

# Parents & Teachers as Allies

From the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

A guide for parents and  
teachers working together  
to support their students

Thank you for reading our Parents & Teachers as Allies guide. In January of 2001, the U.S. Surgeon General released a [report](#) indicating that 1 in 10 American children and adolescents had a mental health condition that caused some level of impairment in their daily lives. Although welcome as a wake-up call to the nation, the recognition did not come as news to the millions of parents and teachers who were struggling every day to help these young people. Decades later, youth mental health is still a major concern, prompting the release of the U.S. Surgeon General's [Advisory on Youth Mental Health in 2021](#). Today, young people are facing not only the “typical” challenges of childhood and adolescence, but gun violence, climate change, the complicated role of technology and social media, and the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**The youth  
mental  
health crisis  
is real, and  
the numbers  
are striking.**

- **50%** of all lifetime cases of mental health conditions begin by age 14; 75% of mental health conditions begin by age 24
- As of 2021, about **1 in 5** children ages 3-17 (21%) in the U.S. had ever been diagnosed with a mental, emotional, or behavioral health condition
- **40%** of U.S. high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2023
- **20%** of U.S. high school students had serious thoughts of suicide in 2023
- The average delay between the onset of mental health condition symptoms and treatment is **11 years**

We also know that the consequences of untreated mental health conditions can be devastating:

- High school students with recent symptoms of depression are more than **2x as likely** to drop out compared to their peers
- Suicide was the **2nd leading** cause of death among people ages 10-14 and among people ages 15-24 in the U.S. in 2023

This guide was created to help parents, teachers, and others involved with students identify the key warning signs of early-onset mental health conditions. In this guide, we will use the term “parent” to refer to the child’s guardian/caregiver, knowing that this isn’t always the child’s biological parent. The guide focuses on the specific, age-related symptoms of mental health conditions in youth, which may differ from the symptoms seen in adults. This is not to suggest that, on top of everything else, parents and teachers should become diagnosticians and therapists. However, to offer the best opportunities for youth, both groups need to be grounded in a common knowledge base. United in their ability to recognize and willingness to identify youth displaying the signs, both parents and teachers can link young people with services and supports for evaluation. This guide is designed to function as a two-way street:

- For teachers to use and give to parents and other family caregivers of the students for whom they are concerned.
- For parents to use and give to the teachers working with their students.

After reading this guide, we encourage you to learn more by attending one of our programs such as NAMI Ending the Silence, NAMI Basics, and NAMI Family-to-Family for additional information and understanding.

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## COMMON BEHAVIORS TO LOOK OUT FOR

Children and adolescents are constantly changing and going through different emotions as they grow. Some behaviors can look very similar to typical emotions one might experience as they grow and develop. It's important to learn what to look out for to recognize if a student may be showing signs of concerning behavior.

Before we jump into the different signs, let's talk about intensity, duration, and level of distress. **Intensity** is related to how severe the behaviors are. **Duration** is related to how long the student has experienced concerning behavior. The **level of distress** is related to how much the behavior impairs the student's daily functioning, either at home or at school. You will need to consider all three factors when observing any symptoms a student is experiencing.

### AT HOME

Look for changes in behaviors and actions

- Seems sad, hopeless, empty, i.e.:
  - ◆ Not engaging in play or hobbies like usual
- Has difficulty sleeping; experiencing a high activity level at night, i.e.:
  - ◆ Their bedroom light is left on
- Overly reactive to rejection and criticism
- Lies and makes up stories
- Constantly runs late, is unexpectedly rude, and misplaces belongings, i.e.:
  - ◆ Not being ready for school in the morning
- Is isolated, doesn't participate in social situations, i.e.:
  - ◆ Not wanting to spend time with friends



### AT SCHOOL

Look for changes in behaviors and actions in:

- Social interactions and friendships, i.e.:
  - ◆ Changes in friend groups
  - ◆ More quiet or outspoken than usual
  - ◆ Isolating themselves
  - ◆ More sensitive to peer comments
- Engagement in activities
- Appetite
- Work habits and conduct, i.e.:
  - ◆ Organizational skills
  - ◆ Work completion
  - ◆ Focus, ability to stay on task
  - ◆ Self-direction
  - ◆ Self-regulation
  - ◆ Following directions
  - ◆ Changes in grades
  - ◆ Persistence
  - ◆ Independent vs. cooperatively working in pairs or groups
- Appears to be tired or makes comments about not sleeping well
- Participation in gym, music, recess, classroom activities, etc.

