

Bummed out at 6

Pre-pubertal depression hits kids who 'can't have fun'

The child weeps, has trouble sleeping and avoids looking you in the eyes. He talks about dying, even considers ways of committing suicide.

The child is depressed, and he is only 6 years old.

"The myth of childhood being necessarily happy, carefree period of life has prejudiced even some psychiatrists," said Dr. Elva O. Poznanski, University of Michigan professor of psychiatry.

The prospects of confronting a

depressed child between the ages of 6 and 12 are so unpleasant that, like the battered child, it is easier to deny a potentially serious problem."

The U-M psychiatrist says that pre-pubertal depression was not recognized as a diagnosable disorder by the psychiatric profession until as late as 1972. Although the existence of depression as a clinical entity before adolescence is still far from accepted, Dr. Poznanski believes that it is drawing increasing attention.

Part of the resistance is parental, part professional, she said. "To get to the child who is depressed, one has to go through the family and the physician. Parents often feel guilty, not in agreement between themselves, and quite often depressed themselves," Dr. Poznanski said.

She added that often even doctors and nurses are skeptical that the suspected depressed child is any more than momentarily sad. While not being critical, Dr. Poznanski points out the difficulty of diagnosing an authentically depressed child.

"Authorities are not agreed how long a mood should last before it is considered a serious psychiatric problem," Dr. Poznanski said. She points out that adult depression, while easier to diagnose, is a complex disorder that is not only extremely painful but also involves possible chemical imbalance.

According to Dr. Poznanski, adults are considered "probably depressed" by some psychiatrists if the low mood lasts two weeks. Other psychiatrists feel the mood should last at least a month before definitely being diagnosed as depression.

"Breakthroughs in diagnosing and treating adult depression are being made dramatically, but we are painfully slow in dealing with the problem at the adolescent and pre-adolescent level," she said.

The psychiatrist and her associates at U-M's Children's Psychiatric Hospital are among the first to study the problem and to contribute to a scientific understanding of it. They have developed a Childhood Depression Rating Scale (ages 6-12) as a diagnostic tool, and they videotaped hospitalized youngsters who have been assumed only to be sad but may in

fact be seriously depressed.

Among the indicators of pre-pubertal depression is a seeming lack of capacity to have fun. Dr. Poznanski stated that the natural desires in children may be misdirected in the suspected depressed child.

For example, such a child may say, in the middle of winter, "I wish I could play baseball." He may even refuse to eat favorite foods after asking for them.

Depressed children generally do poorly in school. "Not all poor achievers are depressed," Dr. Poznanski said. "But poor work goes with depression." They have difficulty concentrating, and are not very talkative. Further, it seems to take them much longer to fall asleep at night.

"Usually we find that the child has a depressed parent, too, but we are not sure why," the U-M psychiatrist said.

While the sleep-brain technique, chemical studies and anti-depressant drugs are used with adults, such aids are generally not available to the child psychiatrist concerned with pre-pubertal depression in youngsters. Dr. Poznanski points out that it is illegal to use anti-depressant medication with children, although European psychiatrists are allowed to use lithium and are reporting successful results.

"In all fairness it has to be said that some research into this problem is going on in certain isolated medical centers, even though it is limited and quite unusual," Dr. Poznanski stated.

"Watch for the child who appears to have headaches and stomach complaints. Watch the child who sits in the corner not bothering people. Watch the child who complains of being tired most of the time, and yet who has trouble sleeping," Dr. Poznanski said.

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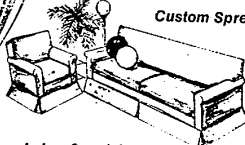
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