

# MENTAL HEALTH

This fact sheet has been written by parent carers for parent carers.



Life brings many additional challenges for our children, not only because they may feel acutely aware that their disability makes them 'different' to their peers but also because they may be more vulnerable to some mental health conditions because of their disability. Some children with autism, for example, can be more likely to develop conditions such as anxiety, depression, or obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

Adolescence in particular can be a challenging time. The physical changes of puberty are accompanied by psychological changes that can affect young people's behaviour and emotional wellbeing. And the social pressures that all teenagers face can be more acute for children with disabilities, which can lead to fragile self-esteem and higher anxiety.

It's also important to remember that mental health issues can sometimes be harder to recognise in children and young people with disabilities. This might be because of communication difficulties, the complexity of their condition or the fact that some mental health symptoms may be confused with their other symptoms.

## Signs that something may be wrong

It's natural for us all go through difficult patches where we may feel more anxious, stressed or down. Often, we can get through these times without needing outside help or support, as long as we are fairly resilient and our self-esteem is in good shape (for more on this see our fact sheet on self-esteem). If you notice that your child is having difficulties, it may be that talking to you, or a trusted friend of the family will be enough to help them to resolve their difficulties.

However, sometimes a problem can be harder to resolve and it may be that your child will need the help and support of people outside the family. You may notice, for example that your child is more anxious, or is becoming isolated and withdrawn from friends and family. Their sleep may be affected and you may also notice that their personal hygiene is neglected. Similarly, you may notice changes in their behaviour. They may be more irritable and may possibly harm themselves or others.

If your child has a learning disability, it may be harder to ascertain what is going on. You may just feel that something is 'off'; that there has been a change in the way that they communicate, their behaviour has changed, that they are sleeping more or less, or they are no longer enjoying their favourite activities. It's important to trust your instincts and speak to professionals involved with your child if you have concerns.

## Getting outside help

The first step when you notice a problem with your child or young person is to speak to other people who deal with them regularly. It's a good idea to note down everything that you are worried about so that you can raise all of your concerns when you talk to professionals.

If your child is still in education, you could speak to their school or college about your concerns as they may be able to offer support such as counselling. If the school or college feel your child needs additional support, they can refer them to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). If your child is not comfortable with opening up about their mental health issues with someone from school, you could speak to their GP or paediatrician who can also make a referral to more specialist mental health services.

CAMHS help with a wide range of mental health problems for children and young people. CAMHS



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workers are based in the community or in clinics and include practitioners such as therapists and psychiatrists. If your child has a sudden or serious mental health crisis they should be treated urgently. All other referrals to CAMHS should get an initial assessment quite quickly, but you may wait some time for whatever treatment is considered appropriate.

You can also get support, information and advice from many local and national charities (see below).

### Ask about

- **Autism Sussex** – go to [www.autismsussex.org.uk](http://www.autismsussex.org.uk) or call **0345 450 0060**. It runs behavioural advice services, parent workshops, coffee mornings, clubs and siblings clubs.
- **CAMHS (Children & Adolescent Mental Health Service)** – doctors and therapists who help children and young people with mental health issues. Referrals must be made by a professional from health, social care or an educational setting.
- **Child Disability Service** – a social work service for children and young people with severe and/or complex disabilities, it works with families and other agencies to ensure they get the right support. Call: **01403 229888** or email: [cdt@westsussex.gcsx.gov.uk](mailto:cdt@westsussex.gcsx.gov.uk). Please note that some children may be referred on to the MASH (see contact details below).
- **MASH** – support from health and social care. If your child is under 18, call the MASH, tel: **01403 229888**, email: [MASH@westsussex.gcsx.gov.uk](mailto:MASH@westsussex.gcsx.gov.uk). For over 18s call the Adult Social CarePoint: **01243 642121**, or email: [socialcare@westsussex.gov.uk](mailto:socialcare@westsussex.gov.uk).
- **Social Communication Team** – team of qualified specialists with expertise in autism who aim to promote the educational, social and emotional development of children and young people, working with their parents and educational settings. Ask your child's school for further information.
- **Your Space** – advice and information for young people run by West Sussex County Council. Includes information on mental health and emotional wellbeing and links to other websites and sources of information. Go to: [www.westsussex.gov.uk/education-children-and-families/your-space](http://www.westsussex.gov.uk/education-children-and-families/your-space).

### Further reading and useful links

- **Making Sense of Adult Life** – our handy guide for parent carers of young people aged 14 to 25 contains directories of local activities and short breaks and much more. It is available to download or buy. For further information, visit our website: [www.reachingfamilies.org.uk](http://www.reachingfamilies.org.uk).
- **Contact a Family** – [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk) or tel: **0808 808 3555** has many information leaflets, including one on growing up, relationships and building self-esteem.
- **Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities** – go to: [www.learningdisabilities.org.uk](http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk).
- **Mencap** – specialist support, advice and information for people with learning disabilities. Go to: [www.mencap.org.uk](http://www.mencap.org.uk).
- **Mental Health Foundation** – go to: [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk).
- **Mind** – go to their website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) or call their information line on: **0300 123 3393**.
- **National Autistic Society** – information, support and services for people with autism [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk).
- **Samaritans** – 24-hour help for people who are feeling anxious, depressed or suicidal. You can also call if you are worried about someone else. Tel: **116 123** or go to: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org).
- **Young Minds** – information and advice about the mental health of children and young people. Go to: [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk).
- **Youth Access** – provider of young people's advice and counselling services: [www.youthaccess.org.uk](http://www.youthaccess.org.uk).

