

Understanding Child Behavior by Age

Toddlers (2–4)

Often Developmentally Expected

- Tantrums
- Saying “no”
- Difficulty sharing
- Short attention span
- Separation difficulties
- Impulsive behavior
- Toilet accidents during training

May Benefit From Additional Support If...

- No meaningful words or gestures
 - Extremely limited eye contact/social engagement
 - Frequent aggression beyond developmental expectations
 - Loss of previously learned skills
 - Severe rigidity or inconsolable distress
 - Persistent sleep/feeding difficulties
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Elementary School Age (Approx. Ages 6–12)

Often Developmentally Expected

- Emotional ups and downs
- Homework resistance
- Occasional arguing/defiance
- Friendship conflict
- Sensitivity to fairness
- Anxiety about school or peers
- Forgetfulness/disorganization
- Difficulty losing games
- Testing limits/rules
- Increased desire for independence

May Benefit From Additional Support If...

- Persistent aggression or severe outbursts
 - Significant academic decline
 - Extreme emotional reactions interfering with functioning
 - Ongoing social isolation
 - Frequent panic/shutdowns
 - Persistent toileting regression
 - Severe attention or hyperactivity concerns across settings
 - Repetitive or rigid behaviors interfering socially
 - School refusal
 - Statements about self-harm or hopelessness
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Teenagers & Adolescents (Approx. Ages 13–18)

Often Developmentally Expected

- Wanting more privacy and independence
- Mood changes or emotional intensity
- Increased peer influence
- Questioning rules or authority
- Identity exploration
- Sleeping later/changing sleep schedule
- Sensitivity to peer acceptance
- Occasional conflict with caregivers
- Increased self-consciousness
- Strong opinions/preferences
- Wanting more time alone
- Stress related to school, friendships, or future planning

May Benefit From Additional Support If...

- Persistent sadness, hopelessness, or withdrawal
- Major personality changes
- Severe irritability or explosive aggression

- Significant decline in grades or functioning
- School refusal or chronic avoidance
- Self-harm behaviors or suicidal statements
- Substance use concerns
- Unsafe/risky behaviors
- Extreme social isolation
- Intense anxiety interfering with daily functioning
- Major sleep disruption for extended periods
- Sudden loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Ongoing family conflict that feels unmanageable
- Significant changes in eating patterns/body image concerns

Important Reminder for Parents

All children and teens have moments of emotional dysregulation, oppositional behavior, anxiety, or difficulty coping — especially during periods of stress, transitions, developmental changes, or environmental demands. A behavior becoming more frequent, intense, prolonged, or disruptive across settings may indicate that additional support could be helpful.

Seeking support does not mean a child is “bad,” “broken,” or that a parent has failed. Early support can help children and teens build coping, communication, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills more effectively over time.