



## Supporting children of parents with a mental illness

A resource for  
primary school workers





## How primary schools can help

### *Primary school staff can make an enormous difference to children and their families by:*

- Providing a stable environment for students.
- Helping children to develop resilience, appropriate social skills and help-seeking skills.
- Promoting awareness and access to support services for parents and children where a parent has a mental illness.
- Building the mental health literacy of the school community to help create openness and reduce the stigma of mental illness.

### *Some of the ways you can support children and families affected by a parent's mental illness:*

- Have a practice of welcoming families to your school in a genuinely warm and non-judgemental way.
- Develop policy and procedures around mental health and mental illness that enable families to feel welcome and find the support they need.
- Seek more information and other resources for yourself and your colleagues about mental illness. Two useful websites are:
  - COPMI: [www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au)
  - KidsMatter: [www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary)
- Run social and emotional learning programs in your school. Check out the KidsMatter programs guide [www.kidsmatter.edu.au/social-and-emotional-learning](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/social-and-emotional-learning)
- SKIPS is a great example of a mental health promotion program for schools to increase support for children of parents with mental illness. The SKIPS website is also a good resource: [www.skips.each.com.au](http://www.skips.each.com.au)
- Support families to use Family Care Plans<sup>1</sup>.
- Work collaboratively with other services involved in the family's life.

*Primary schools are about more than just the education of students. They are often a gateway to the wider community and provide support for families and children.*

Many things can happen that may impact on a family's capacity to cope and put pressure on people to the point that they may need some support. Illness is one of these.

Physical and mental wellbeing are not static. We move along a continuum from being well to being unwell from time to time. When at the unwell end of the continuum we may need support such as the care of family and friends, rest, time or the right treatment to help us recover.

Families where a parent has a mental illness are often at risk of being excluded from the school community due to the nature of, and the stigma associated with mental illness. School staff may need assistance to feel better equipped and confident in their skills to engage with and make people with mental illness feel included.

### *Help parents feel comfortable to talk about their mental health:*

- Equip all staff to work from the principles of enquiry, no judgement and no blame when talking with parents, creating space for listening and assisting them to find solutions and support.
- Assure parents, during early contact with them, that it's best for their child if you/the school is informed about any important issues at home that may affect the child (e.g. health issues, a parent's chronic illness or mental health issues). Don't be afraid to use the words 'mental illness' or 'mental health problems' when talking to parents about the types of things that may affect a child.
- Although parents will not always share information about their mental illness, they are more likely to do so if they feel the information will be used to support them and their child and will not be abused in any way.
- Be careful not to suggest that the parent has a mental illness if they have not disclosed this information to you.
- Know the local mental health services that are available to assist families where a parent has a mental illness so that you can provide this information as needed.
- Communicate clearly to families about the support and services the school can offer and how to access them (e.g. "sometimes when families are going through a rough time they find the following helpful - access to financial support, flexible arrangements for payments/parent-teacher interviews, information about counselling and supports etc. If we can help you with any of these, please let me know".

1. *Examples of different Care Plan templates can be found on the COPMI website. <http://www.copmi.net.au/careplans>*

### *Using your observational skills, knowledge and experience:*

Your skills, knowledge and experience may help in noting changes in coping, attention and presentation that may indicate when a child or family is in need of support. Some possible signs of risk are:

- Poor attendance and/or interactions with others.
- Regression of development and/or emotional maturity.
- Taking on adult caring responsibilities for their parent.
- Worrying excessively about their parent's welfare.
- Overly shy or aggressive behaviour.
- Disturbed or self-destructive behaviour.
- Unkempt or very changeable physical appearance of the child.
- Working very hard to obey or please adults, this may appear as 'perfect' behaviour.

### *What to do if you notice changes in the child that concern you:*

- Express your observations to the child's parent(s) sensitively and ask open questions (e.g. "I've noticed some changes in your child (or you) lately. How are things going?")
- Use active listening techniques and reflect back to the parent what they tell you, to be sure you understand. Be calm, open and non-judgemental.
- Offer to help them find support or information. If you feel uncomfortable about talking with the parent, seek help from your school principal or wellbeing staff.
- Reporting of child protection concerns is mandatory in most states and your obligations under relevant legislation should be clearly outlined in your school policy. When discussing any concerns with parents consider highlighting that reporting your concerns can often assist the family to access extra services.

