



Blue Cross Behavioral HealthSM Children and Adolescents

A reference for parents and child caregivers

We're *here* to help.

Overview

It's troubling when you think your child may be struggling with a behavioral or mental health condition. How do you know if your child needs professional help and, more importantly, what should you do about it?

This reference is intended to be a starting point for parents or caregivers interested in learning more about behavioral and mental health as it relates to children. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan encourages you to talk with your child's doctor if you have specific questions or concerns.

FACTS:

According to the Centers for Disease Control, the most common behavioral health conditions found in children are:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD
- Behavior problems
- Depression
- Anxiety

What's behavioral health?

Behavioral health is an umbrella term we use that includes both mental health conditions and substance use disorders or other behavioral issues. These conditions can affect the way children behave, learn, socialize and handle their emotions — and can make it difficult for them to function well in school and at home. Identifying and understanding these conditions can sometimes be confusing for parents since normal childhood development includes a great deal of change that may easily be mistaken for a behavioral health disorder.



Dr. Kristyn Gregory
Medical Director | Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan

"Seeing a medical professional about a medical problem, such as diabetes or a sprained ankle, is no different from seeing a mental health professional about a mental health concern. Mental and physical health are connected. It's all about wholeness."

FACTS:

Young people are at a higher risk of developing a substance use disorder than adults when exposed to alcohol or drugs. A recent National Institute of Health study found that the younger people are when they first tried marijuana or another drug, the more likely they are to develop a related substance use disorder.

Don't forget to take care of yourself

Parental self-care is often overlooked in a world of non-stop homework, after-school activities and the constant pressure to keep children entertained and engaged. Children, however, learn and model their behavior on those closest to them, and feel more comfortable about resting or sitting quietly with their thoughts if they see their loved ones doing it.

Here are some tips for good self-care:

- Maintain a routine that includes regular, healthy meals, plenty of water, exercise and rest.
- Sleep at least 7 to 9 hours a day.
- Engage in social activities with friends and loved ones.
- Treat yourself to some "me" time: take a walk, sip a cup of tea on the porch or watch a movie you've been wanting to see.
- Be gentle with yourself. There is no perfect family and there is no perfect parent.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, anxious or depressed, talk with your primary care doctor or a behavioral health specialist. You can also find support on our [Blue Cross Behavioral Health](https://www.bcbasm.com/behavioralhealth) site, with virtual, in-person and self-guided options.



Warning signs of potential mental health issues in young children

- An increased number of tantrums, more moodiness than usual or aggressive behavior
- Significant change in appetite or eating habits
- Frequent physical complaints, such as a stomach pain or headache without an obvious medical cause
- Decline in grades or academic performance
- Poor grades despite trying very hard
- Repeated talk about fears and worries
- Changes in sleep patterns (too much or too little), frequent nightmares or appearing very tired during the day
- No interest in playing with other children or repeated struggles to make friends
- Repeated checking on things for fear that something bad might happen

Warning signs of potential mental health issues in older children and adolescents

- Persistent sadness (more than two weeks)
- Losing interest in things they previously enjoyed
- Exhibiting very low energy
- Talking about suicide, death or hurting oneself
- Decline in grades or academic performance
- Poor grades despite trying very hard
- Change, avoidance or withdrawal from social activities and friends
- Very fearful about gaining weight or excessive exercise and dieting
- Change in sleep patterns; always tired or unable to fall asleep
- Significant change in appetite or eating habits
- Engaging in self-harm (e.g., cutting skin)
- Frequent physical complaints, such as stomach pain or headache without an obvious medical cause
- Severe anxiety, worries and fears that interfere with daily life
- Increased moodiness or aggressive behavior
- Noticeable periods of elevated energy and activity and requiring very little sleep
- Engaging in destructive or risky behaviors
- Smoking, drinking or using drugs



What do I do if I'm concerned about my child's mental or behavioral health?

Parents are often the first to notice changes in a child's behavior. If you notice changes that concern you, here are some first steps you could take:

- Talk with your child about their feelings.
- Talk with teachers, close friends or relatives about your concerns.
- Consult with your child's doctor and describe the mental or behavioral issues you've observed.

If you or your child don't have a doctor, [log in](#) to your Blue Cross member account and search for one today.

How are mental health disorders in children treated?

A licensed behavioral health provider (psychologist, psychiatrist, clinical social worker or mental health counselor) with expertise in psychotherapy can help children learn how to talk about their thoughts and feelings, and how best to respond to them. A doctor or mental health professional may also recommend medication as part of the treatment plan.

Ways to support children and adolescents

Routines help children feel secure. As much as possible, maintain normal and predictable routines that include academics, play, spending time outdoors, chores, rest and sleep. Here are other tips:

- Try your best to ensure your child has healthy meals.
- Make sure your child is getting enough sleep as recommended for his or her age.
- Talk regularly with your child and make talking about feelings a normal occurrence.
- Demonstrate the healthy strategies you use when you're having a tough time. For example, you might say: "I'm feeling really overwhelmed right now, so I'm going to take a few deep breaths to calm myself down."
- Avoid allowing children too much screen time and encourage play, reading, drawing or other activities. Children and adolescents should take breaks from social media periodically.
- Seek supportive relationships in the community. Speaking with a pastor, teacher or school social worker can be helpful.
- Limit a child's exposure to social media and news.
- Have age-appropriate discussions about current world events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). The loss of normal routines, such as going to school, or concerns about illness and death can cause children to feel unsafe.



"Our children are watching us and learning from our example. As we face the challenging task of parenting, it's important to serve as a role model for healthy behavior — both physical and mental — and help children navigate the many changes they'll face in their lives. We hope the information in this guide will assist you in your parenting journey."

Dr. William Beecroft
Medical Director | Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan

Stigma as a barrier to getting care

Sometimes stigma can prevent parents from getting the help that they or their children need. Remind yourself and your family that it's just as important to treat disorders affecting the mind as conditions that affect the body. Many high-profile people, including musicians, actors and TV personalities, have spoken publicly about their struggles with mental health and substance use disorders. This type of candor can help remove stigma as a barrier to care.

Where can I find help?

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan can help you find high-quality care for yourself and your family. The *Find a Doctor* search feature on [bcbsm.com](https://www.bcbsm.com) can help you find a primary care doctor or behavioral health specialist in your area.

Also, Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association's Blue Distinction® Specialty Care program can help you find specialty care in 11 different areas of care, including substance use treatment and recovery. For more details see the [Blue Distinction Center Finder](#). Designations are also identified on the *Find a Doctor* search tool on Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan's website.

Numbers to know

- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**.
- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline has a text feature you can use if you or a loved one is struggling. **You can text "HOME" to the Crisis Text Line at 741741.**

FACTS:

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 5 people in the U.S. will experience a mental illness in a given year.

Need more information?

You might find the following resources helpful:

Facts for Families Guide*

MentalHealth.gov*

Child and Adolescent Mental Health*

Prevalence of Substance Use Disorders Among Young People*

Your Blue Cross health plan offers many confidential and low-cost behavioral health care options — some of them free — to help you achieve peace of mind. Visit bcbsm.com/mentalhealth to get started and learn more.



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of Michigan

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