



The situation: Eleven-year-old Benjamin and his family have been active members of your church for many years. In recent months, Benjamin has had several angry outbursts in Sunday school class. Since then, he has chosen to sit in the corner away from the other children, and hasn't talked to anyone. The last few times Benjamin and his family were in church, you observed tense discussions between Benjamin and his father as they neared your classroom. It's been over a month since Benjamin's family was last in church.

Given Benjamin's age, you've wondered if he's starting to go through puberty, and is having a hard time handling his emotions. But you've also wondered if something else could be amiss. Benjamin's best friend - who also attended your church - moved to another state about six months ago.

What is Depression?

All people experience feel sad from time to time, but depression is defined as "a mood disorder where your general emotional state or mood is distorted or inconsistent with your circumstances, and interferes with your ability to function."

Source: MayoClinic.org

Depression can occur for a variety of reasons, including genetics, life circumstances, trauma, medical conditions, as well as drug and alcohol abuse.

About 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14. About 11% of kids experience a mood disorder like depression in any given year.

Source: NAMI.org



Parents often have a hard time discerning if their child's behavior is due to normal ups and downs of childhood, or something more significant.

How Can You Tell Whether Benjamin Is Just Misbehaving or Is Struggling With Depression?

The difference between occasional sadness versus depression has to do with **duration**, **intensity** and **impact**. After Benjamin missed four Sundays, you called his mother to learn if the family was okay, and to let them know they had been missed. Benjamin's mother expressed frustration about Benjamin's change in behavior since his friend moved (**duration**). In addition to Benjamin's refusal to go to church (**intensity**), he decided not to play soccer, a sport he had previously loved (**impact**).

Benjamin's mother was not aware of bullying or anything else that contributed to these recent changes at home, in the neighborhood, at school or church. The family had been very connected to the church; they were well known in the church. There was no indication of abuse or other traumas. Benjamin's parents said that they had recently taken Benjamin to the family doctor, and had a counseling appointment scheduled for him the following week.



In children, depression looks like...

- ...frequent irritability or anger
- ...constant worry
- ...difficulty concentrating
- ...difficulty sleeping or nightmares
- ...changes in appetite
- ...loss of interest in peers or activities
- ...crying or persistent sadness
- ...difficulty making or keeping friends
- ...withdrawal from family or friends

Fact: Depression is associated with a lack of exercise and other activities that can reduce the activity of neurotransmitters in the brain.



Give kids the chance to move before starting the lesson.



What's Happening Inside Benjamin's Brain?

Depression is a complex interaction of factors external to Benjamin (environment at home, school and church) as well as what is happening in the physical parts of his brain and the connections between bodily systems.

Classroom Suggestions

Goal: Allow each child to be comfortable enough to absorb gospel truths.

- Universal design = what works for one, works for all
- Prevents ready identification of those with hidden conditions by other kids
- Visual schedule, activities to get out the wiggles before important parts of the lesson, etc
- Be alert for bullying. Bullies can be very subtle
- Give bullies specific responsibilities to keep him or her too busy to pick on another child
- After class, ask Benjamin if he would like to sit with specific friends or in certain areas
- If you see a behavior that looks like depression, but you don't know if there's a diagnosis, follow these tips and suggestions anyway



Best Practice Tips:

- Don't make kids read out loud or call on kids for class participation, unless they volunteer.
- Seeing a mental health or behavioral challenge? Think "person who wants to do well, but is struggling in this environment."



Help Benjamin grow in his relationship with Jesus...

1. If Benjamin connects with a student in your ministry, connect the two families outside of church
2. Learn about Benjamin's gifts and interests, and allow him to use these to serve the church
3. Mentors can work one-on-one with Benjamin, to disciple him effectively at church and outside the church. Mentors who have personal experience with mental health challenges, and can share how Jesus is present through the challenges may be helpful
4. Share stories of biblical heroes who had mental health challenges: David (despair); Elijah (wanted to die after his battle on Mt. Carmel); Jeremiah ('weeping prophet'). Emphasize how God uses all of us, even with our weaknesses and challenges
5. Provide daily Bible readings and questions as 'homework' to reinforce what was taught. Free online resources or print journals are good options

Qualities of Children's ministry volunteers:

- Hope-filled, encouraging, spiritually mature
- Had their own struggles with mental health
- Experience with one-on-one mentoring

Romans 8:26 & 28 CEV "In certain ways we are weak, but the Spirit is here to help us. For example, when we don't know what to pray for, the Spirit prays for us in ways that cannot be put into words."

"We know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves Him. They are the ones God has chosen for his purpose."