## HOW TO START A CONVERSATION

Behaviors a teacher sees frequently in school may not occur at home; behaviors seen at home may not happen at school. Maintaining two-way communication between home and school is absolutely essential for teachers and parents to gain the information necessary for early intervention on the child's behalf. In the privacy of their home, children are more likely to express their true feelings. In school, the teacher will be in a position to pick up on heightened behaviors caused by the stress of required work and/or negative encounters with peers. It is impossible to put these separate pieces of a child's experience into a meaningful whole unless parents and teachers work together. As allies, they can identify potential early warning signs of mental health conditions and become a united and effective early-intervention team.

### FOR PARENTS: CONVERSATIONS WITH TEACHERS AND FACULTY

As a parent, you may observe behaviors in your child that could be signs that they may be experiencing challenges with their mental health. There may be no reason to be concerned, but it's in your child's best interests to have a conversation with their teacher(s) to get a more rounded view of your child's overall behavior. Here are some tips to help you start the conversation:

- Begin by sharing the reasons you're meeting with the teacher(s) and tell them your observations at home. This will help you and the teacher paint a better picture of your child's experience.
- Next, you can ask the teacher about their observations of your child during class and/or on the playground. Have they noticed any behavior changes or concerning habits? You can also ask about changes in your child's academic performance.
- Discuss the next steps for you and the teacher and develop a plan to support your child. For example, establishing how you will communicate your child's needs regarding their behavior and/or school performance, exploring suitable options for classroom adjustments/accommodations, and learning about available school resources for you as parents and your child.

### Next Steps for You and Your Family

- Review your notes from the discussion and decide how you will use the resources shared with you. Begin implementing your home portion of the plan.
- If your child's teacher is unreceptive to your concerns, consider reaching out to your school's social worker or counselor for assistance. If your school doesn't have a social worker or counselor, contact the school and ask for contact information student mental health services.
- Begin additional research to better understand your child's situation. Consider reading through our listed resources on the final pages of this guide.

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I was not embarrassed by her diagnosis. I didn't want her to be embarrassed by her diagnosis... I let the teachers know right away, asked for a meeting with them, and then I kind of laid out the things that would help her. I had a template email that I'd send to all the teachers so they would understand Jillian's background. She loved school, she loved her teachers, she loved her friends, but school also was one of the biggest stressors for her because of just the nature of what it demands.

— Marie,  
Massachusetts





## FOR TEACHERS: CONVERSATIONS WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES

As a teacher, you see your students for a large portion of their day and you could be the first to notice concerns. Changes in their behavior could signify that they are experiencing challenges with their mental health. These observations are important to relay to the family. Be aware that each family will have unique reactions to hearing that their child could be experiencing mental health challenges. Some will be open and grateful for your concern and others may even be defensive.

It's also important to keep these things in mind when having these conversations with parents and families:

- Be aware of and remove feelings of blame from your comments; do not assign blame to parents or to the student.
- Acknowledge denial and anger as normal.
- Communicate empathy and compassion for the family's situation.
- Emphasize that early recognition, identification, and intervention are essential protective steps for their child.
- Be particularly sensitive to parents with special circumstances (i.e. death in the family, parent who is deployed, separation or divorce, recent moves or job changes).

