

(20) Parents: Epilepsy and depression

After diagnosis, emotional or behavioural issues can occur, particularly if children pick up on their parents being upset and anxious. A child's reaction will also depend on their age and whether the diagnosis of epilepsy was explained in a sensitive and age appropriate way. Your child may struggle to understand the diagnosis or may feel different and isolated from others, which can be difficult to cope with.

Many of these reactions are normal and a child will usually adjust well. Parents and other people who play an important part in the child's life may need to support them even more during this period.

Particularly for older children, epilepsy can affect self-esteem on many levels. If this is not recognised and addressed early, it may lead to depression in some young people.

Identifying depression

If you can answer yes to several of the following questions, you may want to seek further advice from your child's doctor or epilepsy specialist nurse:

- ✧ Does your child appear unhappy or troubled by something?
- ✧ Does your child seem worried, fearful or helpless?
- ✧ Is your child quiet or withdrawn?
- ✧ Is your child refusing to play with friends or take part in fun activities?
- ✧ Is your child having trouble concentrating?
- ✧ Does your child have trouble sleeping?
- ✧ Is your child expressing frequent negative thoughts?
- ✧ Is your child getting poorer marks at school than expected?
- ✧ Is your child complaining of headaches or general aches and pains?
- ✧ Does your child appear unmotivated or lethargic?
- ✧ Is your child refusing to eat or wants to eat all the time?
- ✧ Does your child cry easily?
- ✧ Does your child get easily angry or aggressive?

Possible causes of depression

Apart from psychological causes, depression can also be linked to the cause of a child's epilepsy. The brain controls our emotions and moods, and any damage to a part of the brain which deals with these feelings could lead to depression.

Sometimes, depression can be a side effect of taking anti-epileptic drugs. A doctor will want to consider and monitor this carefully to make sure the treatment does not have an adverse effect on a child's mood.

Also consider the possibility that your child may be struggling at school. There could be issues with bullying or falling behind with learning. Teachers have an important role to play in helping your child accept their epilepsy and normalise the condition. If you suspect your child's teachers are over-protective and are placing unnecessary restrictions on your child, talk to the school. For more information on this, check out our Parent's factsheet 'No 16 Primary and secondary school'.

Getting the right help

Start exploring some of the issues with your child. Depending on the age, your child may prefer to talk to another family member, a family friend, a trusted teacher or epilepsy specialist nurse.

If necessary, the child will be referred to a psychiatrist for an assessment of the depression. In some cases, but this is rare for children, anti-depressants are prescribed.

The following organisations may also be able to help:

- ★ **Childline 0800 1111**
- ★ **National Bullying Helpline 0845 22 55 787**