



TALKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT PARENTS MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Information for parents, guardians and family members

Why discuss mental health with children?

Most children worry less about something if they understand it. Providing children with opportunities to talk with their parent or other trusted adults about their parents' behaviours may help reduce their worries. If they don't understand or have things explained to them, they may make up for gaps in knowledge that may in fact be wrong. Children often express great relief at knowing that their parent is safe, receiving treatment, or that it is not their fault that their parent became unwell.

All parents at some time in their parenting life will come across issues that are challenging to talk about with children. Many of the issues that used to be 'taboo' and difficult to discuss with children such as sexuality and drugs are more open subjects and less confusing as a result of community education. However mental health and in particular mental ill-health are issues that are poorly understood by most people. This means that the stigma of mental illness can prevent people talking about it, its affect on families and the person with the illness and how to seek help when needed.

Many parents who are living with mental illness worry about the effect this may have on their families and on their children. They may think that if they talk openly about their illness and how it makes them feel, that their children will be frightened, confused, embarrassed, or wouldn't understand anyway. Sometimes families decide to keep the illness a secret even from close family members such as grandparents.

"I used to think that it was my fault but now I'm older and I know that it's not my fault"

It can be hard to find the right words to use to explain mental illness to children. Adults often find it difficult to talk to other adults about how they feel! Parents may not feel comfortable discussing this with their children. It is very important to carefully explore the language parents and family

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members feel comfortable using. Be encouraged by knowing that children are better off with accurate, age appropriate information and this is almost always best coming from their parent/s or other significant adults from their family/friend network.

Setting up and preparing for conversations

If children ask questions about their mum's or dad's mental health this usually means they want answers and is a good window of opportunity.

- **Choose a space and a time which is comfortable** for children and the adults involved, preferably where you will not be disturbed.
- **Involve family members wherever possible** and be clear about the purpose and scope of the discussion. Be realistic about what can be achieved.
- **Check out with children what they think** and what they already know. They may have a considerable amount of information and it is important for adults to know this and perhaps understand how they came to learn this. Sometimes parents do not feel their children worry because they do not ask any questions. It is important not to assume that being quiet means they understand. Talking to children about what they understand is happening and what they have noticed about how their parent is behaving is an important first step. It can also dispel any myth they may have that it should not be talked about.
- **Reassure.** Children may feel awkward when they talk about these kinds of things. They particularly may be reluctant to express sadness or anger to the parent who is unwell for fear of causing worry or concern. Children are also intensely loyal. It is important they children are told that adults understand they may be feeling awkward or worried and that they may not feel like talking much.
- **Listen carefully!** Don't try to 'interpret' what they are asking or have experienced, but ask questions to check you have understood properly what they have said or told you.
- **Ask 'open' questions.** More discussion may occur when you ask questions or make statements that require more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Encourage children to put things in their own words.
- **Be yourself.** Use a clear simple manner and avoid using tones that imply pity or could sound patronising. Don't use jargon!

- **Be honest.** You may not have all the answers to the questions your child has and may need time to get more information and consider your response. At those times you can reassure your child by saying, "Wow, that is a really interesting question! You certainly notice a lot. Can I think more about that and get back to/talk with you a bit later about that?"
- **Have paper, coloured pencils, modelling clay or playdough, at the ready!**

"I can be more confident around other people about my mum now I know what's wrong"

- **Use other examples.** Explaining mental health challenges/mental illness to children using an example like asthma can be very helpful. Asthma is generally well recognised by children; most have a friend who has asthma attacks. It can occur 'out of the blue' and can be frightening for the onlooker if the attack is severe. It requires immediate treatment, medication and sometimes hospitalisation. The cause of asthma, like mental illness, is unknown but it is good to know what the triggers are and how to try to prevent attacks.

Using examples or metaphors to illustrate

Another approach is to use a specific example or comparison. The following is a guide using a car engine.



The brain has lots of different parts that do different things. They all need to work together for us to eat, sleep, talk, walk, feel, and so on. It is a very complicated part of the body, so complicated in fact that scientists are still trying to understand what makes it work and what to do when it doesn't. Everyone's brain is unique and special, just as cars have different and special kinds of engines.

One reason why it can be hard to understand the brain is that we can't see inside it to figure it out. If you look inside the bonnet of a car you can see the engine. This is also very complicated. It has bits that go round and about, up and down, water and oil to keep the parts moving, plugs and so

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on. If just one bit stops working correctly, the car starts to 'behave' differently. It may shudder, it may not start at all, it may blow smoke, it may make new noises. It can happen out of the blue and may be a real hassle for the family. And it may need to be fixed by a special person, a mechanic.



In a similar way, a person's brain may not work properly sometimes and needs extra help to work, not by a mechanic, but by a doctor - a psychiatrist - or a counsellor who can talk things through, and maybe with medication, not oil or new parts. You may notice this is happening because my/ your mum or dad's behaviour may change. I/your mum or dad may seem extra angry or extra sad; I/they may be staying in bed a lot and not be able to do the things they normally do. I/they may say or do things that seem strange to you. But I am still your mum/dad.

