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[Home](#) > [OCD in Children](#)

OCD in Children

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Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a condition that can easily affect anyone. From kids and teenagers, to young and older adults, nobody is immune to developing some form of OCD, or having a loved one who struggles with OCD. That is why it is important to understand the condition well.

It is not usual to hear children discussion OCD, and so the idea of them struggling with it may seem distant.

However, children can also develop obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors and it is important for you, as an adult, to recognize the symptoms, so that you can provide immediate, adequate help.

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Early Signs of OCD

Although OCD might be a bit difficult to spot during childhood, it's very much possible and necessary to have an understanding of the signs. Children who suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder often display a set of strict rituals.

Some example of categories may be as follows: arranging objects in perfect order or in a specific order; drawing the same object in the exact same manner, over and over again; compulsive handwashing; avoiding dirt and getting dirty; fearing germs and bacteria; sexual

aggression; illness; household items; numbers; religion and others.

How Do Children Feel?

Keep in mind that it takes some families months, and in some cases even years, to realize that their child is struggling with OCD. The reason is that children may hide their compulsive behaviors, out of fear and shame.

The child may be afraid that he/she is going crazy, and may realize that the obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors are irrational, which might lead to shame and hiding behaviors. If you have any doubts that your child may be struggling with OCD, a great strategy is to engage in casual conversations about mental health, thus demystifying the issue and showing your child that they can talk to you freely, without judgment on your part.

Red Flags

Although every child is unique and may have different expression of OCD, there are certain behaviors, which you can regard as red flags and watch out for.

The most common of them are as follows: your child has become preoccupied with cleanliness and/or you have noticed a dramatic increase in utility bills and usage of cleaning products; preoccupation with grooming, to an extent that is far bigger and uncommon for the child's age group; a highly increased interest in lucky charms, lucky numbers and behaviors; a highly increased interest and checking and re-checking homework, household appliances, personal items, etc.; requests to adults to engage in certain rituals, such as confirming that the child has not been contaminated by bacteria; a sudden drop in performance and social interactions.

This list is a fraction of the OCD-related behaviors, which children may exhibit, but it would provide you with a baseline of what to look for. Remember that children might not exhibit these behaviors in school.

The Impact of Adults

This may seem surprising, but even very young children can struggle with OCD. Although nobody can be blamed for a child's struggle with OCD, it is important to remember that children are very impressionable and can easily become affected by the words and behaviors of adults.

This is especially true, when it comes to adults that hold an important role in the child's life, and are loved and respected by the child. If such an adult is preoccupied with cleaning and protecting the family from illness and bacteria, the child may easily internalize similar thought and behaviors.

Children are also easily influenced by strictness, lack of boundaries, as well as behaviors you may not even realize they notice. That is why it is crucial to work on your own dysfunctional beliefs and behaviors, if you spend time with children.

Your Reaction

The way you react to your child's behavior, whether it is symptoms of OCD or something else, can have a great impact. As you already know, children need love, understanding, care and empathy, just as much as they need boundaries and rules. Most of all, however, it is important for a child's mental and physical health to be able to talk to a trustworthy adult, who will not judge the child's behavior and thoughts, but would rather provide a safe space of understanding and guidance.

Treatment in Children

As you already know, when it comes to OCD, there aren't any huge differences between children and adults. Both groups exhibit clear signs of obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors. Moreover, children and adults both struggle with the same inner turmoil of anxiety and fear.

Treatment options represent one of the main differences between children and adults with OCD. While cognitive-behavioral therapy, which focuses on cognitive restructuring and challenging intrusive thoughts, is a wonderful and extremely effective option for adults, it might be difficult to understand for a 9-year-old.

That is why it is important to use methods suited to children, such as art-therapy, behavioral therapy, music therapy and so on. Therapists, who work primarily or exclusively with children can provide a huge benefit in understand and helping children with OCD. ERP can also have excellent results on children, as long as the exercise is performed under the strict guidance of a child specialist.

Last but not least, moral support from family members and caregivers is of paramount importance. Every child must know that despite of their differences, people will love and accept them no matter what.

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