



FREE GUIDE • FOR PARENTS OF KIDS & TEENS

When your child is struggling. *A parent's guide to therapy.*

What's part of growing up, what's worth a closer look, and how to take the first step gently. For parents of kids and teens ages 7 to 17.

PREPARED BY

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START HERE

You noticed something. *That matters.*

Maybe it's the stomachaches before school. The bedroom door that stays closed a little longer. The spark that's gone quiet. Something in you said: pay attention.

Worrying about your child doesn't mean something is wrong with them. And it doesn't mean you've done something wrong as a parent. It means you're paying attention, and that attention is exactly what kids need most. This guide is here to help you sort what you're seeing: what's usually part of growing up, what's worth a closer look, how to talk with your child about getting support, and what therapy actually looks like once it starts. It's written for parents of kids and teens ages 7 to 17.

SOME THINGS SHOULDN'T WAIT

If your child has talked about not wanting to be here, or about hurting themselves, call or text **9-8-8** (Suicide Crisis Helpline, 24/7). Kids and teens can also call **Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868** or text CONNECT to 686868.

If you've noticed self-harm, or changes in eating like restricting, purging, or rapid weight change, book with your **family doctor** promptly. Therapy can sit alongside medical care, but those signs need a physician involved.

In an emergency, call **9-1-1** or go to your nearest emergency department.

A reminder as you read: the lists in this guide are patterns parents often notice, not a diagnostic checklist. If something here sounds like your child, it means a conversation is worth having. Nothing more, nothing less.

02

WHAT'S NORMAL, WHAT'S WORTH ATTENTION

Ages 7 to 12: *the growing-up years.*

Struggle wears different clothes at different ages. A nine-year-old won't say "I'm anxious." He'll say his stomach hurts at school drop-off. An eleven-year-old won't describe avoidance. She'll just stop asking to go to sleepovers. Knowing what to look for helps you act earlier, before a hard pattern settles in.

OFTEN PART OF GROWING UP

WORTH A CLOSER LOOK

Occasional worry before a test, a recital, or a new situation

The same worry asked over and over, no matter how many times you reassure

Some bedtime stalling and big-day jitters

Frequent stomachaches or headaches with no medical cause, especially around school

Frustration when plans change

Meltdowns most times a routine shifts, or mornings that regularly end in tears or refusal

Wanting to win, hating to lose

Redoing work until the page tears, refusing to try anything they're not instantly good at

An off week or two after a big change at home

Sleep, mood, or school still disrupted months after the change

The quiet signs are the easiest to miss at this age: pulling back from activities they used to love, less eye contact, and self-deprecating jokes that aren't really jokes.

A WAY TO THINK ABOUT IT

Three questions cut through most of the worry. How long has it lasted? How big does it feel for your child? And how much of their life is it shrinking? When a struggle is persistent, intense, and getting in the way of school, friendships, or home, it has earned a conversation.

03

WHAT'S NORMAL, WHAT'S WORTH ATTENTION

Ages 13 to 17: *the teen years.*

Teens are supposed to pull away a little. Privacy, independence, and pushing on the rules are the developmental work of these years, not a warning sign on their own. The question is whether what you're seeing is privacy, or isolation. A door that closes for an hour is different from a teen who has quietly left their own life.

OFTEN PART OF GROWING UP

WORTH A CLOSER LOOK

Wanting more privacy and time alone

Withdrawing from friends, the team, or activities they used to love

Moodiness that comes and goes

A low mood or harsh self-talk that doesn't lift for weeks

Caring more about how they look

The scroll becoming a measuring stick, dreading photos, meaning it when they say "I'm the ugly one"

Stress before exams and big games

Panic-like moments: racing heart, tight chest, falling apart at 11pm over a test

Pushing on rules and testing limits

Constant reassurance-seeking, or grades collapsing into identity ("if I'm not top of the class, who am I?")

WHEN TO SEEK HELP SOONER

Some signs mean don't wait and watch: any self-harm, eating that has changed in a way that worries you, or talk of not wanting to be here. Start with your family doctor, call or text 9-8-8, or go to emergency if you're frightened for their safety. Therapy can work alongside medical care. It doesn't replace it.

04

HOW TO BRING IT UP

Talking to your child *about* therapy.

How therapy gets introduced shapes how a child arrives. A kid who feels ambushed or punished rarely benefits from the first few sessions. A kid who was invited gently, and given some say, walks in with the door already half open.

- i. **Pick a calm moment.** Not mid-meltdown, and not in the car after the school called. A quiet evening, side by side, works better than face to face.
- ii. **Keep the words simple and honest.** "A therapist is someone whose whole job is helping kids with big feelings. You're not in trouble, and nothing is wrong with you."
- iii. **Normalize it.** Lots of kids and teens talk to someone. It's closer to having a coach than to being sent to the principal's office.
- iv. **Give them a real say.** Ask what they'd want a therapist to know about them. With teens, offer genuine agency: try one session, then we'll talk about whether it felt okay.
- v. **Keep the stakes low.** The first step is a free call between you and the therapy team. Your child doesn't have to do anything, or decide anything, on day one.

IF THEY SAY NO

Don't force it. Therapy that feels forced rarely helps at the start. Many families begin with parent-only sessions instead, where our therapists help you respond to what's happening at home. And many kids warm up to the idea once therapy stops being a mystery and becomes something their parents have actually described.

05

WHAT TO EXPECT

The first session, and *your place in it.*

Most parents ask some version of "what actually happens in there?" It's a fair question. Child therapy isn't a lecture, and it isn't an interrogation.

The first session is usually mostly with the parents. The therapist hears the story from your side, learns what's been tried, and talks through what you hope might shift. From there, your child is met at their pace, sandtray figures and drawing supplies for a younger child, two chairs and unhurried conversation for a teen. Your child isn't put on the spot, and they don't have to disclose anything on day one. Sessions are 50 minutes, and trust is the first month of work, not the first hour.

How parents stay involved

AGES 7 TO 17

CONSENT COMES FIRST

Written consent from a legal guardian comes before the first session. When custody is shared, both legal guardians consent first.

PARENT CHECK-INS

Regular brief debriefs keep you in the loop on themes, home strategies, and progress. The work happens with you, not around you.

YOUR CHILD'S SPACE

Some of what your child shares stays between them and their therapist, so trust can grow. Teens hold a slightly wider privacy boundary, explained to parents and kids alike, up front.

SAFETY IS ALWAYS SHARED

Any risk to your child's safety is told to you. Confidentiality protects the therapy relationship. It never protects secrecy about harm.

AN HONEST SCOPE

Registered psychotherapists don't diagnose and don't prescribe. If your child would be better served by a paediatrician, psychiatrist, or psychologist, we'll say so and help you find the right path.

Notes & *a small plan.*

Before you close this guide, take a moment. Jot down what stood out, then choose one small thing to try. A plan you can actually keep beats a perfect one you can't.

What I want to remember

My small plan

One small step I'll try first

When I'll start

What might get in the way

Someone or something that could help

A GENTLE REMINDER

You don't have to act on all of this. Pick one thing, give it a real week, and let that be enough to start.

YOUR NEXT STEP

The first call costs nothing. *And it's just for parents.*

If part of this guide sounded like your child, the next step is a free 15-minute parent call with our team. You talk through what you've been noticing, ask your questions, and hear honestly whether therapy fits, including the times it doesn't. Your child isn't on the call, nothing is decided for them, and there's nothing to pay.

Book your free 15-minute parent call

gracewaywellness.com/book/free-consultation · about 90 seconds

Meet our therapists first

gracewaywellness.com/our-team

Prefer to reach out directly?

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