

# Family Issues and Mental Health

## About Family Issues

The term **family issues** is used here to cover a range of family situations that could have a negative impact on the wellbeing or development of babies and young children, such as:

- Extended separation from a parent or primary carer, e.g. through hospitalisation
- Family stress, e.g. changes in social situation, financial insecurity, legal issues
- Separation or divorce of the child's parents; child access and custody issues
- Any form of child abuse or neglect or violence, including psychological abuse
- Exposure to conflict or violence in the family or the community
- Abuse of drugs or alcohol by the primary carer or other family member
- Mental illness or serious physical illness in the primary carer or other family member
- Experiences of trauma affecting the family, or a family member
- Loss, grief and bereavement, for example through death of a loved one.

## Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Sometimes difficult family situations are associated with temporary difficulties or changes in children's behaviour. At other times, such situations represent a risk to the child's longer term mental health and wellbeing. This is more likely if the situation persists over time, affects key elements of social and emotional development or leaves the child with unresolved grief. The impact of any given situation will depend in part on the developmental stage and coping skills of the child, how the situation is managed and what other forms of support are available.

In infancy and as toddlers, children are developing attachments with their primary and secondary caregiver(s). Difficult family situations can disrupt the development of secure attachment, which has implications for the child's wellbeing and their mental health later in life. Refer to *Attachment and Mental Health*, another handout in this series, for more information.


By preschool age, children have usually developed a preferred attachment style, which affects the coping strategies they choose when they feel that their security is threatened. However they are still learning how to manage their feelings and behaviour and will need help and support from adults to work through difficult situations. Depending on the situation, the capacity of the child's parents or family to offer support may be limited. Provision of care and support from secondary carers, such as children's services staff, may be particularly important at this time.

If social and emotional development is adversely affected, or if difficult feelings that occur in the early years are not resolved, then a person may develop patterns of behaviour and coping strategies that increase the risk of mental health difficulties in adolescence or adulthood.

## What should I look for?

Signs that may indicate a problem with a child's wellbeing or development, or could suggest that they are affected by a difficult family situation, include:

- Significant changes in feelings or behaviour
- Development that is out of step with peers at a similar age and stage
- Regression in development, e.g. loss of previously acquired language or skills
- Poor-quality play that seems limited and repetitive
- Difficulties in attachment and relationships with family and carers
- Being withdrawn, fearful, anxious or upset much of the time
- Being frustrated, angry, defiant or aggressive much of the time.



You may see changes in a child's behaviour associated with a difficult life event you are aware of, such as a death in the family. You will need to show sensitivity and general support in your work with the child and family, but in most cases a child's grief and other issues will be resolved with time. You may like to read another handout in this series, entitled *Trauma, Loss and Grief*.

Keep in mind that you may not be told about a difficult home situation. Sometimes a family will share this information with you, particularly if there is a change in childcare arrangements or contact details (e.g. separation or divorce). Families may be less likely to disclose situations that could be associated with stigma, such as mental illness, substance abuse or domestic violence.

Several other handouts in this series provide more information about specific situations that may impact on children and families. You may wish to refer to the handouts on: *Children of Parents with Mental Illness; Drugs, Alcohol and Mental Health; Refugees and Mental Health*.

### **What should I do?**

When working with children and families who have been affected by a difficult life situation such as a family breakdown, trauma or loss, keep the following in mind:

- Be sensitive to and accepting of changes in the baby or child's feelings and behaviour
- Be sensitive to any setbacks or problems, such as difficulty settling, or using the toilet
- Give the baby or child plenty of warmth and support throughout the day
- Maintain normal routines to help the baby or child feel safe and comfortable
- Allow an older child to talk about their feelings if they want to
- Give the parent or carer detailed feedback about the child's day and wellbeing.

If you become concerned about a child's behaviour or development, or you are worried that the effects of a loss or a difficult event are not settling down with time, then you should:

- Write down your specific observations or concerns
- Write down any additional information about the child's health and family situation
- Speak with your supervisor, coordinator or service director.

Together you can develop a plan for supporting the child in your service, and if necessary referring the child and family to other agencies. Your supervisor, coordinator or director may take the lead in regard to family discussions and referral, but your knowledge of the child is very important in this process. If you or other staff are meeting with family members to talk about a child's behaviour or a difficult family situation, it is best to arrange a specific time and place, rather than talking when there may be limited time or privacy, e.g. when picking up children.

### **Where can I find out more?**

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

Children of Parents with a Mental Illness website: [www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au).

Kearns, K., & Austin, B. (2007). *Frameworks for learning and development* (pp. 502-532). Frenchs Forest NSW: Pearson Education Australia.

Royal College of Psychiatrists. (2004). Divorce and separation. Fact Sheet 14 *Mental Health and Growing Up Series*. Retrieved 29 May, 2009 from: <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfoforall/mentalhealthandgrowingup/14divorceandseparation.aspx>.