

Dealing with common mental health issues for children of different age groups



Parenting in the pandemic presents a unique set of challenges. Hence in this leaflet, we will discuss the various behavioural and emotional difficulties faced by children of different ages as well as certain strategies to assist healthy child development in the pandemic.

Infants (from birth up to 2 years):

Mental health concerns often have roots in childhood and early interventions of the same are necessary to prevent future issues. The growing infant experiences many changes as part of emotional and social development. Sometimes there are persistent challenges in these processes, and seeking support from an expert can help reduce stress for everyone involved.

Common emotional and behavioural challenges for infants include:

- Poor sleep patterns
- Difficulties with feeding
- Persistent or unremitting crying
- Restlessness
- Anxiety and tension
- Lack of weight gain or failure to thrive
- Failure to meet expected developmental milestones

By and large, an infant's developmental difficulties can be helped by providing a consistent and sensitive response to their nonverbal communications and meeting their needs so they can rely on the caregiver. Such as talking to the baby, reading/singing to the baby, feeding your baby and ensuring your baby is clean if they soil their diaper. It is important to watch out for signs of restlessness and spend adequate time soothing/cuddling the baby as well. However, if any of the challenges mentioned above persist, it is advisable to consult the appropriate medical professional for the same.



Toddlers (2 to 5 years)

During these years, toddlers move around more and become aware of themselves and their surroundings. They are likely to explore new objects and people, imitate others, be able to follow simple instructions, and show defiant behaviour. Movement like crawling, walking or jumping is also exhibited during these years. As children grow, they tend to become more independent and start to ask questions about their surroundings.

Some challenging ways in which toddlers may react include:

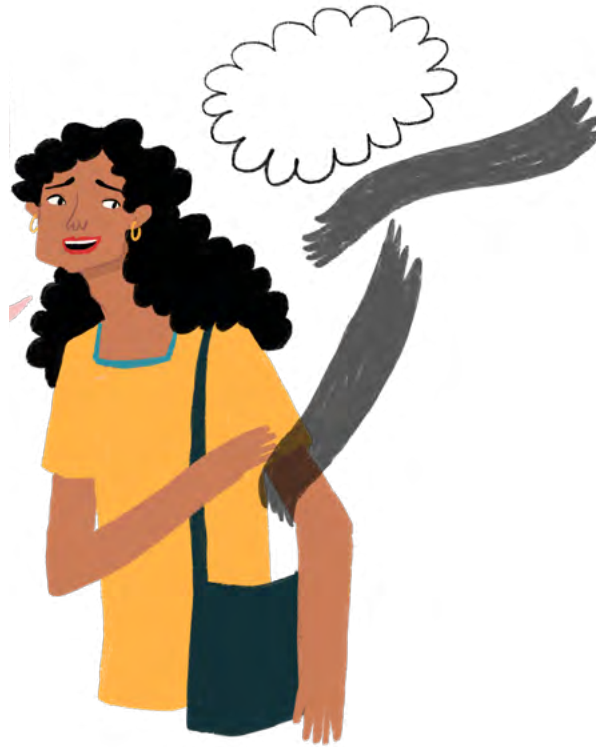
- Frequent crying
- Difficulty staying still
- Problems falling asleep and staying asleep
- Nightmares
- Clinging to their caregivers
- Fears of being alone
- Being withdrawn or aggressive
- Repetitive play (they may repeat what they have heard; try to take special care of their toys or stuffed animals and hide or cover them).

- Toddlers may also display behaviours like refusing to eat, wanting to drink from a bottle, talking like a younger child, etc.

Adequately addressing these concerns would involve attentive and gentle parenting, establishing a routine for toddlers, interspersing educational endeavours with creative play and spending quality time with toddlers. However, if concerns persist or new symptoms appear, it is advisable to seek professional help.

Pre-teens or middle childhood (from 6 to 12 years)

This is the stage where children move into expanding roles and environments, usually spending time away from family and more time at school. Whilst experiencing this world around them in greater depth, children begin to develop their own identity. Understandably we see a high amount of behavioural and emotional issues present in the Middle Childhood period.



Common challenges in middle childhood

Children in this age group may exhibit behavioural symptoms that are centred around difficulty with authority figures. They may display temper tantrums, argue frequently with adults, refuse to obey rules or get easily angered. Another concerning group of behaviours pertains to difficulty in concentration, being accident-prone, being constantly restless, less interest in academics and poor social interactions.

Children in middle childhood are also susceptible to emotional difficulties centred around a depressed mood or anxiety-related difficulties. Some may experience the changes in mood from mania to depression as well. The symptoms experienced would be similar to those that are seen in adult populations, however, in the case of mania, it may be seen as an extreme temper tantrum or irritability.

Specialists such as child psychiatrists, psychologists and paediatricians should be consulted for any concerns parents may have about their children experiencing any of these difficulties. Such challenges can be addressed with

a combination of therapy that is directed at the child, the family, and their experiences at home or in school.

Adolescents (13 years and above)

Adolescence is a critical period of development characterized by transitions in the social, biological and psychological domains. With the surging health crisis, lockdown imposition and resultant restriction on movement and activities, adolescents could be going through any of the following:

- Stress
- Sleep disturbances
- Excessive anger
- Mood changes
- Difficulty in concentration
- Anxiety regarding academics
- Excessive and/or compulsive internet usage

If you are concerned about the mental health of your child, encourage them to seek help from specialists such as psychiatrists or psychologists.