

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 22

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NORMALITY

Parents are naturally concerned about the health and welfare of their children. Many parents correctly and comfortably see their youngster as normal. However, some other parents worry whether their infant, child, or teenager has a problem. These worries may be about various things, for example:

- how the child is developing
- the emotional well-being of the child
- what the child says, thinks, and feels
- how the child acts, for example, eating and sleeping patterns, behavior at school, getting along with family and friends, and coping with stress

Child and adolescent psychiatrists can help parents and families sort out whether their child is normal. They usually interview the child and ask the parents about the child's previous health and behavior. They may also ask about how the family gets along together. It is likely that infants, children, and teenagers are normal when, at the appropriate age, they fully participate in and enjoy their:

- learning, school, and/or work
- relationships within the family
- relationships with friends; and
- play

Many parents first discuss their concerns about their child's normality with a family member or friend, or with the child's personal physician, school counselor or member of the clergy--who may then refer the family to a child and adolescent psychiatrist. He or she listens carefully to the parents and child and sorts out:

- the long-term factors that tend to lead to--or protect against--the child's developing problems

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- the short-term factors that set off the child's problem
- the factors causing these problems to persist
- the roles of other medical conditions; and
- the combinations of school learning with social and emotional growth

Based on the evaluation, the child and adolescent psychiatrist may:

- reassure the parents, explaining how they can enhance normal development and be more effective in parenting
- suggest an activity or an educational program for the child, and/or education for parents, which will support normal developmental processes; or
- provide or arrange for brief counseling to help the child and parents with minor developmental problems, stressful life situations or difficulties due to the child's temperament

If the evaluation reveals a psychiatric disorder, the child and adolescent psychiatrist will recommend a specific treatment program.

Parents, better than anyone else, know their child and know what is usual behavior for their child. If you feel your child has a problem, seek professional help. It is a very important first step in knowing for sure whether there is a problem, and if so, what measures will best help your child.

For additional information see *Facts for Families: #25 Know Where to Seek Help for Your Child*, *#52 Comprehensive Psychiatric Evaluation*, and *#66 Helping Teenagers with Stress*. **See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).**

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The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 6,000 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

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