

# How Do I Know If My Child Needs Help? The Three Ds Every Parent Should Know

As parents, we worry about our kids. It's part of the job. But where is the line between a normal parenting concern and something more serious; something that requires additional help?

There's a simple framework that can guide you when you're not sure whether it's time to seek support or not. Psychology researchers call it the *Three Ds*.

Good news... this simple checklist doesn't require a psychology degree. It's a practical, simple-to-understand tool to help you notice when things might not be quite right—and when your child might need some extra support.

## 1. Distress

Distress is the emotional pain or worry your child is experiencing—or that you're seeing as a parent.

You might notice signs like ongoing sadness, intense anxiety, unexplained irritability, or a general lack of joy. Maybe your once-happy child is now regularly saying things like, "I hate school," or "No one likes me," or "What's the point?"

If your child seems worried, overwhelmed, or unhappy for more than a few days, it's worth paying attention. Even if there's no major event or trauma, distress in itself is a pillar that points to the potential that more help might be useful.

**What to do:** Start with gentle curiosity. "You've seemed a bit down lately. Want to talk about it?" Then listen—really listen—without jumping in to fix. If the distress doesn't shift, consider connecting with your school's wellbeing team, a GP, or a child psychologist.

Remember, it is ok to *not* be ok. But if your child is not ok in a profound way or for an extended period of time, being *not* ok is no longer ok. When distress is high and/or enduring, seek help and support.

## 2. Dysfunction

Dysfunction is when your child's emotional struggles are getting in the way of daily life.

This might show up in school refusal, struggles to make or keep friends, explosive behaviour at home, or trouble completing basic tasks. It could be that your child is no longer learning, socialising, or even sleeping in a way that feels 'normal' for them.

When the basics of life become a battle, dysfunction is often at play.

**What to do:** Ask yourself, "Is this getting in the way of my child having a happy, healthy day?" If the answer is yes, talk with your child's teacher or year coordinator. They might be seeing the same signs—or different ones. Together, you can work out a support plan that meets your child where they are.

Once more, a day of dysfunction isn't a major drama. It can be inconvenient, true, but help and support are needed when dysfunction is high and/or enduring.

### 3. Deviation (or Deviance)

This one sounds a little scary, but it's really just about **developmental norms**. Deviation means your child isn't meeting age-appropriate milestones or is behaving in ways that are significantly different from their peers.

Every child is different, of course... And some kids develop later than others. But if your 10-year-old is still having meltdowns like a toddler, or your teenager is withdrawing so completely that no one knows what's going on inside, there may be something more beneath the surface.

**What to do:** Don't panic. Deviation doesn't mean something is "wrong"—it simply means it's time to ask questions. A teacher, school psychologist, or paediatrician can help determine whether the deviation is part of a wider issue needing support.

---

### A Final Word

There's no perfect formula for parenting. Some kids are dandelions—they thrive anywhere. Others are more like orchids—sensitive to their environment, needing a bit more nurture to bloom. Neither is better. Just different.

But knowing what to look for—the *Three Ds*—can give us a solid, practical guide to help our children when they need it most.

If you're noticing distress, dysfunction, or deviation, trust your instincts. Ask questions. Reach out. You don't have to wait for a crisis before seeking help.

After all, early support is the best kind of support.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit [happyfamilies.com.au](https://happyfamilies.com.au).