### Here are some suggestions for starting a conversation with family:

- Ask how the child is doing at home. Have parents noticed any changes?
- Share similarities and differences in school from what the family reports. Include any changes in behavior academically and socially.
- Consider asking: "I've noticed that [name] is \_\_\_\_\_ more/less than usual. Have you noticed this at home as well?"
  - ◆ If so, do you know of any tools or resources that help them at home?
  - ◆ Do certain phrases seem to help them calm down?
  - ◆ What seems to trigger these behaviors at home?
  - ◆ Note any similarities/differences at school.
- If parents share any details, other resources could be suggested.
  - ◆ I.e., "Would you like me to let our other staff know in case [name] needs some time to process or needs someone to talk to?"
  - ◆ Suggest meeting with the school counselor to get connected with community resources.
  - ◆ Ask if any previous or specialty teachers have a good connection with their child to see if doing check-ins with that adult could be helpful.
- Discuss what school resources might help and what adjustments can be made in the classroom to support the student. These adjustments could include:
  - ◆ Taking breaks from difficult assignments
  - ◆ Having a buddy to check-in with during the day
  - ◆ Going to a calming area of the room or building when needed
- Discuss outside resources, such as NAMI, for classes and support groups to learn more from families who have experienced supporting an individual living with a mental health condition. You can refer to the resources section of this guide for specific programs.
- Determine next steps. These may include:
  - ◆ Follow up to discuss any progress.
    - ✦ Add any involved school staff as part of the follow-up.
  - ◆ Discuss supports in place, how they're working, and how long to keep them implemented.
    - ✦ If supports aren't working, discuss observations, suggest new supports as needed, allow space for parents to discuss what they've heard/seen from the student at home, ask questions or provide feedback about new supports, suggest other ideas, etc.
    - ✦ It's important that the parents feel involved and respected in this process.
    - ✦ Involve the student in discussions whenever possible.

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My music teacher actually noticed that I wasn't doing so great, and he eventually decided to contact my parents. We had school plays, and he was the one who coached them, so I spent more time talking with him academically than any other teacher and it felt like I could open up a little to him about my experiences. He said, this is okay, telling me, but this is to the point where we have to contact someone because it isn't healthy. He was very calm about it and that made it feel a lot more genuine than if he'd freaked out or just showed no emotion. But he was super calm about it, and he was like, I understand how you're feeling and you're not alone, but this is a point where we have to reach out to someone.

— Kevin,  
Illinois

## CREATING A SUPPORT PLAN FOR THE STUDENT

Students experiencing challenges with their mental health will need support both at home and in the classroom. It's the responsibility of the parents and teachers to work collaboratively to develop a plan that supports the student in coping with their mental health challenges. This support plan can also include insight from mental health professionals who have evaluated the child and provided mental health practices to benefit the child. As mentioned in the last section, communication is very important. Parents and teachers should be attentive to changes in the child's behavior and note if there is a need for changes to the current plan.

### PARENTS

One aspect of your role as a parent in the support plan is to be observant of changes in your child's behavior. If you've worked together with your child's teacher, take note of changes whether positive, negative, or no changes at all. This will help you determine what will work best in supporting your child's mental health. Here are some tools to incorporate into your support plan:

#### INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS

Talk to your child about their mental health. A great way to start is to share how you're feeling. It may help to talk about yourself first to model that it's okay to share, like saying, "I'm feeling a little overwhelmed today, so I'm going to go for a walk to clear my thoughts. How are you feeling? Would you like to join me?" For the younger kids, you can introduce NAMI's "Meet Little Monster," a coloring & activity book to help introduce the concepts of mental health in a fun and engaging way.

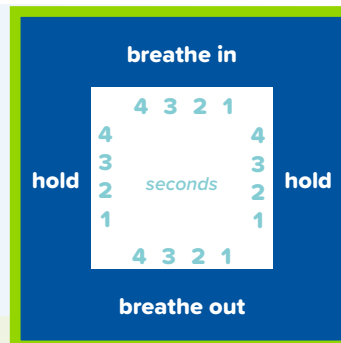
For more tips on how to talk to your child about mental health, check out the resources section.

#### MINDFULNESS TOOLS

Mindfulness tools are a great way to help your child be in tune with their body. These are good resources for your child when they feel like they are feeling overwhelmed by their emotions.

