

Quick Guide

# More Than a Phase: Spotting Mental Health Needs in Kids



WellWithAll  
Foundation™

**Grounded in clinical knowledge, tailored for real people.** This resource was reviewed by Gillian C. Galen, PsyD, a licensed clinical psychologist and nationally recognized expert in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Her feedback helped ensure this content is both accurate and empowering for real-life use.

## Why This Guide Matters

Sometimes it's hard to know what's part of growing up — and what might be more.

Kids don't always say, "I need help." Mental health struggles can show up as "attitude," "laziness," or "just a rough patch." Sometimes, those behaviors are early signs that deserve support — not shame.

This guide helps parents, grandparents, mentors, and others notice changes in the kids you love, move past cultural blind spots, and feel confident speaking up for the child's well-being.

**Disclaimer:** Your health is unique, and the information in this guide is for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for personal medical advice. Consult with a healthcare provider or registered dietitian to create a plan that is right for your specific health needs and goals.



# Step 1: Notice What Stands Out



Every child grows and changes differently — but some shifts may deserve a closer look. Here are a few examples across ages, with everyday signs to watch.



Age	Part of Growing Up	Signs Worth Addressing
Preschool (3–5)	Feeling nervous when away from a parent (short-lived separation anxiety). Occasional tantrums when upset or tired.	Meltdowns that last longer than 30 minutes almost every day. Trouble talking or putting words together for their age (speech delay). Not pretending or playing make-believe (like playing house or superheroes).
Elementary (6–10)	Being shy in new settings. Having trouble sitting still sometimes or losing focus during schoolwork.	Constant difficulty paying attention or sitting still. Frequent complaints of headaches or stomachaches without a clear medical reason. Avoiding recess or playing with friends.
Middle School (11–13)	Mood swings and wanting to “fit in” with friends.	Pulling away from friends and family most of the time. Sudden, steep drop in grades. Ongoing trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or sleeping way too much.
Teens (14–18)	Wanting more privacy. Ups and downs with emotions.	Spending nearly all their time alone. Personality changes that feel “out of character” (like an outgoing child who has become quiet and moody). Talking about hurting themselves, showing unexplained cuts or burns, or hiding arms/legs in warm weather (signs of self-harm). Big changes in eating or sleeping habits.

## Why This Matters

If your child’s behavior feels noticeably different from their usual self — and it lasts more than a couple of weeks — it may be a sign they need extra support. Trust your gut. Asking questions and paying attention early can make it easier to get them help before little struggles turn into bigger ones.

## Step 2: Common Blind Spots That Delay Support



Many parents miss early signs. It's not because they don't care — it's because some challenges can get in the way of noticing what's really going on.

- + **Fear of Judgment** › Families sometimes stay quiet because they worry others will think badly of them or their child.
- + **Cultural Beliefs** › In many families and communities, what looks like “laziness” or “disrespect” may actually be a struggle the child can't control on their own, like depression, anxiety, or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- + **“They’ll Grow Out of It” Thinking** › While some phases do pass, waiting too long can delay getting support that helps.
- + **Unfair Labels for Kids of Color** › Research shows Black and Brown children are often noticed later, unfairly labeled as troublemakers, or misunderstood. This can mean they're overlooked, not connected with the right support, and miss out on help that could make a difference early.

### Try This

Instead of assuming it's just a phase...

**Four Simple Steps for Support Beyond the Behavior:**

#### Step 1

##### Pause.

Take a breath before reacting.

#### Step 2

##### Ask.

“What else could be going on?”

#### Step 3

##### Notice.

Write down what you see, when it happens, and how often.

#### Step 4

##### Reach Out.

If the pattern keeps showing up, connect with a teacher, doctor, or counselor.



### Why This Matters

Spotting the difference between misbehavior and mental health isn't always easy. Writing down what you notice and sharing the info with teachers and doctors can turn small clues into the help your child needs sooner.

# Step 3: Tools You Can Use Right Now



Kids don't always come right out and say how they're feeling. But the way you ask can make it easier for them to open up. Keep it low-key — like chats in the car, while walking the dog, or cooking together often work better than sitting them down face-to-face which can feel more intense.



## Try This - Talk in Ways that Help You Hear Them

All it takes is a few good questions to get the conversation flowing:

- + “What’s been the hardest part of your day lately?”
- + “How are you really feeling these days?”
- + “What’s something you wish people understood about how you’re feeling?”

## Know The Tools That Can Give You Answers

You don’t need to be an expert to ask for support. Knowing the names of a few common tools can help you feel prepared when you talk with a doctor, counselor, or teacher:

What's The Tool →	How It Works →	Who Can Help
Anxiety Check-In (GAD-7)	Short set of questions that help flag signs of anxiety	Pediatrician, school counselor
Depression Check-In (PHQ-9)	Quick questionnaire that screens for depression symptoms	Pediatrician, school counselor
School Learning & Behavior Evaluation	In-depth school-based testing that looks at learning, attention, and emotional health (sometimes called “neuropsych testing”)	Your child’s school; request in writing

## Why This Matters

These kinds of questions take the pressure off and give your child space to share what’s really going on below the surface. Even short answers can give you clues about how they’re coping. Your job isn’t to fix it right away — it’s to keep listening, write down what you notice, and let your child know you’ll be there to figure things out together.



## What Really Makes the Difference

- + Taking action early isn't about labeling your child — it's about freeing them to get the support they deserve.
- + Every child deserves real tools, not guesswork.
- + Support is strength. Asking for help shows your child that reaching out is healthy.
- + You don't need every answer. What matters is starting the conversation and showing up again and again.
- + Supporting your child is hard work — but your steadiness matters far more than perfection.

## Why This Matters

If something feels off ...



### **Write it down | Ask questions | Reach out**

Early support can change the course of a child's life. Your presence is the most powerful tool your child has — and your steady support gives them the foundation to thrive.