

Polyvagal Theory for Parents

Supporting a Child With Depression

Make connection and daily tasks more manageable while taking changes in safety seriously.

How to use this workbook

Complete a page alone or with another caregiver. Practice supports during calm moments. Invite your child's preferences when possible; skip anything that increases distress.

Polyvagal theory is a proposed lens for thinking about stress responses. These pages track observable clues and practical support; they do not diagnose a child or establish a precise nervous-system state.

This educational workbook does not replace individualized medical or mental health care. If your child is in immediate danger, seek emergency help.

Child's name or initials: _____



Notice the pattern

Use everyday words to describe what you see. A child may move between states during one day.



CONNECTED

Can engage, rest, play, or learn.

What helps my child feel available?



HIGH ALERT

May seem fast, angry, worried, or restless.

What tells me stress is rising?



SHUTDOWN

May become quiet, withdrawn, or hard to reach.

What gentle contact is welcome?

The same behavior can have more than one cause. Check for pain, illness, fatigue, hunger, sensory strain, and changes in routine before drawing conclusions.



My child's early clues

Choose one recent moment. Notice what came before it, what you observed, and what happened next.

What happened just before?

What I noticed in my child's body, words, or actions

What I did first

What helped or made it harder

Clues to watch for in this guide:

- ☐ Withdrawn, irritable, or unusually quiet
- ☐ Low energy and loss of interest
- ☐ Sleep, appetite, or school changes



Plan for a harder moment

Choose supports your child welcomes. A helpful strategy for one child may be unhelpful for another.

Possible sources of stress

- ☐ A day with many demands
- ☐ Isolation or a difficult transition
- ☐ Poor sleep, pain, or a stressful event

Supports to try together

- ☐ Sit nearby without demanding conversation
- ☐ Offer one small choice or shared task
- ☐ Keep meals, sleep, and check-ins predictable
- ☐ Notice effort rather than only completion

A support my child chooses

A support to avoid or change



Words that help

Speak briefly. Match the words to your child's age, communication style, and preference for silence.

"You do not have to pretend to be okay with me."

My own version:

"Would you rather talk, text, or sit together?"

My own version:

"We can do one small thing together."

My own version:

What can I say after everyone has settled?



A steadier daily rhythm

Choose one small change to practice for a week. Adapt the plan with your child when possible.

Before a known hard part of the day

A warning, visual cue, check-in, or practical preparation

During the transition

A short phrase, choice, break, or sensory adjustment

After the transition

Connection, rest, repair, or a brief review

One strength or interest we can build into this plan



People and safety

Write down the people who can help and what each person needs to know.

Home

Caregiver or trusted adult

School or community

Teacher, counselor, or other support

Care team

Pediatrician, therapist, or clinician

Ask directly about thoughts of suicide or self-harm if you are concerned. If there is intent, a plan, recent self-harm, or inability to stay safe, stay with the child, reduce access to lethal means, and seek emergency or crisis help now. In the U.S., call or text 988.

If urgent: first person to contact _____ Phone _____

Further reading: NIMH, Children and Mental Health — nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/children-and-mental-health



Four reflection prompts

Use short notes. Focus on patterns and next steps rather than blame.

What did my child's behavior make me assume at first?

What form of contact felt possible for your child today?

Who will help arrange a timely evaluation and follow-up?

What can I do to steady myself before I respond?



30 day observation tracker

Use a few words per day. Leave days blank when tracking is not useful.

Day	Date	Clue or situation	Support tried	What happened next
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				

A pattern I notice: _____



30 day observation tracker continued

Use a few words per day. Leave days blank when tracking is not useful.

Day	Date	Clue or situation	Support tried	What happened next
16				
17				
18				
19				
20				
21				
22				
23				
24				
25				
26				
27				
28				
29				
30				

A pattern I notice: _____