Just as the car may need to go to the garage to be fixed, I/your mum or dad may need to go to hospital to get special help to get better and come home again. The people there have special training, so they know the best way to help me/your mum or dad.

Cars need to be looked after so that maybe they won't get sick. People need to look after themselves too and this may mean taking medication, getting enough rest and breaks, talking about how they feel to others. Sometimes finding the right kind of medication can take a while and everyone needs to be patient! All these things will help cars to keep starting and people with mental health challenges/mental illness to stay well.

Checking in

After using examples like those described above, you can elaborate further or offer more time for questions. Keep checking in with the child or young person to make sure that they understand what you are saying, and that you have heard them correctly. You can also reassure them depending on their age that they might not understand this all at once and can ask more questions later.

Planning for relapses or unexpected events

Sometimes even with everyone trying to help and make things better, crises can occur and these times can be very worrying and scary for everyone,

particularly for children. It is a really good idea to have an agreed upon plan, rather like a Bushfire Plan, for times like these. People who live in the country or near forests have bushfire plans that the whole family knows about, and which is kept somewhere visible. In the same way, a Family Action Plan, can avoid last minute decisions having to be made when everyone might be very stressed and panicky about what is happening due to a person's gambling.

The Family Action Plan should be made with as many people involved as possible developing it, with the child/young person, at a time when people feel calm and well. An example of a Family Action Plan is included at the end of this information.

Summary

These types of explanations can easily be adapted for all ages and can be shortened or extended. Other ways to approach talking to children include using drawings or puppets. Check out the website www.copmi.net.au for more resources, age specific information and downloadable handouts.

Children understand things differently at different ages. Keep in mind the words and examples you chose and use your own unique understanding of your child to guide you.

Use other trusted adults to help you. Grandparents, other family members or good friends may be important sources of support for your child. They may also be able to help you explain your experiences with mental illness to your child. Your child's school teacher or an identified person at school may be able to sensitively provide you and your child with support.

If you are concerned about your child, your case manager or key worker can advise you of any programs or services in your area that may be able to provide you with assistance for you or your family.





TALKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT PARENTAL MENTAL ILLNESS

Family Action Plan for Children and Young People

(adapted from the national COPMI Initiative www.copmi.net.au)

If I am worried or upset I should call:

Name: _____ Relationship to me: _____
_____ Ph. _____

Name: _____ Relationship to me: _____
Ph. _____

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 Emergency: 000 Other:

About me

Name _____ Address _____

My date of Birth: _____

My phone number/s _____

My parent's details

Parent 1: Name: _____ relationship to me: _____

Address: _____

phone number/s _____

Parent 2: Name: _____ relationship to me: _____

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Address: _____

Phone number/s: _____

Brothers and sisters names and ages: _____

My school: _____ Year/Grade: _____

My doctor's name and phone number: _____

My Medicare number: _____

My medication (if I take any) _____

My allergies _____

Illnesses or special conditions I have _____

In a crisis

If my parent is unable to care for me and I need to stay with someone else for a while, it will be one of these people:

Name: _____ Phone number: _____

Name: _____ Phone number: _____

These people have agreed it is ok for me to stay with them? Yes/No

My parent/s has agreed it is ok for me to stay with them? Yes/No

I know how to get there (e.g. bus, taxi, getting picked up)? Yes/No

My parent knows how to contact me if I am there? Yes/No

Things I will take with me if I am staying away from home: Some ideas - favourite clothes, a family photo, school bag, school books, school uniform, my own pillow, favourite toy, toothbrush, diary, music...

Here is some information about what I like. (If you have to stay with someone else while your parent is away, it will help them to know a bit about you)

My favourite foods:

Foods I hate or am allergic to:

My hobbies and stuff I like to do to relax:

My cultural or religious customs (e.g. do you go to church? When are where?):

My favourite TV shows and movies:

My favourite book or magazine:

My favourite music or band:

My favourite sport or team:

Organising my week:

Here is a calendar to fill in the things you do each week

Monday am
evening

Monday pm

Monday

Tuesday am evening	Tuesday pm	Tuesday
Wednesday am evening	Wednesday pm	Wednesday
Thursday am evening	Thursday pm	Thursday
Friday am evening	Friday pm	Friday
Saturday am evening	Saturday pm	Saturday
Sunday am evening	Sunday pm	Sunday

Where will I get money from? Talk to your parents first, or ask your support worker to help you find out if you are eligible for financial assistance.

What do I need money for?

Bus _____

Lunch _____

School expenses _____

Music or sport lessons _____

Other _____

Other _____

Other _____

If my parent has to go away for a while, I know that I will be able to:

- visit when they are well enough
- speak with them regularly by phone when they are well enough
- see photos of them regularly
- write letters to them
- Other

Please add any additional information here:

Signatures

Me: Name _____

Signature _____

Parent/carer: Name _____ Signature _____

Parent/carer: Name _____ Signature _____

Support worker: Name _____ Signature _____

Date _____

Details of people who have a copy of this plan: _____

Name of Organisation (if applicable): _____

Phone _____