

Adjustment Disorder

Adjustment disorders are emotional or behavioral reactions to some type of change in your child's life, such as a death or divorce. Some children become sad and withdrawn while others become angry and difficult. The problems usually get better in a short time. Talking with a mental health professional and exploring other forms of support may be helpful.

- More serious or sudden life changes are more likely to cause a reaction. Losing someone or something that was very important to your child may provoke a strong response.
- Your child and family's unique situation and resources will affect how you and your child react to stress and change.

What is adjustment disorder?

Adjustment disorders arise from some type of change in your child's behavior related to a recent stressful event. It may be a major life event, such as a death in the family, or something relatively minor, such as moving or starting at a new school. The behavioral or emotional reactions vary widely. Your child may become depressed, angry, withdrawn, disobedient, or a mix of these.

By definition, adjustment disorders do not last any longer than a few months. If the problems linger, your doctor may recommend further evaluation for another problem such as anxiety or depression. During times of stress, counseling can be very helpful for children and families.

What does it look like?

Your child's reaction to a stressful event may take many forms, such as:

- *Depressed behavior.* Your child may act very sad and withdrawn. He or she may cry a lot, have trouble sleeping, feel hopeless.
- *Anxious behavior.* Your child may seem tense, nervous, and worried. Sometimes depressed and anxious feelings occur together.
- *Angry behavior.* Your child may begin disobeying rules at home and at school. He or she may skip school, get into fights, or get into trouble with the police.
- Many other behavior changes or emotional reactions are possible, including an illness that cannot be explained by anything physical. Because reactions vary so widely and the stressful event triggering the reaction may not be recognized, it can be hard to figure out why your child's behavior has changed.

What puts your child at risk of adjustment disorder?

- Adjustment disorders are common in children and teens (in adults as well). We all have stresses and changes in our lives to which we must adapt and adjust.

Can adjustment disorder be prevented?

There's no way to prevent stressful life events or to predict how we'll react to those changes. If your child has a strong support system—for example, at home, at school or church, or among friends—he or she may be better able to cope with life changes.

How is adjustment disorder treated?

- The first goal is to find out what stressful event might be causing your child's adjustment disorder. Although this is sometimes obvious, at other times it is not.
- We may recommend an appointment with a mental health professional, such as a psychologist. This person can help to determine whether your child is having an adjustment disorder or whether some other diagnosis (for example, anxiety or depression) is more appropriate. Sometimes having a chance to talk with a mental health professional about life problems and stresses can be very helpful. The appointments may involve you, your child alone, or other members of your family.
- Talking with your child about the stressful event or life change is helpful. You can provide support and encouragement to help your child adapt to and cope with the stressful situation.
- If marital problems are an issue, marriage counseling for the adults may be helpful. If there has been a death in the family, grief counseling may help your child and family to adjust.
- Medications such as antidepressants are usually not needed for children or adolescents with adjustment disorders. However, depending on your child's situation, short-term treatment with one of these medications might be helpful.
- Follow-up visits are important to make sure your child's adjustment disorder is resolving. If your child is having continued symptoms of depression or anxiety, it's important to get proper evaluation and treatment.

 **When should I call your office?**

Call our office if:

- Your child's emotional or behavioral changes do not begin to improve or if they get worse. Symptoms of adjustment disorders usually resolve within 3 to 6 months.
- You and your family are having a hard time dealing with some type of life change or stressful situation. Mental health resources are available and can be very helpful in dealing with such situations.