

## Overcoming the Winter Blahs in Children

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February is the month of "the winter blahs". Children too, get the blahs, especially when activities are largely restricted to indoors, with limited opportunities to get out and socialize. But when do the winter blahs turn into the more serious problem of depression in children? How can parents tell the difference? And, what can you do if your child is depressed?

Feeling sad, unhappy, bored or "down" are common experiences for children and adults alike; but most children bounce back quickly. It is only when a number of symptoms of depression persist for two weeks or more that a child might be considered to be clinically depressed.

Symptoms of depression in children include:

- a depressed or irritable mood
- lose interest or pleasure in almost all activities
- loss of appetite, weight loss, or failure to make expected weight gains.
- sleep too much or have problems sleeping, or show fatigue or loss of energy
- motor agitation, or reduced motor activity
- Children might blame themselves or call themselves "stupid" for small mistakes.
- think frequently about death or suicide
- Their school performance might decline
- Younger children are more likely to complain about stomach aches or other ailments and fears
- adolescents are more likely to become sulky, overly emotional and withdrawn, or to get in trouble for antisocial behaviours.
- Girls are likely to show sadness or to withdraw from normal activities,
- boys are more likely to show aggressive behaviours.

You are likely to see some of these symptoms in your child at some time, but one symptom does not mean your child is depressed. A professional diagnosis by a Psychologist, Psychological Associate, or Psychiatrist is needed.

What can parents do to help their children to cope with the winter blahs and to prevent depression in their children?

1. Try to catch your child doing something good, and praise him or her for it. Depressed children have to be told that they do some things right, and be encouraged to keep up the good work.
2. As much as possible, try to maintain stability in the family. Stick with your household routines, bedtimes and rules. If you have a change in your family or your routines, tell your children what the change is and why it is happening. Tell them what will happen to them and what they will be doing that is different.

3. Make sure that your child gets enough physical exercise and recreational activities. Physical activities help us to produce endorphins, a chemical in the brain that has been related to feeling good. Check out your local recreation centre for activities of interest to your child that he or she could join. Help your child to invite a friend so they can go together. Encourage the reluctant child to "try it once".
4. Ask your child what he or she will be doing when he or she feels better. Try to engage your child in that activity. By doing something enjoyable, the child will soon start to feel better. Your child doesn't have to feel better before doing something enjoyable. Doing an enjoyable activity will lead the child to feeling better.
5. If you are concerned that your child shows persistent symptoms of depression, consult with your family physician or a Psychologist.