### *Ways to build understanding about mental health and illness within the school community:*

- Include relevant articles in the school newsletter. COPMI have some great examples: [www.copmi.net.au/kids-teens-young-adults.html](http://www.copmi.net.au/kids-teens-young-adults.html) or [www.copmi.net.au/parents-and-families.html](http://www.copmi.net.au/parents-and-families.html)
- Display posters or pamphlets that promote mental health and recovery from mental illness, visit:
  - COPMI: [www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au)
  - beyondblue: [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
  - SANE Australia: [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)
  - The Mental Health Council of Australia: [www.mhca.org.au](http://www.mhca.org.au)Your local state mental health service will also have materials available for display.
- Celebrate mental health events such as Mental Health Week and include them in the school curriculum. This could include displaying posters or artwork, viewing DVDs, reading stories or discussing issues related to mental health and mental illness.
- Create links on the school website to relevant websites for more information (e.g. the websites listed above).



### *Ways you can assist the child:*

You can help children to develop resilience by:

- Creating a warm and predictable environment in the classroom.
- Enhancing each child's sense of responsibility and belonging. Assigning a 'special' role to a child can help them to feel valued.
- Being available to listen. Children respond well to staff that are genuinely interested in them, even if they know you can't solve their problems.
- Supporting the child to use the coping skills they have and enhancing their social and communication skills.
- Encouraging and supporting the child to have positive expectations of themselves and their family.
- Assisting the child to find age-appropriate information on mental illness.
- Strengthening the child's self-esteem and resilience by providing opportunities for them to practice and achieve mastery in school related activities.

### *Ways you can assist the parent-child relationship:*

You may be able to assist the parent to develop, enhance or regain a secure and confident relationship with their child by:

- Engaging with the parent about their child's achievements and highlighting their strengths and interests.
- Supporting the family to participate in the school community (e.g. family picnics, athletics day, information/activity nights).
- Supporting the parent to access other services to assist them to develop their relationship with their child if necessary (e.g. parent support programs).
- Providing access to information and support on child development and on parent/child communication. The KidsMatter website features some useful resources: [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au)



## Tips from parents with mental illness about how schools can support them

### Build Rapport

Building relationships is always important, but with parents who experience a mental illness, the barriers can make this a slower process.

It can help to find something you have in common, such as a shared interest. This could be anything (e.g. following the same sport, interest in music or the local community news). Parents have a wide range of interests and experiences. The challenge is finding something that you have in common to help build rapport between you both.

### Be positive

Be encouraging, particularly in relation to their parenting role. Highlight strengths that parents have already shown, particularly in managing the difficulties they've encountered. This can be empowering as it helps to externalise any difficulties rather than personalise them. For example, thank the parent for getting their child to school on time three mornings in a row, as opposed to focussing on the fact that the child was late twice in the same week. This can then be an opportunity to talk about what could be put in place to enable more timely arrivals. Most of us respond better to the carrot, not the stick.

### Be realistic

Work within the context of where people are and with whatever they are prepared to give. For example, it may not be possible for the parent to attend formal parent-teacher meetings at this stage, but this doesn't mean that the parent is not interested in how their child is progressing at school.

### Be flexible

Give some leeway to account for the above difficulties. There are often a number of different ways to achieve the same outcome. Offer options to parents and try a different way of doing things. Ask the parent what might help them at this point in time. Many people with mental illness prefer contact via email or SMS, as this takes the pressure off having to respond immediately and gives them time to respond when they are best able to. This is also less personally challenging than a face-to-face exchange.

### Persevere

Most of all persevere. This can make a lot of difference for parents and their children. It is tempting to try all of the above once or twice and then give up as the desired outcome may not have been achieved. Many parents will appreciate a genuine and persevering attempt to engage with them and will respond when they are able to.



## Some things to remember:

Schools are key environments for:

- Creating stability for children.
- Supporting parent-child interaction.
- Supporting families' engagement in the community.
- Providing accurate information and support for families where a parent has a mental illness.

Families where a parent has a mental illness are at greater risk of exclusion from school communities.

Parents living with a mental illness:

- Express a strong need for better understanding about mental illness from education professionals (SANE Australia 2012).
- Face more challenges than other parents (SANE Australia 2012).
- Have their own individual recovery journey.
- Care deeply about how their mental illness may affect their child (SANE Australia 2012).
- Want information and support for their child and themselves (SANE Australia 2012).

### References

Allchin, R., Candy L., Malmberg J, Cowling V., Wrigley L., (2012), SKIPS Promoting mental health and supporting kids in primary school. Presenter manual, EACH.

Allchin, R., Candy L., Malmberg J, Joyce, A. (2004), SKIPS Supporting Kids in Primary School, Presenter manual, EACH.

SANE research Bulletin16: parenting and mental illness: the school years (August 2012) ISSN 1832-8385.



## More fact sheets and program information:

[www.copmi.net.au/resource-search](http://www.copmi.net.au/resource-search)

[www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary/resources-your-journey](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary/resources-your-journey)

[www.beyondblue.org.au/resources](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/resources)

[www.skips.each.com.au](http://www.skips.each.com.au)

[www.easternhealth.org.au/fapmi.aspx](http://www.easternhealth.org.au/fapmi.aspx)



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