

SAFEMinds.

SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES ENHANCING MINDS



NOTICE

...changes in mood and behaviour that may indicate a child or young person is having difficulties managing emotional distress



INQUIRE

...sensitivity and competency about the child or young person's circumstances



PLAN

...appropriate first steps and possible referrals within or outside school setting to support the child or young person

NIP IT IN THE BUD!



NOTICE – TIP SHEET FOR FAMILIES



headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

NOTICING DISTRESS IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Parents and carers are in an ideal position to notice changes in emotions, behaviours, thoughts and actions, which may suggest their child is experiencing distress and may require support.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider the individual child or young person, how they would usually function and how this has changed.
- Be mindful of the many developmentally appropriate reasons a child or young person may be experiencing challenges or distress.
- Reflect on how long a child or young person has been experiencing these changes in emotions, behaviours, thoughts or actions.
- Appreciate any cultural, family or personal experiences that may influence emotional regulation.
- Identify when these changes are persisting or becoming more extreme and be alert to identifying those children or young people who may require additional support.

INCIDENTS REQUIRING URGENT MEDICAL ATTENTION:

Some instances of self-harm require urgent medical attention. An urgent response is required if the child or young person, for example:

- has been poisoned, has overdosed, has made a mistake with medicines, regardless of whether they are showing symptoms (contact the Victorian Poisons Information Centre on 131 126)
- is confused, disoriented or unconscious (contact 000)
- has bleeding that is rapid or pulsing (contact 000).

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

Children and adolescents progress through distinct developmental stages with key tasks that can be shaped by their cognitive, emotional and social growth. While these are typical developmental tasks, progressing through these stages may cause distress.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

3–5 Years

- Language skills
- Social skills
- Motor skills
- Self-sufficiency
- Emotional recognition

MIDDLE AND LATE CHILDHOOD

5–12 Years

- Transition to school
- New social groups
- Increased independence
- Creativity
- Social conscience

ADOLESCENCE

12–15 Years

- Puberty
- Identity formation
- Importance of peers
- Problem solving/decision making

15–18 Years

- Romantic/sexual relationships
- Preparing for further study/work
- Increased responsibility and independence



OTHER REASONS FOR EMOTIONAL DISTRESS MAY INCLUDE

- Real or perceived loss (loss of family member, pet)
- Relationship breakdown (friendship, romantic, family)
- Abuse (physical, sexual, emotional)
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Serious illness, disability
- Over stimulated, anxious due to neurodiversity
- Peer relationships, not belonging, bullying, discrimination
- Family conflict
- Academic pressures

YOUR ROLE AS A PARENT OR CARER

There is no need to diagnose a mental health difficulty or illness. Instead, focus on noticing when your child might be showing signs of distress.

When you notice these signs, you can gently check in with your child to understand what they're experiencing. A calm, open conversation can help you determine whether they simply need support from you in the moment, or whether additional help—from another trusted adult or a professional—might be needed. *See Inquire tip sheet.*

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

Below are examples of behaviours that may indicate a child or young person is experiencing distress.

FORMS IT MAY TAKE	EXAMPLES
Worry	Expressing fear of future events, tasks or new people, distorted thinking or worry (e.g. "I'll never finish this", "I don't want to go out", "Something bad will happen").
Avoidance	Avoiding social situations, family interaction or activities with others (e.g. avoiding family meals, avoiding sports/hobbies).
Attention to threat	Frequently scanning the home environment for 'danger', easily startled by loud noises.
Physical Arousal	Frequently going to the toilet, blushing, sweating, fidgety behaviour, shaking knees, irritable or agitated.
Perfectionism	Excessive use of whitener or erasers, redoing work, becoming upset when things aren't "perfect".
Excessive shyness	Avoiding eye contact, displaying 'shuffling' movements.
Social withdrawal	Avoiding other people, seeming lonely, decreased participation with peers.
Physical complaints	Frequently reporting headaches, stomach aches or other physical symptoms, asking for medication without clear cause.
Appetite changes	Sudden and unexplained weight change, playing excessively with food, taking a lot longer to eat meals.
Apathy/Loss of pleasure	Seeming bored, loss of interest and pleasure in activities they once enjoyed, lacking energy or motivation, unhappy, seeming 'down' most of the time, feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness.
Emotional changes	Tearful, frequently crying, feeling worried or tense, blaming oneself excessively, angry outbursts.
Slowed movements	Dawdling, dragging oneself around.
Restlessness, Risk taking	Restless, fidgeting, self-harming, deteriorated self-care, engaging in risky or impulsive behaviours at home or outside.
Irritable/Agitation	Fidgeting, unable to settle, nervous, jumpy.
Sleep changes or disruptions	Trouble falling asleep, waking often, tired during the day, frequently yawning.
Negative self-image	Negative body image, low self-esteem, changes to appetite and weight, excessively covering up, avoiding family activities related to body exposure (e.g. swimming).
Physical upkeep	Poor attention to personal hygiene and appearance.
Cognitive impairment	Difficulty listening, unable to focus on tasks, forgetting details, drawing wrong conclusions.
Poor school attendance	Missing classes, frequently late to school, school avoidance.
Self-harm	Covering up arms on hot days, scratches, bruises, visual scars, hair pulling, self-hitting, interfering with wound healing, poisoning. If a person has taken an overdose or consumed poison they may become confused, disoriented or unconscious.