Children of parents with a mental illness

Fact Sheet

What is a mental illness?

A mental illness is a term for a range of clinically diagnosable medical conditions, which change a person's thoughts, feelings, relationships or behaviour. A mental illness can be diagnosed by a doctor or mental health professional. There are different types of mental illness that occur with varying degrees of severity. Some examples include anxiety, depression, psychosis, eating disorders and bipolar disorder. For more information on mental illness see:

- Additional fact sheets on the Response Ability website www.responseability.org; and
- Videos at www.copmi.net.au/kids-young-people/about-mental-illness.

About children of parents with a mental illness

Approximately 23%, or one in five, Australian children have a parent with a mental illness. This means over one million children in Australia have at least one parent who experiences mental illness.

Why is this important?

When a parent has a mental illness it may impact on their ability to meet their child's emotional and physical needs. Having a mental illness does not mean a person is unable to parent well. However, for some people with mental illness it can be hard to maintain the day-to-day tasks of parenting and positive family relationships. This can be particularly hard during acute and/or severe phases of the illness, or when the illness is experienced for a long time.

The development of secure attachment may be affected if a parent experiences mental illness in the first few years of their child's life. Evidence shows secure attachments lay the foundation for social and emotional development. If a secure attachment is not formed and/or the relationship between parent and child is affected this can impact on elements of the child's social and emotional development for example emotional regulation or coping skills.

Children can be impacted in many other ways and young children can be particularly vulnerable to the effects of parental mental illness due to their higher dependence on adult caregivers. For example, when a parent or caregiver is unwell, the symptoms may impact on their capacity to meet their child's basic needs and to provide a safe, nurturing and stimulating environment. Over time, this can impact on children's development across a range of areas, particularly their social and emotional development.

How does mental illness affect parenting or caregiving?

Having a mental illness can affect a person's ability to think clearly, manage emotions, maintain relationships or get things done. Many parents with a mental illness continue to manage their everyday roles and responsibilities as a parent with minimal disruption to family routines and relationships. However, for many parents, the symptoms and behaviours experienced as a result of the mental illness (or the side effects of its treatments) can have flow on impacts onto their parenting. For example:

- Respond with warmth and consistency, or be available emotionally to their child e.g. sharing a child's excitement during daily activities;
- Meet the child's physical care needs or be available physically for example if a parent needs to be treated in hospital;
- Difficulties maintaining consistent and familiar routines that provide children with a sense of security;
- Being able to tune in, understand or respond to their children's needs and feelings;
- The symptoms and behaviours associated with mental illness can contribute to conflict or strain in adult relationships, which can increase children's

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exposure to conflict, arguments or family relationship problems;

- Parents may also be using drugs or alcohol, exposing children to behaviours, including violence or neglect, that are commonly experienced when under the influence of drugs and alcohol;
- Financial worries, stress and poverty related to the costs of treatment, time taken off work or unemployment; and
- Isolation from family, friends or community networks due to feelings of shame and discomfort, or withdrawal related to personal or community stigma associated with mental illness.

How does parental mental illness affect children?

The impacts of parental mental illness on children are different for each child and vary depending on the type, duration and severity of the illness, the social and financial resources the family has access to and the availability of supportive networks for the parent, child and the family. However, compared with their peers, children of parents with a mental illness are more likely to experience:

- Social, emotional and physical development problems;
- Attachment difficulties including insecure or disorganised attachment;
- Abuse or neglect (particularly when parental drug and alcohol problems and family violence are also present); and
- Taking on additional household and caregiving responsibilities, including as a carer for their siblings and/or parent.

Children of parents with a mental illness have a higher risk of developing mental health problems or mental illness themselves (during childhood or adulthood). This is thought to be due to a combination of genetic predisposition as well as difficult life experiences.

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.

Protective factors for children of parents with a mental illness

There are a number of protective factors that can reduce the impact of parental mental illness on children and their daily lives. These include:

- Parents having access to effective and supportive services and networks that support recovery and manage the impacts of mental illness on their parenting role and the parent-child relationship; and
- Children and families having access to supportive networks that can assist in developing and maintaining regular and familiar routines and relationships for children.

What can teachers and educators do?

Teachers and educators have a unique and important relationship with children, parents and caregivers. They can play an important role in preventing children of parents with a mental illness from experiencing educational, developmental and health difficulties. They can also be an important point for supporting children and families to access support. Some of the ways that teachers and educators can assist children of parents with a mental illness include:

- Supporting and maintaining consistent and familiar relationships and routines for all children in the

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education/care environment (particularly important for children of parents with a mental illness);

- Building a safe and supportive relationship with parents or caregivers so that they feel comfortable sharing information about family matters (such as mental illness) that might be impacting on children;
- Creating an education or care environment that reduces stigma and invites conversations about mental illness (e.g. providing access to information on mental illness for parents/caregivers, highlighting resources for parents with a mental illness in newsletters); and
- Establishing policies, procedures and professional development so that all staff and parents know how to respond and manage parental or child disclosures about mental illness or experiences.

Educators may find out that a parent or caregiver has a mental illness either by the family sharing this information directly or through conversations with the child. Be careful not to suggest that a parent has a mental illness if they have not disclosed this information to you.

