



# Should Kids Take Mental Health Days?

by Rae Jacobson, 2022

## *When taking a break is helpful (and when it's not)*

- 1 "I don't want to go to school!" "Please, can I just stay home? *Please.*"
- 2 The please-don't-make-me-go plea is a common refrain of childhood. So when kids start asking to stay home or give a little hopeful cough it can be tempting to roll your eyes, hand their back pack over, and point them out the door.
- 3 But, when your child begs to stay home or asks for a day off, they may be trying to tell you that what they really need is a mental health day.

## **What are mental health days?**

- 4 Letting a child who isn't physically ill stay home, especially after so much **disruption** and school loss, might feel wrong to most parents. But in the wake of the pandemic an **unprecedented** number of children and teenagers are struggling with mental health issues. And caring for kids' emotional well-being is as important as caring for their health.
- 5 Taking mental health days—that is, time at home to rest and recharge—can be an important tool to help protect and manage mental health. And giving kids the chance to take them—within reason—can have big benefits.
- 6 But it can be hard to know when you should, and shouldn't, let your child take a mental health day, and how to help them get the most out of it when they do. Here is some advice from our experts.

## **How to decide when a mental health day is a good idea**

- 7 When kids ask to stay home, parents should use it as an opportunity to check in, and do a little detective work. Talking through your child's reason for asking to take a break will help you get a better idea of what they're going through and make it easier to decide if a mental health day is the best solution.
- 8 For example:
- Are they feeling overwhelmed?
  - Did something happen at school that was upsetting, like a fight with a friend or an embarrassing moment in class?
  - Are they worried about their schoolwork?
  - Have they just finished a big, difficult assignment? For example, long paper, or a big test that required a lot of studying?
  - Are they feeling anxious, sad or stressed?
  - Is something happening at home that is adding stress, like the illness or loss of a loved one, the death of a pet, a big move, or a divorce?
- 9 Once you know more about what your child's needs are, you'll be in a better position to decide whether taking the day off is the right choice.

### **When are mental health days *not* a good idea?**

- 10 "Mental health days can be positive for any child," says Allison Dubinski, a LCSW at the Child Mind Institute, "as long as they're done in a way that's not reinforcing avoidance or anxiety."
- 11 We want to teach kids that **prioritizing** our mental health and taking care of ourselves is important, Dubinski says, "But if kids are asking for a day off because they're trying to get out of something that they're anxious about, staying home may end up reinforcing that anxiety."
- 12 Jerry Bubrick, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute agrees. "I'm a big advocate for mental health days," he says. But parents need to be conscious of making sure kids aren't using them to avoid schoolwork. "This isn't because you want to get an **extension** on a paper or miss a test—then it's just a **procrastination** day."

- 13 Not to mention that skipping tests, dodging schoolwork or hiding from conflict often ends up making the problem bigger, not better. “The goal is to give kids the coping skills they’ll need to manage anxiety, and sometimes that means pushing through even when it’s difficult,” says Dubinski. Likewise, kids—especially younger children and kids with ADHD or learning differences—might really need the **consistency** and support the school routine provides. Or they could end up feeling more anxious because they’ve missed something important in class.
- 14 A mental health day might be appropriate for something specific like a breakup or recovering from a long hard week. But if kids are experiencing ongoing issues, like problems with friends, or anxiety about school, says Stephanie Ruggiero, PsyD a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, an occasional day off isn’t a fix. “Mental health days are more likely to be a band-aid than a solution.”

### **When are mental health days a good choice?**

- 15 But when a child has been pushing through challenges and is feeling drained, a break is not only a good idea, it’s necessary.
- 16 “Mental health is health,” says Dr. Bubrick. “Think of it like this: If you were exhausted and feeling sick, pushing yourself to keep going, to work or to school, would probably be a bad decision.”
- 17 Children who struggle with **depression**, anxiety or other mental health and learning issues or even kids who’ve just had a rough week—for example facing their fears about reading in front of the class, going to school even though they’re having trouble with a friend, or just facing down everyday school anxiety—may need some time to **recuperate** and recharge.

### **Making a mental health day count**

- 18 If you do agree to a mental health day, especially for teens and tweens, help them make it meaningful, says Dr. Ruggiero. “This means they’re doing things that benefit and protect their mental health.” For example, she explains, kids shouldn’t use the day to catch up on outstanding assignments or sink into social media.
- 19 The other experts agree. “If we’re taking a mental health day we should be thinking about that day in a mental health way,” says Dr. Bubrick.
- 20 Some mental health day activities could look like:

- Taking a walk outside, or spending time in nature
- Baking, drawing, painting, or other activities that your child finds calming
- Taking some time to practice mindfulness activities
- Exercising
- Listening to music or reading a book (or listening to an audiobook)

21 Parents can help kids be intentional about using their mental health day to rest and care for themselves. This doesn't mean overscheduling, or pushing kids to talk about their feelings. The goal is to help your child learn what they need to do to care for their mental wellbeing.

### **Setting limits**

22 It's important to let kids know that though you support taking mental health days, they aren't always appropriate or available. Mental health days should be just that—a day. "We're not having a mental health two-days, we're not having a mental health week," says Dr. Bubrick. Settling clear limits can help avoid pleas for "Just one more day . . ."

23 Some examples of limit-setting could be:

- Agreeing on a set number of mental health days per year (and sticking to it). For example, two per semester, or five per school year.
- Working with your child to plan ahead. For example, if you know they've got a big project coming up, agreeing that they'll take a day off to wind down when it's finished.
- Deciding on black-out days. For example, if Mondays tend to be packed with important information, or if Thursdays your child has a class they're behind in, those days can't be used for a break.

24 If kids need a break, but taking a whole day seems like too much, Dr. Ruggiero suggests offering smaller, targeted breaks that can help kids recharge without falling behind. "For instance, give your child the chance to sleep in or take a half day. It's less disruptive, but they'll still get some time to rest."

### **What to do when kids push for more**

25 Even with limits, some kids may still ask for more days off than you're willing to give. If your child is asking to stay home often or faking sick, use it as an opportunity to have a conversation about why they are feeling anxious or upset. "We want kids to be honest," says Dr. Ruggiero. "Let your child know you take their mental health as seriously as their physical health. There's no need to resort to lying or pretending."

- 26 When kids do lie or push back, try to keep your cool and remember that what they are really trying to say is that they're feeling down, anxious, upset, or stressed. Instead of getting angry or upset, invite your kid to talk to you. With younger children you could say: "I know you're not sick in your body, but I can tell you're feeling really upset. Can we make a time to talk about what's going on after school?"
- 27 Of course, kids may not want to share what they're feeling or may not know what to say, and that's okay. Asking questions and modeling good habits by taking care of your own mental health will help kids know you're taking their feelings seriously, and that the door is always open when they are ready to talk.

### **When to be concerned**

- 28 Mental health days are not a substitute for treatment or a long-term solution.
- 29 If your child is faking sick or crying or begging to stay home frequently, breaks won't get to the heart of the problem. There may be a serious issue at school, like bullying or an undiagnosed learning disorder. Or they could be struggling with a mental health issue like depression.
- 30 "If the issues are ongoing, it's time to have a bigger conversation," says Dr. Ruggiero. Talking to your child's teacher, connecting with the school counselor, or reaching out to a mental health professional will help your child get the care and help they need.