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Mental health and substance use  
information you can trust



Canadian Mental  
Health Association  
British Columbia  
Mental health for all

# *learn about* mental illnesses in children and youth

info sheets 2014 [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)



*At what point should we start worrying that our child's tantrums or teenager's mood swings are more than just "growing pains?"*

Kids and teens are constantly changing. They grow up quickly and before you know it, your giggly, energetic toddler is a teenager who sleeps until noon. As we grow, it's normal to change as we learn new things and our bodies transform into our adult selves. But with all these changes going on, how can we tell which changes are normal? At what point should we start worrying that our child's tantrums or teenager's mood swings are more than just "growing pains?" It can be hard to tell. The truth is, for many kids, these sudden changes aren't just a part of growing up—they're symptoms of a mental illness.

## What is it?

Mental illnesses are surprisingly common in children and youth. About one in seven young people in BC—or 14%—will experience a mental illness at some point. Many mental illnesses—between 50% and about 70%—show up before the age of 18, so they can have a huge impact on a child's development. Mental illnesses can affect how well

kids do in school and how they form relationships with other kids and adults. Mental illnesses, if not treated early, can be disruptive enough to a kid's normal development that it can affect them for the rest of their lives. Below are some common mental illnesses that affect children and teens:

# mental illnesses in children and youth

## could my child have a mental illness?

It can be hard to tell the difference between normal changes as a child grows, and the symptoms of mental illness. Has your child:

- Shown sudden changes in their behaviour? (e.g., an active child becomes quiet and withdrawn or a good student suddenly starts getting poor grades)
- Suddenly changed their feelings? (e.g., a child may show signs of feeling unhappy, worried, guilty, angry, fearful, hopeless or rejected)
- Started avoiding places or situations that others don't routinely avoid?
- Recently complained of physical problems like frequent headaches or stomach aches, problems eating or sleeping, or a general lack of energy?
- Started suddenly keeping to themselves?
- Started to use (or is using more) alcohol or other drugs, especially when alone?
- Shown signs that they're having trouble coping with regular activities and everyday problems?
- Shown little regard for the feelings or property of others?
- Expressed terror or disgust over their weight, or changed how they eat, in unhealthy ways?
- Started making odd or repetitive movements beyond regular playing?
- Deliberately hurt themselves or talked of suicide?

If your child is showing one or more of these changes, and it's impacting their daily life, the best thing to do is talk to them about how they're feeling and then talk to your family doctor to rule out other explanations. Then, it's important to connect to other supports in the school and community. Keep in mind that all talk of suicide must be taken seriously.

- **Anxiety disorders** are the most common illness to affect children and youth. About 6% of kids experience an anxiety disorder at some point. Anxiety disorders can cause kids to be extremely afraid of things or situations to the point that it interferes with daily life.
- **Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)** affects just under 5% of BC children at any given time. ADHD makes it very difficult for kids to focus their attention. A child with ADHD is also more impulsive and harder to settle down than other children.
- **Conduct disorder** affects about 3% of BC children. It leads children to be extremely aggressive and destructive toward other people, pets or property. They may also seem like they don't care about important but basic rules, such as by doing things like regularly skipping school or running away from home.
- **Depression** is a mood disorder that shows up most often during the teenage years. About 3.5% of young people in BC experience depression. Depression can affect a child or youth's attitudes and emotions, making them feel unusually sad or irritated for more than two weeks at a time.
- **Psychosis** is a condition that involves loss of contact with reality. It affects 3% of the total population but most often appears later in adolescence and early adulthood. It can be seen on its own or with many of the illnesses mentioned in this info sheet.
- **Bipolar disorder** is a mood disorder that may affect up to about 1% of young people. It usually starts during the teenage years, but in rare cases, it may be seen in younger children. Bipolar disorder can cause a young person's moods to change back and forth between extremely high moods, called mania, and extremely low moods, called depression.
- **Eating disorders** are less common in young children, but the risk increases with age. Anorexia affects up to 1% of young males and females aged 15-24, and bulimia affects up to 3% of young people in Canada. Eating disorders involve a distorted body image along with seriously harmful behaviours to manage food and weight, making it difficult to nourish oneself properly.
- **Schizophrenia** affects about 1% of the total population, and usually shows up between the ages of 15 and 25. Schizophrenia makes it hard for people to think and speak in an organized way. It can also cause people to lose touch with reality.
- **Suicide** often goes alongside a mental illness. Suicide continues to be the second leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year-olds in BC, after motor vehicle accidents. Suicidal thinking or attempts are also common. A BC survey found that in one year, 5% of youth had made a suicide attempt and 12% seriously thought about suicide.

# mental illnesses in children and youth

## What can I do about it?

Unfortunately, only one in four kids and teens in Canada who need mental health treatment can get it. There are many reasons for this. Parents and caregivers can have mixed feelings about getting their children help for their mental illness. They may worry about being blamed for their child's change in behaviour, or they worry about what treatments may be tried. Mental illnesses can be frightening, and many people worry what others will think if they talk about their experiences. The good news is that mental illnesses can be treated successfully, and early treatment can help reduce the impact of a mental illness on your child's life. The kind of treatment that works best for your child will depend on your child's needs. Talk to your doctor to learn more about the different options.

### Counseling:

- **Cognitive-behavioural therapy**  
—Helps young people recognize and change thinking patterns and behaviours that are not good for their mental health
- **Family therapy**—Can help you look at what you can do as a family to help your child through their mental illness, and manage behaviours.
- **Interpersonal therapy**  
—Helps young people to feel more comfortable interacting with others.
- **Educational interventions**  
—Can help your child by teaching them ways to manage the time in the classroom.

**Medication:** There many different types of medications that are being prescribed to kids including medications for mood, for anxiety, for psychosis, and for ADHD. If you aren't comfortable with your child taking medications, then express your concerns to your doctor. They can explain which medications, if any, would be right for your child and go over the benefits and risks of medications with you. For young people, medications are usually not the first type of treatment considered.

If they're suggested, they are usually meant to work in connection with other treatments or supports.

### Support groups:

- For teens, groups of others who've gone through or are going through what you're going through (sometimes called peer support groups)
- Groups for family members of someone with a mental illness, including children, to meet other families in similar situations

## who does it affect?

Just as with adults, mental illnesses can affect kids and teens from all family types and cultural backgrounds. Kids and teens in certain situations, though, can be at higher risk for mental illnesses and may also face additional barriers to getting help. Some of these situations include:

- Young people with a family history of mental illness
- New immigrants and refugees
- Aboriginal children and youth
- Young people who've gone through a major life change such as moving to a new city or new school
- Young people who have faced or witnessed trauma, including abuse
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender youth
- Young people with substance use problems



# mental illnesses in children and youth

## where do I go from here?

Many parents and care providers want to get help for a young person with mental health problems, but don't know how or where to do it. Navigating the range of services in BC for child and youth mental health—including support from your child's school, family doctor, and Ministry of Children and Family Development child and youth mental health team—can be difficult. Resources to help you find help, available in English only, are:

### **FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health**

Visit [www.forcesociety.com](http://www.forcesociety.com) or call 1-855-887-8004 (toll-free in BC) or 604-878-3400 (in the Lower Mainland) for information and resources that support parents of a young person with mental illness.

### **Kelty Mental Health**

Contact Kelty Mental Health at [www.keltymentalhealth.ca](http://www.keltymentalhealth.ca) or 1-800-665-1822 (toll-free in BC) or 604-875-2084 (in Greater Vancouver) for information, referrals and support for children, youth and their families in all areas of mental health and addictions.

### **BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information**

Visit [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca) for info sheets on child and youth mental health problems and helpful tip sheets on finding help and what to expect when you do find help for your child. Some of these sheets are also available

in Chinese and Punjabi. Also see our Family Toolkit it's full of information, tips and self-tests to help you support a family member with a mental illness. It includes a special section on supporting a young person.

### **AnxietyBC**

Visit [www.anxietybc.com](http://www.anxietybc.com) or call 604-525-7566 for information, tools, and community resources on anxiety. You'll find resources for parents of children who experience anxiety problems, including video, information, strategies to try at home, and tips for talking about anxiety with children. You'll also find AnxietyBC Youth, a site for young people. For AnxietyBC Youth, visit [youth.anxietybc.com](http://youth.anxietybc.com).

### **Youth in BC**

Visit [www.youthinbc.com](http://www.youthinbc.com) for youth resources and support. They are trained to help with crisis situations like suicide and other difficult situations. Call 1-866-661-3311 (toll-free in BC) or 604-872-3311 (in the Lower Mainland) 24 hours a day to talk by phone, or chat online at [www.youthinbc.com](http://www.youthinbc.com) between noon and 1.00 am Pacific Time.

### **Children's Health Policy Centre**

A research group at Simon Fraser University that works to improve children's well-being and give everyone in BC equal access to health services. Their Children's Mental Health Research Quarterly looks at best and

emerging practices, evidence-based research, policies, strategies, and services that support mentally healthy children and youth. For more, visit [www.childhealthpolicy.ca](http://www.childhealthpolicy.ca)

*Resources available in many languages:*

\*For each service below, if English is not your first language, say the name of your preferred language in English to be connected to an interpreter. More than 100 languages are available.

### **Your Local Crisis Line**

Crisis lines aren't only for people in crisis. You can call for information on local services or if you just need someone to talk to. If you are in distress, call 310-6789 (do not add 604, 778 or 250 before the number) 24 hours a day to connect to a BC crisis line, without a wait or busy signal. The crisis lines linked in through 310-6789 have received advanced training in mental health issues and services by members of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information.

### **HealthLink BC**

Call 811 or visit [www.healthlinkbc.ca](http://www.healthlinkbc.ca) to access free, non-emergency health information for anyone in your family, including mental health information. Through 811, you can also speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you're worried about, or talk with a pharmacist about medication questions.

This fact sheet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.



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#### **BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information**

HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addictions Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program at Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.