



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

Part I - Childhood depression: Why is it increasing and what parents can do about it?

Childhood depression seems like a contradictory phrase. Isn't childhood and adolescence generally a carefree time without significant responsibilities and pressure?

How can kids be depressed when it seems like they have never had it better? Children are being raised in environments that generally offer them more of everything. Compared to 50 to 100 years ago, children have access to better educational opportunities, health care, and a material benefits. Key indicators of child abuse, health, academic achievement, and an overall standard of living suggest this is a relatively privileged generation for most children.

Even so, kids are clinically depressed and exhibiting serious emotional problems. Two and half percent of 8 to 11 year old children and 4.8 percent of 12 to 15 year olds are depressed, according to a study published last month by the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. These are not kids who simply feel sad, but rather were diagnosed with a mental disorder of depression. These survey results are consistent with previous studies, which generally indicate that about 3-8% of American kids and adolescents are clinically depressed in any given year.

Symptoms of depression are different with kids than they are with adults. The National Institute of Mental Health advises parents and professionals to be vigilant of the following: pretending to be sick, school refusal, or fear of a parent dying. Teens may get into trouble at school, exhibit chronic irritability and negativity or feel misunderstood and disconnected.

It's easy to dismiss such symptoms as a normal part of adolescence, which sometimes they are. However, the persistence of these behaviors is a signal for a parent to get professional help. The Center for Disease Control reports that in any given year 14.5 percent of American high school students have seriously considered killing themselves, and 6.9 percent actually make an attempt.

Here's the confusing part of this story. Rates of depression, among both children and adults, are increasing a time when material benefits have never been greater. Contemporary college students have a rate of depression that is six times higher than their counterparts in 1938! Studies have documented that rates of depression have increased about ten-fold according to one expert in childhood depression, Dr. Martin Seligman.

Experts agree that depression is caused by a number of factors, including brain chemistry, genetic predisposition, as well as social and psychological factors. Since it's unlikely that biological factors could explain such a dramatic increase in this mental disorder, we need to look at environmental factors to help us understand this problem.

Our parenting style, although well intentioned, may be contributing to the increase in depressed youth.

We are raising generations of children with an unrealistic sense of entitlement, low tolerance for failure or frustrations, psychologically addicted to praise and recognition, and focused excessively on feeling good about themselves.

Part two of this series will examine how this style contributes to depression and what parents can do about it.

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