

# Parents with a mental illness: the problems for children

## Factsheet for parents and teachers

### About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet provides information on the problems encountered by children who have a parent with a mental illness, and gives some practical advice as to how to deal with these problems.

## Introduction

### What is mental illness?

It is estimated that mental illness will affect 1 in 4 of us at some time in our lives. When a person is mentally healthy they feel good about themselves; they can do everyday things easily, like going to school or work, and enjoying their hobbies and friends. Even when things go wrong they can usually sort it out themselves, although it may be hard for them. When someone becomes mentally ill, they may find everyday things very difficult to do and they may feel confused and upset a lot of the time. They may do things that seem normal to them, but to other people watching they may seem strange.

### Children who have a parent with mental illness

Many children will grow up with a parent who, at some point, will have a mental illness. Most of these parents will have mild or short-lived illnesses, and will usually be treated by their general practitioner. A few children live with a parent who has a severe mental illness such as schizophrenia or manic-depressive illness (often referred to as bipolar affective disorder – see Factsheet 22). Many more children live with a parent who has a long-term problem, such as alcohol or drug dependency, personality disorder or long-standing depression.

## Difficulties for children

Children often cope well when a parent is ill for a short time. It is easier for them if they can understand why their parent has become unwell. It is important that things are explained to them, rather than being secretive about the problem. Children do find it difficult to cope when the problem is more long term. For many children in this situation, problems can arise if they:

- are separated again and again from a parent who needs to go into hospital for treatment
- feel unsure of their relationship with the parent with a mental illness
- are not being looked after properly
- are being hit or mistreated (this is more likely if the parent suffers from alcohol or drug dependence or has a disturbed personality)
- are having to look after a sick parent, or are taking care of brothers and sisters
- are upset, frightened, worried by or ashamed of their parent's illness or behaviour
- are being teased or bullied by others
- hear unkind things being said about their sick parent.

## Problems that children may develop

Some children withdraw into themselves, become anxious and find it difficult to concentrate on their school work. They may find it very difficult to talk about their parent's illness or their problems at home, which may stop them from getting help. Children are often ashamed of their parent's illness and worry about becoming ill themselves.

## Sources of further information

- Goepfert, M., Webster, J. & Seeman, M. (eds) (1996) *Parental Psychiatric Disorder: Distressed Parents and Their Families*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Information about the effects of mental illness on children, and what can be done to help.
- The Manic Depression Fellowship supports people with a diagnosis of manic depression and their families. Castle Works, 21 St George's Street, London SE1 6ES; tel. 020 7793 2600; e-mail: [mdf@mdf.org.uk](mailto:mdf@mdf.org.uk); [www.mdf.org.uk](http://www.mdf.org.uk).
- Rethink offers help to people with severe mental illness (not only schizophrenia) and their carers. 30 Tabernacle Street, London EC2A 4DD; national advice line 020 8974 6814; e-mail: [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org); [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org).
- 'Being seen and heard: the needs of children of parents with mental illness' multi-media training pack for use of staff involved with parents and their children. Available from the Royal College of Psychiatrists. [www.partnersincare.co.uk](http://www.partnersincare.co.uk).

### Or you may like to look at these websites:

[www.sane.org.uk](http://www.sane.org.uk)

[www.pendulum.org](http://www.pendulum.org) (manic depression)

[www.rethink.org/at-ease](http://www.rethink.org/at-ease) (for young people)

- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel: 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax 020 7245 1231; e-mail: [booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk](mailto:booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk), or you can download them from [www.rcpsych.ac.uk](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk).

Some children are more at risk of developing a mental illness themselves, particularly if they have:

- been abused or neglected
- seen a lot of arguments/violence between their parents
- had parents who have separated or divorced
- had a parent who misuses alcohol or drugs
- suffered from poverty, poor housing and instability during childhood.

## Where can I get help?

There are some steps that can be taken to try and help avoid these problems and to make the child's life easier. For example:

- having a reliable, consistent and caring parent or other adult around
- being given information and explanation about their parent's illness
- it is important for parents and teachers to be aware of the possible stresses on the child with a sick parent, and to recognise that a child's difficult behaviour may be a cry for help
- your general practitioner and social worker can help with support and practical help for the family in caring for the child, and in giving advice from social services if there are

problems that are harming the child's health or development

When a child or young person has behavioural problems that interfere with their life and that don't seem to be improving, more specialist help may be needed. The general practitioner will be able to advise about local services and to refer a young person, if necessary, to the local child and adolescent mental health service. This service usually includes child and adolescent psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, nurses and social workers.

A child may really value the chance to talk about their parent's illness, and their fears, with a professional who is familiar with these things. They may also need help in overcoming their own emotional and behavioural problems.

## References

- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (eds) (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.