

Children of Parents with Mental Illness

About Children of Parents with Mental Illness

Twenty to 25 % of Australian children live in a household where a parent has a mental illness. The term **mental illness** includes many different disorders that can have an impact on a person's thoughts, feelings, relationships or behaviour. Mental illness can affect people of all ages, from all walks of life, and can affect their capacity to look after themselves or others.

When someone has a mental illness, the changes in their feelings and behaviour are stronger and more persistent than might be expected from the normal ups-and-downs of living. For example, we all feel sad at times – but a person with clinical depression may have sadness, hopelessness or other feelings that are more severe and long-lasting, with additional symptoms.

Many people with mental illness cannot easily change their mood or behaviour just by making a decision to do so. They have a complex medical problem that needs treatment and support. There is no single cause of mental illness and the treatment options vary. Most types of mental illness are thought to be influenced by a combination of biological and environmental factors.

Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Effectively meeting a child's needs and supporting their optimal development in the early years are important factors that help to lay the foundation for mental health and wellbeing later in life.

Providing responsive and consistent care for a child can be particularly challenging for a parent or other carer who has mental illness, even when the person is committed to the child's wellbeing. If mental illness disrupts the early years of the adult-child relationship, it is less likely that the child will have a secure attachment style or optimal social and emotional development.

Children whose parents have a mental illness are at higher risk than other children of having emotional, behavioural or mental health problems at some stage in their lives. The risk may be due to a combination of factors such as genetics, family situation and early life experiences.

The possible impacts of mental illness in a parent (or other primary carer) include the following:

- A parent who is unwell may have difficulty meeting the child's physical care needs.
- A parent may not respond with warmth and consistency, or may be emotionally distant.
- A parent may need hospitalisation, which can disrupt the adult-child relationship.
- There may be attachment difficulties including insecure or disorganised attachment.
- The illness may cause strain in adult relationships, resulting in conflict or separation.
- There is an increased risk of parents with mental illness misusing drugs or alcohol.
- There is an increased risk of the child experiencing abuse or neglect.
- An older child may take on responsibility as a carer for the adult or other children.
- There may be financial worries associated with costs of treatment or time off work.
- The stigma associated with mental illness may cause discomfort, shame or withdrawal.

Mental illness can happen in any family or household. The impact on the family and the child will depend on several factors. These include the developmental stage of the child; type of mental illness; the family's understanding of the illness; how the illness is treated or managed; and the capacity of other adults to provide care and support. Not all children who have a parent or carer with a mental illness will experience negative effects. However it can be an important contextual factor in the child's life, just as it could be if a parent had a serious physical illness.

What should I look for?

You may not know if a parent has a mental illness. Some illnesses are not visible to other people unless they know the person well. There is also a stigma associated with mental illness, so families may choose not to talk with you or with their children about the issue.

You may know that a parent or carer is experiencing a mental illness if:

- A parent or carer tells you, while talking about their child's needs or family context.
- A child in your care talks about a parent's health issues, behaviour, or a hospital stay.

The following signs could indicate a problem with a child's social and emotional wellbeing or development, or may suggest that a child is affected by a difficult situation. This list applies to many possible situations, not just to a parent having a mental illness. Signs of concern include:

- Significant changes in a child's feelings or behaviour
- Development that is out of step with peers at a similar age and stage
- Regression in development, losing skills the child had previously mastered
- Poor-quality play that seems limited and repetitive
- Difficulties in relationships with family and carers; disorganised attachment
- Being withdrawn, fearful, anxious or upset much of the time
- Being frustrated, angry, defiant or aggressive much of the time.

What should I do?

If you think a child or family may need extra support for any reason, discuss this with your supervisor, coordinator or service director in the first instance. If necessary, they can offer to help the family find and use appropriate early intervention or support services.

If you become aware that a family member has a mental illness:

- Keep working with the family in a way that shows they are accepted and included.
- Discuss any changes in childcare arrangements, e.g. attendance, family contact details.
- Ask if the child is aware of the illness – if so, how has it been described or understood?
- Help the child feel secure by providing consistency and routine in your care practices.
- Allow the child to talk with you about their feelings and experiences if they want to.
- Consider asking whether the family is receiving health care or needs any extra support.
- Look for more information about supporting children whose parents have mental illness.

Experts suggest that it is better to explain the situation to the child at a level that is appropriate to their development, rather than not talking about the parent's illness at all. However this will depend on the situation and you should be guided by the family's context and preferences.

Where can I find out more?

The Response Ability website (www.responseability.org) has more detailed fact sheets on a range of issues affecting children and families, listed under *Education and Children's Services*.

Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association (2005). *Principles and actions for services and people working with children of parents with a mental illness*. Canberra, ACT: Department of Health and Ageing.

Children of Parents with a Mental Illness website: www.copmi.net.au.

Cowling, V. (2004). *Children of parents with a mental illness*. Camberwell, VIC: ACER Press.