

Introduction

This book is about depression in children and teenagers during their school years, from five to eighteen. It is written primarily for parents, but we hope that teachers, social workers, health visitors and family doctors will also find it useful.

Why do parents need to know about possible depression in their children? All children get sad and miserable from time to time. Sometimes it is difficult to know if such normal unhappiness needs special attention. We aim to help parents in this situation.

This is an example of a situation in which a mother describes how first she thought her son's problem was nothing much to worry about but then she had to change her mind. Ben's mother, a teacher, described the change that came over her ten-year-old son after a short viral illness.

'He changed somehow. The change was so gradual that it was hard to pinpoint at first. We thought he was still recovering from the virus and took him to the doctor. But, slowly, we became aware that things were getting worse. He seemed to have lost his sparkle – he used to be such a lively, interested and interesting ten-year-old, with a passion for Arsenal! Then even football lost its charm for him. We felt he was just going through the motions of everyday life. He would agree to most things, but do them without enjoyment. He quickly became tearful over minor incidents. He stayed indoors more and more and we realised that he spoke less frequently about his friends or their joint activities. Unless we pushed him into doing some activity, he would just do nothing. It was such an upsetting difference from the energetic, sometimes exhausting, lively child that we had known.'

Children and young people themselves need to know about depression so that they can better understand what is happening when one of their friends or they themselves suffer from it. Although this book is written primarily for parents and carers, in the section on Resources at the end of this book, we suggest some places where children and young people can find more information.

Teachers need to know about depression because it can affect learning and behaviour in the school setting. Sometimes a child or young person with a depressive problem can show unmistakable signs at school but appear or show very different behaviour at home. Sometimes, as with Emma, behaviour not usually associated with depression can be a sign of its presence.

Emma is an intelligent eight-year-old girl whom her teacher thought of as a 'real pain' in the classroom. In a reasonably well-behaved class of thirty-two children, she was very much the odd one out. Some of the other children, especially the boys, were amused by the way she made peculiar noises when the class was supposed to be quiet, but most of the others, like her teacher, were irritated by the way she drew attention to herself. Emma, when not being disruptive, would sit looking out of the window, apparently in a world of her own. In the playground she would mix with a group of young children, sometimes pushing them around and hurting them, so that teachers had to intervene.

Although Emma's mother had previously denied there was any problem with her at home, on the next occasion the teacher saw her she decided to press more firmly on the subject. Eventually tears came into Emma's mother's eyes and she explained how her husband had become redundant, was drinking heavily and was himself depressed. Money was very, very tight. Emma was his favourite of the four children, but now he had little time for her and would push her away when she tried to sit on his knee. The mother herself was worried about Emma, who was not at all naughty at home, but miserable and listless, not wanting to play with her friends, and sometimes saying she wished she were dead.

At the teacher's suggestion, through her general practitioner, Emma was referred to the local child and adolescent mental health service. The family members were seen together on three occasions and Emma's father was able to talk about his sense of failure. The family problems remained considerable, but Emma now seemed to understand the situation, was more settled and less miserable, wanted to play with her friends and was much less trouble in class.



Alisha was a fourteen-year-old girl who described her depression very movingly.

'I felt as though no one could like me. I began to wonder just what was the point of anything? At first I lost interest in everything. I felt tired all the time and didn't sleep properly. I would wake up before the rest of the family and lie there feeling grotty and forgotten by the whole world. It felt as if everything was darkness and full of nothing, stretching out to the horizon and filling every corner.'

Alisha needed to understand what was going on in her mind, so she reached out and asked for help from a school counsellor. In particular, it was reassuring for her to know that there were others suffering in the same way, that she could be helped to understand why she should be having these horrible experiences and that, with help, she could become a healthy teenager again.

Social workers, children's nurses and family doctors will all come across children and young people who are depressed in their everyday work. They will have had some training in the recognition of the symptoms and ways of helping. But they may find this book, written as it is in non-technical language, helpful in their understanding of the problem.

Any one of us may experience depression, and being successful or rich or beautiful doesn't mean we can't be depressed. The supermodel Cara Delevingne described how she responded to her massive success as a model when she was only fifteen. She has spoken about being hit with a 'massive wave of depression, anxiety, and self-hatred'. In an interview with *Vogue*, Delevingne said, 'I was packing my bags, and suddenly I just wanted to end it. I had a way, and it was right there in front of me. And I was like, I need to decide whether I love myself as much as I love the idea of death.'

Many well-known writers, like the poet Sylvia Plath or the novelist J.K. Rowling, have written movingly about their crippling experiences of depression, but there is no evidence that people who are very creative are more likely to suffer depression than others. They have their share of depression, and when they are affected they are, of course, particularly good at describing what it feels like.

The examples given above make it clear that children and teenagers do indeed get depressed. Parents and teachers, when they hear about a child who might be depressed, may think to themselves: 'They're just too young for that to happen.' Sometimes we have even heard stories of children being taken to see a doctor, only to be told, 'Children can't be clinically depressed'. But, as you can see from these examples, they are certainly not too young. It is not helpful – and can be dangerous – to deny that the young can get depressed. That attitude usually means that we close our eyes and pretend that it is not happening, even when it clearly is. All mental health problems carry a stigma, which can stop people from speaking up. Such stigma is a barrier to understanding and finding help. We need to overcome it and we hope this book will contribute to that process.

Another reaction when people hear that a child is depressed can be: 'Oh, how awful, poor thing. It upsets me terribly just to think about it. How dreadful for the

parents! How guilty they must be.’ That is not very helpful either. If people were more aware of how depression arises and what can be done about it, parents of depressed children would benefit from their greater understanding. Depressed children and teenagers do need sympathy, but this is not enough. Furthermore, although troubles at home are sometimes the cause of depression, there are many other causes, some in school and some in the child’s or teenager’s personality or even their genetic make-up.

Depression in childhood and early adolescence is a fact of life we have to face. It is sad, and, as we’ll discuss later, there are things that can be done to prevent children from becoming depressed; but when it does happen there is often a good deal that can be done to help, providing we recognise that the problem exists, and providing that we do not jump to conclusions too quickly about what is causing it and what might be the solution.

In this book we have tried to give useful information about depression in young people. It is one of the most common, serious problems in today’s school-age population. We have tried to describe how depression can be recognised by parents, teachers and young people themselves, and have included the words of real young people and carers (with names and identifying details changed, to protect their confidentiality) describing their experiences. The second half of the book explains what can be done to help, by young people themselves, by those who care for them and by mental health professionals.