

HELP, MY CHILD IS ALWAYS SAD: TEARFULNESS, SADNESS AND DEPRESSION IN PRIMARY AGED CHILDREN

March 14 , 2018

If you ask parents what they most want for their child, many will say something like this: "I just want my child to be happy". Whilst most of us know, at a logical level, that we can't make this happen, seeing our children frequently or deeply sad, is very confronting.

Observing sadness in our children often feels different to parents than it does to observe them experience other emotions. When we see our child anxious, frustrated or even disappointed it feels to us that these are normal, temporary and resolvable. We also feel like there is a role for us to teach and support our children through these emotions.

But seeing our children experience frequent or strong sadness – and not being able to make them feel better – is much more painful. It can make parents feel helpless, frustrated, worried – and like a failure at some very deep level. It feels "wrong" in some subconscious way.

However, the truth is - it is not uncommon for children to experience times of sadness. Although only about 2-3% of prepubertal children will experience the type and extent of sadness psychologists will diagnose as a formal depressive disorder, many more children experience slightly less severe – but still persistent and frequent – sadness at some point during their childhood.

WHICH CHILDREN EXPERIENCE FREQUENT AND PERSISTENT SAD MOODS – AND WHEN?

Children are more likely to experience sad moods when they have to deal with tough life circumstances. For example, children who are managing family separation, grief, physical illness, learning problems, family poverty, family ill health or other tough life situations are more likely to experience frequent sadness. Indigenous children are also more likely to experience frequent sad moods, probably partly because there are higher rates of this population dealing with the above "tough life circumstances". Older children are more likely to experience sadness than younger children.

Children are also more likely to experience sad and hopeless moods if they have a biological tendency towards psychological and emotional sensitivity. I like to call these children, "kids with big feelings". These children experience strong reactions to life, feel things deeply and think about life deeply. Sometimes they are clever, creative and socially and emotionally sensitive. If you have a child like this, you will know exactly what I mean – and these "kids with big feelings" are more prone to experiencing times of sadness.

WHAT DOES PERSISTENT SADNESS LOOK LIKE IN CHILDREN?

Here's an example of what this kind of sadness might look like in the life of a child.

Justin*, aged 9, came to see me after his parents had separated. His parents told me they were worried about him and also frustrated by his behavior in the past few months. They said he was always irritable and angry with his younger siblings, would cry "at the drop of a hat", was always saying he was "tired", had asked to drop out of his (previously enjoyed) soccer team and had begun to sit alone and recess and lunch time, despite being asked to play with his friends. When I spoke to Justin, he said to me he doesn't have many friends and that he doesn't like soccer anymore. He said he misses his Dad when he lives at his Mum's house, and misses his Mum when he lives at Dad's house. He also said he feels like "school is stupid", and that he feels sad and angry a lot but he doesn't really know why. His eyes filled with tears while talking with me in the session, and I was soon to discover that this would happen each session for some time.

Justin's story is typical of these children. As you can see, when children are feeling frequently sad, they will be less interested in socializing, find life more effortful, will be less interested in being physical active or doing enjoyable activities, will be more likely to cry. They may be irritable about everything, complain a lot, tell you they are in pain or

tired. They may appear to have low self esteem and say things to themselves like “I’m no good”. Some children may even talk about death “I’d rather be dead”, “there is no point to life” and “I wish I’d never been born”.

Common reactions from parents with children going through this are to feel helpless and worried. It is also likely that they have been frustrated and angry with their sad child or with others (I’ve talked with parents who feel angry with their child’s peers, teachers, other parent – they might know deep down it’s not these people’s fault their child is sad – but they are looking for someone to blame).

Justin’s parents felt helpless. They had tried to encourage Justin to “think positively” and they’d try to cheer him up. They’d also frequently been frustrated with him and shouted at times, particularly when Justin had acted in particularly irritable and angry ways with his siblings. They also expressed frustration with Justin’s peer group who they felt were not being kind, they had also felt the school hadn’t managed some bullying which had occurred in the previous year.

WHAT SHOULD PARENTS OF SAD CHILDREN DO?

If you have a child prone to or experiencing times of sadness, here are three messages which might help you – and your child.

1. Remind yourself that your sad child is not feeling sad all the time (even if they feel they are).

It’s normal for children (and adults) in the midst of sad moods to genuinely feel like they are sad all the time. They will often say to you, “I’m always sad”, they will express excessively negative opinions about their day, the event they just went to, their school day and their friends and classmates. Their self report may suggest to you that there is nothing positive happening for your child and that they feel bad all the time.