##### BOX BREATHING:

- ◆ Draw a square on a piece of paper
- ◆ Breathe in as you move up one side
- ◆ Hold your breath as you move across
- ◆ Breathe out as you move down the other side
- ◆ Hold your breath as you move across
- ◆ Repeat as needed



##### BODY SCAN

- ◆ You can stand up tall, lay down, or sit for this exercise
- ◆ Take a deep breath in, then out
- ◆ Try to become aware of every part of your body, from the top of your head all the way down to your toes
- ◆ Try to notice any clenching or tightness in your body; release the tension if you can
- ◆ Slowly begin moving your body, starting with wiggling your toes, then your fingers
- ◆ Then shake out your legs, then your arms
- ◆ Take another deep breath in trying to fill up your lungs, then a big breath out
- ◆ Consider how you feel; if you're still feeling tension, you can repeat the exercise

### Accommodations

Some kids may benefit from specific accommodations provided by the school. There are two levels of accommodation plans in most schools: Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) that are the most intensive and comprehensive or Section 504 Plans that are less intensive. An IEP may include time outside class in a "Resource Room," psychological counseling, extra time for tests and more. The 504s generally keep the child in the classroom, but they have many accommodations you and the team agree upon.

For more resources and tools, check out our [resources online](#).

## TEACHERS

It is important for teachers to stay attuned to changes in their students' behavior in school. Whether the changes are positive, negative, or minimal, they provide valuable insight to support the student's mental health, especially when working with the family. Ongoing communication between home and school plays a key role in supporting the student's mental health and overall development. When creating a support plan, here are a few elements teachers might consider including:

### INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS

- ◆ Observe behavior changes within your students. Establish a consistent and sustainable method for tracking the student's behavior both at home and in the classroom. This could be done daily or weekly, depending on what best supports the student's needs. Regular communication between the teacher and parent is essential. Sharing updates about how the student's day went helps ensure both parties are informed and aligned, making it easier to respond appropriately and provide the right support. Some methods of communication are:
  - ◆ Suggest a daily or weekly journal that the student takes to and from school for parents and teachers to keep each other updated about their day.
  - ◆ Some teachers use an app for classroom management that has a messaging feature for parents and teacher to communicate about the student's day.
  - ◆ Simple daily check-in sheet broken into sections of the day. The morning could be filled out by the student and parent before school, and the afternoon section can be filled out by the student and teacher at the end of the day. This could involve circling words about how the student is feeling, rating their day on a scale from 1-10, or coloring in a certain number of stars to rate their day. Add a comment section for any other details needed.
- ◆ Check in with the student to see how they are doing. Offer options to talk, go to the counselor if needed, or visit another trusted adult with whom they have a relationship.
- ◆ Talk to the student when you notice a change or concerns in their behavior.
  - ◆ Ask if they would like to talk about anything or want to take a break.
  - ◆ Use any strategies mentioned during the conversation with the parent.

### MINDFULNESS TOOLS

- ◆ Teaching mindfulness in the classroom. If this is not possible, then have the student visit the counselor for some mindfulness breaks/lessons. See the above parent section for Mindfulness Tools.
- ◆ Create a classroom safe space or calm corner.
- ◆ Have a feelings wheel posted in the classroom.
- ◆ Create an area where students can go when feeling overwhelmed or needing a break.
- ◆ Have a mindfulness kit that students can easily access which could include:
  - ◆ Fidget toys
  - ◆ Water timer
  - ◆ Liquid motion timer
  - ◆ Putty, play dough, kinetic sand
  - ◆ Stuffed animal
  - ◆ Reminder cards on different breathing techniques

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Things get exponentially better when my son can be surrounded by a team of people, and he is not just relying on me for all of these needs.

—Beth,  
Illinois





## NAVIGATING THE REFERRAL PROCESS AS ALLIES

In most school systems today, a referral for behavioral health services is a long-delayed, last step in a series of team meetings and administrative reviews that typically lead to an evaluation by a psychologist or social worker. A psychiatric evaluation and assessment may not be pursued unless these evaluators recommend it. This process can be challenging, but going through it as a team can make it much more manageable.

