Deerfield Parent Network
"Network Notes"

The Changing Moods of Adolescence: What's Normal and What's Not,
by Peggy Kubert, MA, LCSW

Peggy Kubert is executive director of Erika's Lighthouse, an organization dedicated to raising awareness about childhood and adolescent depression and mental health issues. Erika's Lighthouse, located in Glencoe, IL, was founded in 2004 by the family of a teen who took her own life.

Depression is a word that is so pervasive in the everyday lexicon, chances are that if your child came home from school and said, "I'm depressed," a typical response would be, "Well, I'm depressed too, but we have to get to that soccer practice now, so get in the car!" Only recently have we come to recognize clinical depression as an illness that can affect children. In fact, it's a common illness: 20% of us will have an episode of clinical depression in our lifetimes. If that statistic were applied to a physical condition, we would say it's an epidemic. Depression is a term that teens are familiar with, so it's a good starting point when trying to help teens struggling with mental health.

One reason it's hard for parents to discern whether their child is within the "norm" of adolescent behavior is that parents don't typically see their children within a group of peers on a day to day basis the way their teachers or coaches might. If they did, they would realize that "normal" adolescent behavior runs a very wide gamut.

Kubert offered the following guiding principles for parents:
▪**Remember, you are not alone**. Others have been in your position and have survived!
▪**Continually educate yourself**. New information is available all the time; i.e., the *Wall Street Journal* recently ran an excellent article titled "What's Wrong with the Teenage Mind?" It explains that kids experience puberty at a younger age than ever before, but their brains are not ready for all the hormones changes that accompany puberty. Here is the link to this article:
(http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203806504577181351486558984.html
▪**Expect Change**. Kids may not be ready for all the changes that come their way, but parents can *teach* them how to deal with the issues that come up. There's a myth that teens are always full of angst and on an emotional roller-coaster, but this doesn't have to be the norm.
▪**You are their role model**: they are watching **everything** you do, so if you model good mental health, they will learn by example.
▪**Trust your Gut**. If you feel something's wrong, ask questions of everyone involved in your kid's life. Under these circumstances, it's okay to *snoop!*It's OK to ask for help, even to deal with the day in, day out kinds of issues that come up with your child.

Defining Depression
It's important to know how depression is defined and diagnosed in order to understand what's normal and what's not. To be diagnosed as clinically depressed, a child must consistently exhibit at least **five** of the following behaviors for a period lasting **longer than two weeks**, and **including at least one of the first two behaviors listed here:**

- Sad, depressed, cranky, or moody. Irritability is the primary symptom.
- Little or no interest in pleasurable activities or in one's favorite activities.

(continued on page 2)

PAGE 2 of Peggy Kubert

- Significant weight loss or weight gain, or change in appetite.
- Insomnia or hypersomnia
- Psychomotor agitation or retardation
- Fatigue
- Feelings of worthlessness, and/or excessive or inappropriate guilt
- Diminished ability to think or concentrate; extreme indecisiveness
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide; a suicide attempt or plan; or giving away one's favorite possessions. Any of these should be considered a big red flag!

It's hard for parents to tolerate their kids' being sad, but when sad things happen, it's appropriate for them to feel sad. Children need to learn how to deal with sadness which only comes through experiences so please don't try to shield them from these sad moments. Each change in a child's behavior is an opportunity to have a conversation about what's going on.

The tragedy of teen suicide is that because of their [lack of] emotional maturity, their thinking goes something like: "I'm going to kill myself today and then tomorrow everything will be alright." But they don't really want to die, they just don't want to be in pain anymore. They don't realize that suicide is permanent.

When it comes to talking to your children if you think there's a problem, don't confront them by saying "What's wrong with you?" Instead, tell them, "**You deserve to feel better and I'm going to help you do that."** Encourage discussion about all aspects of your child's life. Acknowledge any changes in behavior or mood.

The car is a great place to get a discussion going. If your child is in your car with his or her friends, you can leave the radio on in the rear but turn the volume off in front ; that way, you can listen in on their conversation without them realizing it.

Use active listening skills: nod your head, sigh, and give other non-verbal, encouraging signals. *Always maintain eye contact*. Choose your battles when you have an issue with your child, and use "I" messages. Help them learn to talk about their own emotions by modeling talking about your own. Make sure your child understands your expectations for him or her and maintain those expectations. Recognize, however, that if your child is having problems, you may have to temper those expectations.

Intervention Language
Use the "D – E – S – K" acronym to remember the positive way to intervene when you are having a problem with your child:
Describe the behavior you see
Express how it makes you feel
State what you want to see happen
Know and communicate the consequences
If you consciously remind yourself to use the **DESK** system when talking with your kids, it will prevent you from saying a lot of things you'd regret.

(continued on page 3)

Deerfield Parent Network
"Network Notes"

PAGE 3 of Peggy Kubert
Here's an example of the DESK method:
D- I see that you are playing video games again before your homework is done
E- This makes me feel frustrated
S- I want you to stop now and finish your homework
K- This is a rule in our house and if not followed will lead to the video games being taken away for the week.

If you're unsure if a problem is serious or not, call your child's school and ask to talk to his or her teachers, or anyone else who sees your child in a group setting and/or on a regular basis.

Keeping a journal is a great way to assess what is happening with your child, either to recognize changes in behavior that may be problematic, or to determine progress the child is making while in the therapy process. Journaling is a great tool for the child as well.

Getting Help
If you suspect a serious problem, start by going to your pediatrician. The symptoms may be caused by a physical problem. Once that is ruled out, your pediatrician can help by recommending a therapist who can provide a mental health assessment. Erika's Lighthouse has published a very useful handbook *by parents and for parents* to help them deal with all aspects of a child's mental health problem. Copies are available for $15 or can be downloaded for free from the website: www.erikaslighthouse.org. Once a diagnosis is made, that will guide the treatment process. Unless there is a very serious issue, talk therapy will come before any medication is prescribed. You may need to consult a psychiatrist to get medication, since psychiatric social workers cannot prescribe.

Finding a good therapist is a matter of word-of-mouth, recommendations from friends, or from other professionals. It's wise to interview a prospective therapist, and if possible, include your child in this process. You may have to shop around until you find a good fit for your child. It's fine to check in with your child's therapist and ask him or her if they think the therapy is really making a difference.

A child with a mental health issue can wreak havoc on the entire family, so be sure to check in with your child's siblings to make sure they understand what is happening and are not feeling neglected. Be reassuring and honest about the problem. Seek treatment for yourself if you find the situation difficult; that sets a good example for your child as well. Above all remember it's an ***illness;*** **there is no blame, and there is no shame.**

Helping your child find happiness
Encourage your child to develop strong, meaningful relationships.
Encourage your child to feel he or she has purpose.
Encourage your child to set and achieve goals toward that purpose.

To encourage self-esteem, focus on your child's ***competencies***. Remind yourself what are the things you really want your child to be good at. Let the child know you believe in him or her.