However, this self report is not 100% true but simply a function of how the human brain works. When we are in negative moods, our brains are designed to focus on the problems. Children (and adults) will subconsciously “block out” positive memories, interactions, people and events when they are feeling bad. But this doesn’t mean they are not there.

It is important for parents – and their children - to know that sadness is not constant. Even children who are frequently sad, have many moments each day of being absorbed in a task, enjoying an activity for a moment or to have some periods of time when they are looking forward to something. It’s important for us as parents, and our child, to remember this, and to help them identify these “shades of grey” in their mood.

Of course, this isn’t to say a child isn’t still experiencing a great deal of sadness. Sometimes they are. This brings us to the next point.

2. Over time, your child will gradually feel less sad, less often.

Persistent and long lasting depression in childhood is extremely rare. The chances are excellent that your child will feel less sad, less often at some point in the near future. Having worked with hundreds of children, I know that almost all children will have reductions in sadness over time.

Be assured: it is very likely that life will change for the better for your child at some point. They will adjust to difficult life events, grief will resolve, they will have a change in peer group, they will find an activity or part of life which feels meaningful and interesting for them, or life will change for them in some other way.

Even if the sources of sadness do not change significantly, they are likely to learn to think about life and cope with life in ways which make sadness less frequent. Especially with support and help to do this. This brings us to my next point.

3. As parents you can help your sad child.

Parents often feel helpless when their attempts to help their sad child don’t seem to help. They feel like there is nothing they can do. This is not true.

As parents we can coach and support our child to help themselves to feel less sad and to cope with tough life events. No, there is no quick and easy fix, but we can make a difference slowly as time passes.

Now to the practical.

I've listed 10 ideas below which parents can use to help their child cope with sad times.

1. Be empathic. Be "with them". Say "I'm sorry you had a hard day" and "I'm sorry you are feeling sad at the moment".
2. Try to be patient with your child. Remember your child can't "make themselves" be positive or happy.
3. Ask about specific "sad time triggers". Although children will sometimes be sad "for no reason", it is more often that there are at least some situations, thoughts or events which do trigger or cause sadness. Try to help children identify at least some of these – and then think about how these can be managed differently (or avoided).
4. Although we need to be on the lookout for and ask about triggers, it's also important to NOT talk endlessly about the sadness or the problems. Having hour long conversations (especially before bed) may make things worse. Tell your child "we will talk about this again soon, but now let's read a book/watch TV" etc.
5. Try to also limit your frustration with others – don't blame other people for your child's sadness. Teachers, doctors, parents and other children aren't the (sole) source of the problem and they can't "fix" your child either.
6. Gently teach children to notice the ups and downs of their mood – pick your moment but empathically challenge comments like "I'm always sad" – feeling this way is part of sadness, but is not 100% true. Ask them to notice when they felt good or interested or absorbed in something and sadness wasn't their focus.
7. Teach children to notice the positive aspects of their day and positive events in the future. Put in "gratitude" exercises around the tea table occasionally and "my interesting week" exercises. Make some of these "past" focused, and others focused on the future.
8. Constantly work on social connection – it is very difficult to reduce sadness in children if they are isolated and have no positive source of friendship. Even if there are other obvious sadness triggers (ie grief, family separation, learning problems, health problems) – increasing social connection will help children feel less sad as they deal with them.
9. Keep working on helping your child finding sources of self esteem and meaning. Children (like adults) need to feel they are good at something, or that there is something interesting and important for them to do.
10. Work on physical activity, sleep and nutrition. Sadness eases when children are more physically fit and active, get enough sleep and eat well. Don't neglect these areas.
11. Teach children ways to cope with periods of sadness. Help them make a list of "busy brain" activities so that when they are sad they do not withdraw or ruminate for long. Help them use words to tell people about their sadness rather than get angry or cry. Help them identify a problem which triggers their sadness and see if they can come up with potential steps to manage it.
12. Ask for help from other professionals. Psychologists, teachers, school counsellors and GPs can support you and your child to slowly do all of the above.

Finally, look after yourself. As I've said several times in this article, supporting children who get sad is a challenging and stressful experience for parents. If you are to manage any challenging and stressful experience, you need to look after your own physical, mental and emotional health. Take care of yourself, talk to others, get professional support, take breaks from parenting or do whatever else works for you in looking after yourself.