Teachers and educators can work in partnership with families. This means that staff work with families to understand each child's individuality, their family, culture and community. This understanding then forms the foundation for shared decision-making that supports the child's learning and development. Partnerships are based on mutual respect, trust and open communication. By establishing a supportive professional relationship with families and working in partnership you may find that parents are more comfortable or open to discussing difficulties, problems or challenges when they arise.

There are things you can do as a teacher or early childhood educator for both the child and the parent/family. This will help to reduce the impact of risk factors and promote protective factors.

If a parent has let you know they experience mental illness then:

- Ask parents if there is anything that they would like you to do to support the child at the education or care environment, (you may like to outline the ways in which the school or service can help the child (if needed);
- Provide information about local mental health services, if needed;
- Ask them about how they would like you to respond to questions the child may have;
- Work closely with families in an accepting and inclusive way (keep in mind that they may have experienced negativity or discrimination in the past when talking about their condition); and
- Treat information as confidential and do not disclose it without consent. If appropriate discuss any support needs with the school principal or director/supervisor.

To aid this process it would be beneficial for you to have a:

- Knowledge of services, supports and professionals in the community who can help parents with a mental illness and their families; and
- Knowledge of school or service policies and support which can help families e.g. financial support or flexible payments, flexibility with parent-teacher communication (e.g. email may be preferred over phone conversations or face-to-face meetings).

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Support for children

Living with a parent or caregiver with a mental illness can pose extra challenges for children. However they can still experience positive mental health and wellbeing.

Relationships

Relationships with understanding and supportive adults can make a significant difference to a child's outcomes. Teachers and early childhood educators are in a unique position to provide this type of relationship for infants, children and young people.

As an educator you can:

- Provide a stable environment for children;
- Promote positive experiences and engagement within the school environment;
- Help children to develop resilience, social skills and help-seeking skills;
- Help children to understand and communicate their own emotions and learn skills for managing difficult emotions;
- Allow the child to discuss their thoughts and feelings about the illness if needed; and
- Identify and monitor children who may need additional support.

It is important to consider each child and their respective parent/family on an individual level to work out what their particular needs are at this point in time (as needs will likely change depending on the current severity of symptoms and other contextual factors such as external support available).

I am concerned for a child's wellbeing

If you have serious concerns about a child's safety or wellbeing, follow the existing policies and procedures at your school or service. This includes the mandatory responsibilities under the child protection legislation in your state/territory.

Promote social and emotional wellbeing for all children

Response Ability has developed two key guides:

- *Social and emotional wellbeing: A teacher's guide*; and
- *Social and emotional wellbeing: A guide for children's services educators.*

These summarise how teachers and educators can promote wellbeing for all children.

Benefits of this approach for children of parents with a mental illness

By promoting wellbeing for all children you are able to contribute to promoting the wellbeing of children of parents with a mental illness, some of whom you may be aware of and some who you may not.

The sections on *Identifying children who may need additional support*, *Linking children and families with support,* and the GRIP framework will be of particular interest.

Download the guides at:

www.responseability.org/home/guides.

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Work in collaboration with external agencies and community

There are professionals and specialist services that can assist parents who are experiencing mental illness and their children.

As a teacher or educator you can work collaboratively with other services involved in the family's life. For example by helping to implement any support practices suggested by professionals. This could include supporting families to use family care plans, if one has been developed.

A family care plan is written to outline a family's preferences and instructions for the care of their children when their parent/s is unwell or unavailable. The plan should detail:

- The child's routine;
- How others can help maintain this routine and the family's routine;
- How to stay in touch with the child while a parent is away; and
- What a parent prefers their child is told about their illness or where they are in hospital.

Further information

For more detailed information and resources on supporting children of a parent with a mental illness, see the *Sources and links* box below for a range of publications and weblinks.

Sources and links

Children of Parents with a Mental Illness. (2015). Promoting children's resilience when a parent has a mental illness. *COPMI GEMS: Gateway to Evidence that Matters, 21*.

Sources and links

Children of Parents with a Mental Illness. (nd). *Supporting children of parents with a mental illness: A resource for primary school workers*. Available at: www.copmi.net.au/professionals-organisations/how-can-i-help/advice-by-setting/schools-education/education-resources

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

Schools/education: www.copmi.net.au/professionals-organisations/how-can-i-help/advice-by-setting/schools-education

Early childhood workers: www.copmi.net.au/professionals-organisations/how-can-i-help/advice-by-setting/early-childhood

Family care plan: www.copmi.net.au/parents/helping-my-child-and-family/care-plans

Maybery, D. J., Reupert, A. E., Kent, P., Goodyear, M., & Crase, L. (2009). Prevalence of parental mental illness in Australian families. *Psychiatric Bulletin, 33*(1), 22-26.

Principles and actions for services and people working with children of parents with a mental illness. Available from: www.copmi.net.au/images/pdf/principles-and-actions.pdf

Response Ability at Hunter Institute of Mental Health. (2013). *Social and emotional wellbeing: A teacher's guide*. Canberra, ACT: Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

Response Ability at Hunter Institute of Mental Health. (2012). *Social and emotional wellbeing: A guide for children's services educators.* Canberra, ACT: Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

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