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never underestimate the power of caring

Danger Signs: When to Worry

When a child is locked in the bathroom with water running and he says he is doing nothing but the dog is barking, call 911.

Erma Bombeck, parenting humorist

As a parent, it's sometimes tricky to discern between ordinary moodiness in your child and the beginnings of a problem. Throughout childhood, kids go through stages where they become more moody and more argumentative, but knowing what's normal and what's not can help you figure out what's going on. Consider these ideas:

Tips for . . .

All parents

- Keep in touch with your child. The more day-to-day contact you have, and the more you know your child, the better you'll be able to figure out if he or she is having problems
- Don't be ashamed of your child occasionally having problems. Every child will encounter difficulties. That's life. That's part of growing up. Deal with problems right away, and help your child learn how to cope and deal with difficulty.
- Model appropriate ways of dealing with difficulty. Your child watches you when you have a bad day. How do you act? What do you say? How do you cope? Make sure you're acting in ways you want your child to learn.
- Reach out to professionals when you're stumped—or when you're sure there's a problem. You're more likely to help your child if you get assistance early on.

Parents with children ages birth to 5

- Make sure you visit your pediatrician with your child for all regularly scheduled "check-up" appointments. A pediatrician often can quickly spot anything out of the ordinary.
- Monitor your child's eating habits. Although it's normal for young children to go through phases when they eat more (and others when they eat less), if they lose interest in eating, it's often a warning sign.
- Know the developmental milestones your child should be reaching around each age.

Parents with children ages 6 to 9

- How interested is your child in school? Activities? Play? Loss of interest, especially for a long period of time, is a danger sign.
- Find ways to help your child express how he or she is feeling through creative means. For example, ask your child, "What color is your day?" Or "What number is your day?" Then ask why.
- Monitor your child's schedule. Kids often lose interest—or get into trouble—if they're over- or under-scheduled.

Parents with children ages 10 to 15

- As your child enters the teen years, expect more moodiness, but keep on top of what's bothering your child. If your child stops communicating with you (which can happen), find another trusted adult who can keep tabs on your child and let you know.
- Stay aware of your child's behavior. Although kids go through a number of changes, they shouldn't suddenly start getting into fights at school, want to sleep all the time, completely change groups of friends, or start acting out of character. If you notice these changes, contact a teacher, school counselor, or social worker.
- Be interested in what's happening in your teenager's life. Find out what gets him or her excited. Notice when things are going well and intervene when they're not.

Parents with children ages 16 to 18

- Although teenagers at this age may become quite private and spend more time with people other than you, keep in touch with them daily. Ask about their day and what gets them excited. Notice what they say—and how they say it.
- School grades can tell you a lot, particularly if they start to slide downward. If your school has an online system where you can monitor your teen's school attendance and grades, do so.
- Show interest in what's happening in your teenager's life. Find out which activities and hobbies gets him or her excited.

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