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Even kids can get the blues

Age, Melbourne



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Withdrawal or mood swings can be telling, writes Shona Hendley.

When Craig Killian noticed his 11-year-old son Carter's shoulders slumped and his usual happy, cheeky demeanour withdrawn after coming off the soccer field, he took notice.

"He then talked to his friends in the back of the car about what he did wrong in the game," Killian says. "You could hear the negativity as he spoke."

Killian is far from the only concerned parent. New Beyond Blue data shows that 60 per cent of parents with children in primary school are seriously concerned about their kids' mental health and one in three report they are extremely concerned.

A community survey of 1000 parents, commissioned by Beyond Blue last month, found that parents identified bullying and screen time as the two main issues affecting kids, followed by social media and the stresses of learning.

"Unfortunately, bullying is very common. One in four kids are affected by it," says Dr Luke Martin, a clinical psychologist and a senior adviser for Beyond Blue. "Bullying can lead to kids feeling unsafe, isolated, sad or hopeless, which can have a huge impact on their mental health."

Killian calls his son's late-primary school cohort the "odd tween age" where everyone is growing at different rates, something he believes has been the main catalyst behind Carter's mental health and confidence struggles, as one of the smallest boys in his friendship group.

When Killian observed a change

in his son's behaviour and mood, he acted quickly, which is something

Professor Harriet Hiscock from the Murdoch Children's Research Institute says is critical to reducing the impact of a child's mental health condition.

"We know around half of mental health conditions begin in childhood, before the age of 14. For many children, mental health issues can emerge around the age of five," says Hiscock. "The earlier parents can notice concerns with their child's mental health, the better the outcome will be."

The Beyond Blue survey found that almost 80 per cent of parents are confident they can recognise the signs of concern in their child and know where to go for support.

"They may be seeing more anxious kids who do not want to go to school or no longer want to do the things they usually enjoy," says

Hiscock. "It can also be changes in their sleep or appetite, and changes in their mood, like being very irritable or tearful. Or at the other end, increasing aggression or problems with hyperactivity."

However, bullying can be uniquely difficult to detect. "A child can start to withdraw from the family, start to refuse to go to school and unless you sit down and ask them why you may not realise it's because of bullying," says Hiscock. "Asking questions like, 'I have noticed you haven't been yourself recently. Can you tell me what is going on?' can be helpful."

For older children, experts say a different approach is often best.

"Older kids can find it very hard to talk about their emotions in a very direct way, particularly with their parents because as part of

adolescence, they are trying to become independent to become adults," says Hiscock. So indirect conversations while walking or in

the car can be a good idea.

"The good news is support is available, and parents can do things to help their kids, and themselves, navigate these challenges in ways that protect their mental health," says Martin.

For Killian, incorporating a meaningful connection with a hands-on approach, by becoming the coach of Carter's soccer team, has proven helpful.

"By coaching, I can guide the conversation about the game and the self-belief of the team," he says. "I do this by explaining areas of improvement constructively and involving them in how to improve in a logical and fun way."



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