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## **Gorski Discusses Signs of Childhood Depression**

**TAMPA, FL** – Peter A. Gorski, M.D., M.P.A., child development expert at the Children's Board of Hillsborough County, a pediatrician and a professor of pediatrics, public health and psychiatry at the University of South Florida, offers the following tips concerning signs of childhood depression:

Until recently, neither health professionals nor the general public believed that children could feel depressed. Now we know that any aged child is prone to this serious illness. Unlike adults, however, children may express their condition quite differently depending on their age and stage of development.

Since everyone feels sad once in a while (after relatively small disappointments on a test or sporting event or larger events like the death of a pet or a family move to a new city), what constitutes childhood depression and how can you tell when a child is suffering its effects?

Depression occurs when sadness turns into despair, lasts for weeks or months and prevents children from functioning happily and successfully at home, among friends or at school. About five percent of children and adolescents suffer from depression. Kids who are chronically or extremely stressed (think abuse), who experience loss or who have mental, behavioral or certain physical disorders are at higher risk for depression. Having a parent who is depressed is the single biggest risk factor for a child becoming depressed. There is some genetic influence though the impact is compounded by the affected parent's relative emotional unavailability and limited responsiveness to the child's emotional needs.

While there is a lengthy research literature on the effects of maternal depression on the behavioral development of infants and children, a newly published study found that seven percent of fathers suffered from depression, adversely affecting their interactions with their young children.

Rates of depression are about equal among boys and girls until around 11 years of age. During adolescence, girls become twice as likely as boys to experience bouts of depression. Perhaps girls are just more conditioned to be reflective about themselves. More teenage girls than boys worried about matters such as appearance, popularity, safety, friendships, romance, family problems and self-worth.

Young children will not tell you and may not even recognize that they are depressed. Instead, very young children may lack energy, show little emotion, withdraw from people, appear hopeless and have trouble sleeping. School-aged children may complain of physical symptoms like headaches or stomachaches and have changes in appetite. They may lose interest in their friends and the activities that used to be fun for them. Teens may sleep a lot, move or speak more slowly than usual, hallucinate or have delusions.

Depression can range from mild to severe. From less eye contact to more irritability to lassitude to losing hope and wanting to die, children demonstrate how little or how much they are in the grip of depression. The good news is that depression is a treatable illness. As a parent or other adult in close relationship to a child, seek professional help through your pediatrician, school psychologist or community mental health professional when a child shows one or more of the following signs of depression:

- Frequent sadness, tearfulness, crying lasting more than a few days
- Decreased interest in activities or inability to enjoy previously favorite activities
- Hopelessness
- Consistently acting bored and having low energy
- Social isolation
- Decreased communication (even less than usual)
- Low self-esteem or a sense of guilt
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
- Increased irritability, anger or hostility – depressed troublemakers don't always act sad
- Difficulty with existing relationships
- Frequent physical complaints of illness, headaches, stomachaches
- Frequent school absences or poor performance in school
- Poor concentration

- A major change in eating and/or sleep patterns
- Talk of or efforts to run away from home
- Thoughts or expressions of suicide or self-destructive behavior

Early diagnosis and treatment are essential for depressed children. A physician should always rule out the possibility that depression may be caused by a serious medical condition. Diagnosing and treating the physical illness could relieve the psychological symptoms. Once depression is identified as the problem, individual and family therapy may be useful. Treatment may include the well-supervised use of antidepressant medication.

All of us should heighten our attention, sensitivity and response to the ways our children communicate their inner feelings. You might be the first to begin to walk a child out of a tunnel of darkness into the light.

*The Children's Board of Hillsborough County serves as the leading voice and advocate for children and families in our community. The board is the only organization of its kind in Hillsborough County that generates revenue to help children and families. The Children's Board is recognized nationally for its contributions to best practices in policies and programs aiding children and families. Citizens may visit [www.childrensboard.org](http://www.childrensboard.org) to learn more about the board's programs.*