

# The Good Schools Guide

## Mental health problems in adolescents

*How can parents promote good mental health in their teenagers, and when problems develop, what can they and the school do to help? Headmistress Lucy Elphinstone explains.*

Your sunny, outgoing little girl has morphed into a moody, withdrawn, angry teenager. Your energetic, sociable, son has transformed into a sullen, listless, computer-obsessed adolescent. Is this normal growing up or should you be worried? Back off or wade in?

### Tough times for teenagers

If it's hard being a parent nowadays, it is harder being a teenager. The well-being of adolescents has declined markedly in the past decade.

One in ten suffers from a recognised mental health issue and one in three reports feeling 'sad' or 'down' more than once a week.

The number of calls to ChildLine about online bullying, suicidal thoughts and self-harm have soared in recent years, and admissions to hospital for self-harm and eating disorders have doubled in the past three years.

The reasons include pressure from exams, and a culture of perfectionism and fear of failure, particularly amongst girls.

Violent computer and video games and the prevalence of pornography have given rise to heightened aggression and distorted views of sexual relationships. Apps such as Instagram, Snapchat, Vine, Pinterest and Peach are replacing face-to-face verbal communication. 'Phones are seldom used for calls; they are vehicles for impossibly enhanced and distorted images of beauty.

In the face of a culture which can seem increasingly alien to us as parents, the temptation can be to turn a blind eye, embarrassed and fearful in our ignorance. But we can and must keep engaging with our adolescent children.

### How can parents improve a child's mental health?

First and most important, lay the foundation. Children need to know that love and approval isn't based on their achievements, particularly on their academic performance.

We can stop trying to control our children's careers and ensure that we don't convey anxiety and fear about their future.

We can steadfastly refuse to compare them to their siblings or friends. We can surround them with love, acceptance, fun and play. We can have adventures together and build bonding memories.

Don't let your child withdraw – either physically to a den in their room, or psychologically behind a wall of grunts or shouting.

Don't overwhelm them with love, trying to be their best friend, but equally be there for them whenever they are home, quietly available and not buried in your own emails or social networking.

Communication with teenagers is best done not sitting down eyeballing them, but indirectly, in the course of a walk, a car journey or a visit to a museum.

Always show an interest in the small things and they may allow you to glimpse the big ones.

## How can schools support children with mental health problems?

Find a school where your children are loved and valued for their individuality, where their particular gifts are recognised and nurtured, where they are encouraged to think outside the box, take risks and learn to be brave.

Find a school where the pastoral care is outstanding and your child will feel secure and safe. When you have found that school (and it may not be easy in our performance-obsessed society), trust the teachers. They are experienced and trained to spot signs of mental and emotional distress, and will ensure a strong partnership with you to communicate concerns and support.

Sadness or anxiety that persists beyond two or three weeks may indicate a more serious problem, and parents and teachers must collaborate to provide systematic, coherent support.

If you are seeking a new school, remember that a good school will have a culture of openness to mental health problems.

## Strategies which schools can use to develop good mental health

At my own school we have gone much further than simply responding to mental distress with counselling and support. We have introduced several strategies to build emotional resilience and give pupils the tools to combat anxiety and stress.

### Learning to fail

In girls, fear of failure and performance anxiety account for many of the mental health issues which go beyond normal teenage worries. If we want girls to understand how to fail, we must encourage them to take part in competitive games. We have developed our sports programme to ensure that our teenagers remain actively involved in sport until they leave at eighteen. Emphasis is not put on the outcome (though winning is fun) but on the need for practice, for determination, for courage and teamwork, for perseverance and grit.

### Overcoming fears

Second, we have introduced the Exploration Society, a programme of increasingly challenging expeditions to learn survival skills, collaboration and endurance for all the year groups culminating in a trek to the Himalayas. Risk taking and pushing boundaries are natural features of the developing adolescent brain and planned adventures help young people face and overcome their fears.

### All in the mind

Third, consider mindfulness. At our school, pupils, teachers and parents are taught simple meditation techniques, and the school day starts with a minute of silence to steady and focus the mind, be present in the moment, and control anxiety and worry.

### **Early intervention**

Fourth, we can give young people the space, the time and the means to share their anxieties without shame or fear. Our school has introduced Place2Be – a programme of early intervention in mental health problems in young children so that we are not waiting until the children are cutting or starving themselves but destigmatising such issues so that they have the time and tools to talk through their worries early on.

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