



Is My Child Normal?



There isn't a parent alive who hasn't asked that question at some point. Is it normal for my child to refuse most foods? Is it normal for my child to start walking so late or start talking so late? Is it normal for them to throw huge tantrums? Or as a teenager, is it normal to question his/her gender identity? Is it normal that they get so anxious in social situations or struggle to get out of bed for school?

We have become a society obsessed with normal vs. abnormal behavior. And if we are always looking for what is wrong, we will surely find it. Parents can easily be confused or overwhelmed with all the parenting information online from both professionals and non-professionals. No doubt the growing complexity of society and the separation of extended family make generational parenting wisdom harder to share. And what about the impact of technology and social media on children's and teens' brains? So, it is no wonder that we can't help wondering: Is my child ok?

Many parents bring their young children to counseling seeking an answer to that very question. Most are relieved to find out that their child is going through a normal phase of development or that their behavior is a typical, age-appropriate response to the arrival of a new baby or the death of a grandparent.

Am I a bad parent?

As parents, we are all doing the best that we can. We're raising our children based on what we know and understand. We don't have to be perfect parents—just "good enough" parents. Although it is important to focus on what we can do better, beating ourselves up is not helpful. If you identify deficits in your parenting, seek out good advice. Many parenting questions and concerns can be answered by well-educated, reputable parent coaches or counselors.

I'm afraid of damaging my child

Many parents become frozen by fear that their parenting decisions might be harmful to their children. If you were raised by unavailable or incapable parents, you may be afraid of repeating what your parents did. The solution is parent education. Before bringing your child in for therapy, it's a good idea for you to work with a counselor or parenting coach first. And if you're parenting an anxious or depressed child, be sure to get help for your own anxiety or depression.

Over-pathologizing

Stress. Anxiety. Sadness. Anger. All of these are normal childhood emotions, but they can feel overwhelming. Emotional responses cover a wide spectrum: One child's reaction might be "over the top," while another youngster goes with the flow.

Kids who feel there's something wrong with them may turn to online resources to uncover the reason why they are struggling—and the internet is overflowing with information about mental health and diagnoses. Caution is the watchword here. It's all too easy for teens to latch onto a diagnosis found on a blog and label themselves with disorders such as ADHD, OCD, tics, or Autism.

But there is a big difference between symptoms of ADHD and the common difficulties kids experience in school. There's a difference between the obsessive hand washing that results from a serious germ phobia and being a bit preoccupied with cleanliness. There's a difference between a profound depression that interferes with daily life and the sadness over losing a basketball game or a break-up. The list goes on. To be human is to struggle at some level with a variety of behaviors and emotions. That is normal.

When parents and kids pathologize typical human behaviors, the result is confusion about what an actual disorder really looks like. In addition, someone who self-diagnoses a mental illness may become very invested in developing or showing the characteristics of that diagnosis. It's important to recognize that a diagnosis doesn't automatically provide solutions. It tells a therapist or doctor what treatment plan is best.

More therapists are beginning to think of mental health issues on a spectrum: mild to severe. In our lifetimes, many of us will experience mental health issues that fall into the mild or temporary end of the spectrum. A mild depression may last for a little while and be eased by talking about it or doing some exercise. A deep depression which occurs following the death of a loved one might be treated with short-term medication or participation in a grief group. Problematic depression is diagnosed when it truly interferes with someone's ability to cope with day-to-day activities over a longer period or includes suicidal plans.

What's a parent to do?

When your child starts talking about a particular mental health diagnosis or wondering whether they have OCD or ADHD or panic disorder, ask what they have been reading online or listening to on YouTube. Check it out for yourself. Is the source reputable? Or is it someone discussing their own "disorder" in an attention-seeking manner? Ask your child why they think they have the disorder and listen to what is underneath what they are feeling. If they are scared about having it, deal with the fears and comfort them. Perhaps your child is sad or disappointed, or is experiencing self-doubt or worry, and they're looking for an explanation as to why they feel so bad.

If your child learns about a disorder and gets excited or thinks it's "cool," there might be something else going on. Maybe someone they know is getting a lot of attention due to a physical or mental health issue—it makes them special or unique. It might be a YouTube or film star that has the disorder. For example, when pop star Billie Eilish came out about having Tourette's Syndrome, lots of kids started having tics. Although it can be tricky to convince some youngsters that difficulty focusing at school is normal human behavior and not a pathology, your child or teen can be nudged gently toward other activities that make them feel special—like art, sports, or writing.

As a parent, you will know when your child crosses the line toward the severe end of a mental health issue. Absolutely seek help from your doctor or a child therapist. If your child is under eight years old, consult with a counselor first. The issue may best be treated with a different set of parenting tools. Then let the counselor determine if the child needs to be seen by a medical professional and whether diagnostic testing is needed.

All children are unique and wonderful

The more you focus on what is good and unique about your child, the more their self-esteem and sense of worth will grow. Help them develop their special talents and gifts even if they don't look normal to someone else. Many gifted and talented people did not look "normal" as children. Your need to have "normal" children as compared to others may diminish their self-worth and ability to grow into healthy thriving human beings. A good therapist can help you let go of needing your child to fit in a "normal" box.

Summary

The pandemic has certainly messed with our collective mental health. Our anxiety and our children's anxiety have been off the charts at times. It is normal to have higher anxiety and depression in times of crisis. Our children need our love, support, understanding, and help to normalize all the intense emotions they are having. When you find yourself feeling consumed with what's wrong, look for what is right or what steps you need to take to make things better.



"We must have the courage to live with paradox. The strength to hold the tension of not knowing the answers and the willingness to listen to our inner wisdom . . ." - Maureen Murdock

"There is a time to act, and a time to wait, to listen, to observe. Then understanding and clarity can grow. From understanding, action arises that is purposeful, firm, and powerful." - Charles Eisenstein