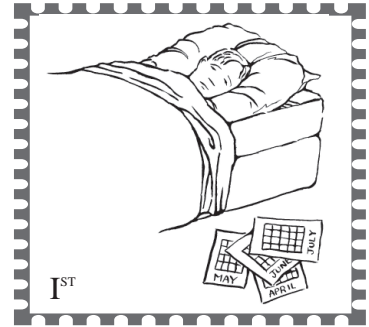


# Chronic physical illnesses: the effects on mental health

## 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 looks at the effects that a long physical illness can have on a young person's mental health and offers advice about how to recognise and deal with these problems.



### Introduction

Children with a long-lasting physical illness are twice as likely to suffer from emotional problems or disturbed behaviour. This is especially true of physical illnesses that involve the brain, such as epilepsy and cerebral palsy.

### Why are mental health problems so common?

Serious illness or disability can cause a lot of work and stress for everyone in the family, especially the parents. Children who are ill have many more stressful experiences than children without an illness. Most children will, at some time, get upset by this. Sometimes, the upset feelings and behaviour can go on and on. If they do, this can add to the child's health problems by making their life even more difficult.

### How does this affect the child and family?

Following the diagnosis of a potentially serious or long-term illness, most parents and children go through a process of coming to terms with it.

### Long-term effects

The affected child might have fewer opportunities to learn everyday skills, and to develop their interests and hobbies. Educational problems are also common:

- Your child might have to miss a lot of school and have particular difficulties with learning.
- Be sure to be in touch with your child's teacher on a regular basis. Your child might need extra help at school.
- Your child might see themselves as different from other children, and they hate this.
- Some children may become depressed (see Factsheet 34 on depression in children and young people).
- Some children may be vulnerable to bullying (see Factsheet 18 on the emotional cost of bullying).

It is easy for you as parents to be overprotective of your child. You may find it harder to say 'no' than you normally would, making it difficult to control your child. It is harder to allow them to manage the 'rough and tumble' of childhood.

Sometimes it can be difficult and confusing to cope with all the different doctors, and other professionals involved with your child's illness. This can be very stressful for everyone.

Brothers and sisters sometimes feel that they are being neglected. They may feel embarrassed by their brother or sister. They may feel responsible for them. They can miss out on school or their social life, get bullied or lose friendships.

## How to help

It's very important to remember that although long-lasting illness does make things very difficult, most children and their families cope well. It is only a minority who experience problems.

- Live as normal a life as possible.
- Be open with your child about their difficulties.
- Restrict them as little as possible.
- Help them to get out and about with other children of their own age.
- Encourage your child to be as independent as possible.
- Meet other families with similar experiences.
- Seek help if you feel that you're not managing.

## Sources of further information

- Contact a Family: for families with disabled children. 209–211 City Road, London EC1V 1JN; tel. 020 7608 8700; helpline 0808 808 3555; textphone 0808 808 3556; e-mail: [helpline@cafamily.org.uk](mailto:helpline@cafamily.org.uk); [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk).
- The Back-Up Trust. A national charity supporting people paralysed through spinal cord injury. The Business Village, Broomhill Road, Wandsworth, London SW18 4JP; tel. 020 8875 1805; [www.backuptrust.org.uk](http://www.backuptrust.org.uk).
- YoungMinds provides information and advice on child mental health issues. 102–108 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5SA; Parents' Information Service 0800 018 2138; [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk).
- 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).

A lot can be done to prevent further problems developing. Parents who appreciate the emotional impact of the illness on the child, and on the rest of the family, are much better placed to spot problems early and do something about them.

## Where can I get help?

Making sure that there is enough help and support is very important. In addition to support from family and friends, try:

- Contact a Family (see above for contact details)
- your general practitioner
- voluntary support groups
- social Services
- school
- health visitor
- school nurse.

If there are signs that your child is developing emotional or behavioural problems, your general practitioner can refer you to the local child and adolescent mental health service for specialist advice. They may suggest that some family work could be helpful. Also, it often helps to link up with the other professionals involved in the ill child's care. This can help sort out any problems related to the treatment, and make sure that everyone is working together effectively.

## 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.
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- 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.