



Children who have a parent with a mental illness

A number of factors that affect parents will also have a direct impact on young people. These include poverty, separation and divorce, drug and alcohol abuse, changing family structure and mental health problems.

Research tells us that about 20% of the population will be diagnosed with a mental health problem at some time in their lives. These may be short term, eg, in response to major change, or to a sad or traumatic event or the mental health problem may be more long term, eg, a mood disorder, schizophrenia, severe depression or an obsessive compulsive disorder.

If a parent is suffering from a serious mental health problem their ability to care for, nurture and protect their children may be impaired.

If a parent has a mental illness some of the effects on the children can be:

Isolation:

The symptoms of mental illness can be serious. A parent who is hearing voices, having hallucinations or feeling as if they want to hurt themselves can be very frightening. Children may feel confused and scared. It is sometimes hard for children to talk about what is happening to their parent and to talk about the effect of the mental illness on everyone in the family. They worry people won't believe them, or might call their parent "psycho", or even get called names themselves. They are sometimes afraid to ask their friends over. They are worried about what their parent might do. Children can feel very alone.

Guilt:

Children and especially young children, often think that whatever happens in their world is somehow linked to something they did. Children can feel responsible for the mental health problem their parent is having. They can feel angry because their parent or family is different or because the mental health problem can take up a lot of the family's attention and energy. Children can feel guilty and disloyal when they have these feelings.

Neglect and other issues of safety:

Parents who are suffering from a severe and serious mental health problem may not be able to care for their children or protect them in the way they would like. The children may have to fend a lot more for themselves than other children the same age. They may be cooking for themselves and other family members, or taking responsibility for household running in other ways. Without a parent's guidance children may put themselves in risky situations. Mental health problems may make a parent have harmful thoughts against family members. All these situations can get in the way of children having good emotional and physical health.

Support - is crucial!

Support can come from other family members, from friends, school teachers, church groups, coaches or someone else that is trustworthy and known to the child. Children may also need extra help from child and adolescent services or other professionals who work with young people in these situations.

Concerned adults can help children by:

- Explaining that they can ask for help
- Listening to their feelings and fears and showing understanding. Children need others to be understanding about mental health problems and what this means for the parent as well as for the children.
- Helping them write a diary or draw about how they feel.
- Helping the child identify and learn to use a network of adults they can feel safe with. These should be people that the child can ring or contact for help when they find themselves unsupported, afraid or alone.
- Learning strategies to keep themselves safe, including crisis or emergency medical contact numbers to use.
- Ensuring that there is a good reliable person available at short notice to care for the children if their parent is unwell.

Where to go to get more information?

Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800
Life Line (24 hr counselling) 13 11 14
Parent Line 13 20 55
Your local Community Health Centre
Look under 'Community Services' in your telephone directory, many States and Territories have Parent Help lines.