Emotions in the Classroom ([bit.ly/3iZiXO](https://bit.ly/3iZiXO))
- Depression ([childmind.org/topics/concerns/depression](https://childmind.org/topics/concerns/depression))
- School and Classroom Depression Strategies ([bit.ly/37T3eyH](https://bit.ly/37T3eyH))

### Related mental health primers:

Bullying, Crisis, Low Self-Compassion or Low Perceptions of Competence

## LOCAL RESOURCES:

