

DEPRESSION

What is the skill?

Depression is more than feeling sad. It affects a child's emotions, thoughts, energy, motivation, and ability to enjoy everyday activities. While all children experience disappointment or grief, depression causes these feelings to become more persistent and interfere with daily functioning, relationships, and development.

What does normal development look like?

Children naturally experience periods of sadness when they lose something important, experience conflict, or face disappointment. With the support of caring adults, these feelings gradually lessen, and children return to enjoying play, learning, and relationships. They continue to experience curiosity, hope, and pleasure even after difficult experiences.

How does neglect interfere?

Children who experience neglect often receive the message—directly or indirectly—that their needs, feelings, or presence do not matter. Over time, this can contribute to feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, or helplessness. Chronic stress also affects brain systems involved in mood regulation, making some children more vulnerable to depression. Rather than expressing sadness openly, many children become emotionally withdrawn or appear irritable.

What might this look like?

Depression may appear as a loss of interest in play, low energy, changes in sleep or appetite, frequent tearfulness, irritability, or negative statements about oneself. Some children stop trying new things because they expect to fail, while others appear emotionally "flat" and show little excitement about activities they once enjoyed.

Parenting implications

Children experiencing depression benefit from emotionally available caregivers who remain patient and engaged, even when children seem distant. Encouraging enjoyable activities, maintaining predictable routines, and acknowledging feelings without judgment help children rebuild hope and emotional connection. Severe or persistent symptoms should also be evaluated by a qualified mental health professional.

From Understanding to Attunement

A depressed child often isn't choosing to withdraw—they may have learned that expecting comfort or success only leads to disappointment.