The most effective way to put a child on a fast track to effective mental health services and supports is for the parents to find a qualified mental health professional either through your insurance or through a recommended source, get an accurate diagnosis, and present the school with this objective medical evidence that their child has a mental health condition. If a child psychiatrist cannot be located in their geographical area, parents can seek help from a neurologist or pediatrician. For families who cannot afford these options or are apprehensive about them, they can contact their NAMI State Organization or NAMI Affiliate (find yours at [www.nami.org/local](http://www.nami.org/local)) to get information about the public mental health system in their area. Another option for the parent is to talk with the teacher to start the process for the child to be evaluated by the school for special education services. Close collaboration during the review process means the teacher can help the parents understand why they must advocate for an evaluation by a qualified mental health professional every step of the way.

Someday, we will live in a world where screening for mental health conditions in young people is an accepted, customary practice. Until that time, children and adolescents will not receive the critical early intervention they deserve unless parents and teachers unite to identify early symptoms and to team up to get the child toward the appropriate treatment.

Parents play a key role in their child's educational experience. Teachers do, too, by serving as mentors, supporting students in reaching their full academic potential, and recognizing when the need exists to connect students with effective services and supports. Together, parents and teachers form an indispensable alliance and offer a positive difference for every student's future.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

NAMI has many resources that can be found at [nami.org](https://nami.org). We have listed several resources we think may support you.

### For Parents and Teachers

#### [Be a Trusted Adult for Young People in Your Life](#)

Trusted adults can be family members, grandparents, teachers, social workers, or any other supportive, caring adult in a student's life. This kind of relationship can have a positive impact on physical, mental, and social outcomes for children.

#### [Language Matters](#)

A one-pager that helps individuals understand the importance of words when talking about mental health conditions and suicide.

### For Parents and Families

#### [NAMI Basics](#)

NAMI Basics is a six-session education program for parents, caregivers, and other family members who provide care for youth (ages 22 and younger) who are experiencing mental health symptoms. This program is free to participants, 99% of whom say they would recommend the program to others. NAMI Basics is available both in person and online through NAMI Basics OnDemand.

#### [NAMI Family Support Group](#)

NAMI Family Support Group is a support group for family members, significant others, and friends of people with mental health conditions. Groups meet weekly, every other week, or monthly, depending on location. Many support groups are virtual and attendance is open to everyone across the country.

#### [Getting Your Child Mental Health Support and Accommodations in School](#)

Often, when children are grappling with emotional and behavioral challenges, these difficulties interfere with their school performance and functioning. Improve your understanding of how to advocate for your child's needs in school.

#### [Finding Mental Health Care for Your Child \(Video\)](#)

A video that describes what to do and where to go for help when your child shows symptoms of a mental health condition.

#### [How to Talk to Your Child About Mental Health](#)

Read our tips on how to start the conversation with your child.

#### [10 Questions on a Tuesday](#)

An activity guide for parents and guardians to discuss mental health and well-being with their children in the home and develop supportive practical strategies.

#### [The Three C's for Parents and Guardians](#)

A one-pager with tips for parents on supporting their children's emotional and mental well-being during the challenging transition back to the classroom and throughout the school year.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

NAMI has many resources that can be found at [nami.org](https://nami.org). We have listed several resources we think may support you.

### For Teachers

#### [NAMI TraumaInSight](#)

NAMI's first trauma awareness training, NAMI TraumaInSight, is available for all youth-serving professionals. This course is completely free, self-paced, and available to the public.

#### [NAMI Ending the Silence](#)

NAMI Ending the Silence is an engaging presentation that helps middle and high school aged youth learn about the warning signs of mental health conditions and what steps to take if you or a loved one are showing symptoms of a mental health condition.

#### [Mental Wellness Moments for Educators](#)

An activity guide for educators to incorporate daily wellness activities in the classroom to enhance the emotional well-being of their students.

#### [Mindfulness Activities](#)

Often, in school, students can find it hard to focus or can be impacted by events around them. You can use these exercises to bring students back into the moment.

View more online resources from NAMI [here](#).