



Making Time to Talk

Advice for parents with mental illness

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Introduction

If you have a mental illness, you may find it hard to cope, particularly if you're a parent. Bringing up children is never easy, and all parents wonder if they are doing it right. If you have mental health problems, you may worry about how this will affect your children and how you'll manage.

This booklet looks at what it's like for the children and gives advice about what you can do. If you are in any way worried about your children, the best thing is to talk about it – to your family, your friends, neighbours or a medical or care worker. Talking about your children is important to all parents.

It is also important to talk to them.

Support in Mind Scotland has booklets especially for young people which are a good way to get discussions going. Please ask us for copies of these.

My psychiatrist tells me I need to relax. That's easy enough for her to say. But how can I, when I have children at home demanding my attention?

The doctor says it would be better if I stayed in hospital for a while. In my heart of hearts I know he's right – but how can I explain it to the kids?

My partner suffers from terrible mood swings. I try to understand why he behaves the way he does – but can the children?



How Do Children React?



Children react in different ways

Parents are the most important people in a child's life. When parents have problems, children notice. Most children miss nothing – no matter how young they are.

Children are all different and they react in different ways.

Children ask questions

Children want to know what is going on. They may not ask you, but go to someone else. It's good if children have someone else they can trust that they can talk to, but it's better if they can find out what is going on directly from you.

This is because you know your children better than anyone and how they are likely to react.

Children worry

Many children have no one to talk to about what's happening at home. They worry on their own and sometimes blame themselves or feel guilty. Worrying can result in your child not being able to concentrate at school or withdrawing from their friends.

Children need information

Open, honest information can stop children from worrying or blaming themselves. Talk to them in your own way. If this does not help or your child still seems down, then ask for help, for example from your child's teacher or GP.



Children need someone they can trust

It's important for children to have other people as well as their parents that they feel comfortable with. A trusted person, chosen by the child, can be very important.

Children need to talk

Children don't just need information. They need to talk about their own experiences and feelings too. Ask your child what they think – and take what they say seriously, even if you do not agree.

Children try to get attention

Sometimes children try to get their parents' attention by being

disruptive, unresponsive or difficult. They might break things on purpose or start arguments or become unusually clingy. It shows that your child is bothered about something. Children don't usually behave like this when things are at their worst, instead they wait until things are returning to normal. When they then start to feel secure again they are keen to remind you that they are still here too!

If your child becomes "difficult" it can be extra hard for you. You might not be able to cope with their behaviour. Is there anyone else that can help out with the children?

It's also worth remembering that it's probably temporary, and that most children are difficult at some point in their lives.

Children are unusually helpful at home

Some children want to help when a parent is ill. They listen carefully, help in the house and do the shopping without a moan or complaint. It can be very pleasant when children help out. But children are children! Don't let them take on too much – make sure they have time to play and to have fun.

Children don't seem to have any particular problems

Your child(ren) may not react in any of these ways. That's perfectly possible. Most children grow up without a hitch, despite their parents' problems. The situation in the family affects them, but they cope with it. Even if your child

doesn't ask questions or seems to be unaffected, it's important that you spend time together and that you talk to each other. After all, you would do that usually!

Children need reassurance

Children have vivid imaginations. If they don't understand something, they may invent their own explanation. So, it's important to keep telling them that they are not responsible for what's happening.

Children need their friends

Contact with their friends and peers is very important. They can talk about what's happening and how they are feeling with a good friend.

What Do Children Need?

Children need all sorts of things... a plaster on a grazed knee, a bed-time story, a hug, someone taking an interest in them. But you don't have to be the only one that gives out all the time. Friends, relatives and neighbours can help too.

Here's a list of things that children need. What do you give your children and what do they get from other people?

Children Need

Clear rules and boundaries so they know what's allowed and what isn't. This makes them feel secure.

Attention and praise so they know what they are doing well.

Warmth and love – children need this even more than adults.

The opportunity to express their feelings – both pleasant and unpleasant ones!

To be taken seriously – we all want to be taken seriously. This means really listening to your children so that you know what they need.

Patience – children have a lot to learn and they can't learn it all at once.

The opportunity to show what they can do – all children must become independent. This only happens if they get the chance to do things for themselves.

Role models – children need people to admire. Parents, teachers, siblings or friends can all be role models.

Ten Tips for Good Parenting

If you have a mental health problem, you can still be a good parent. Here are some things you can do to help your child.

1 Explain to your child what is wrong

Your child will notice when something isn't right. It's better if you explain exactly what's wrong. You can initiate this or you can wait until your child asks. Some children don't want a sit down conversation. They feel more comfortable chatting while you do the washing-up or when you tuck them in at night.

2 Be honest

Explain what's going on and ask your child if they understand, just to make sure. Your child might ask questions which you can't answer. It's OK to say, "I don't know".

3 Listen to your child

Ask your child about their feelings and opinions and listen carefully to what they say.

4 Observe your child

Children's behaviour usually reflects how they are feeling. If they are not behaving as they usually do, this may mean that something is wrong. Wetting the bed or skipping school are all clear signals of distress but

it's often not so obvious. This means you have to pay attention to your child and watch for subtle changes.

5 Keep to usual routines

Everyday routines help children feel secure and stay secure, even if there are problems at home. This includes doing their homework, playing sport or taking part in other activities at the usual times.

6 Include other adults

Don't try to cope with everything on your own. Friends, relatives, or teachers may all be able to help. Other sources of advice or help are suggested on page 10.

7 Inform the school

If you have to go into hospital, tell the school. If they know, they can look out for your child. Tell your child that you have told the school.

8 Accept it if your child confides in someone else

Don't be upset if your child confides in someone else. Many children like to talk to someone outside their immediate family because they don't want to worry you. It's not about leaving you out.

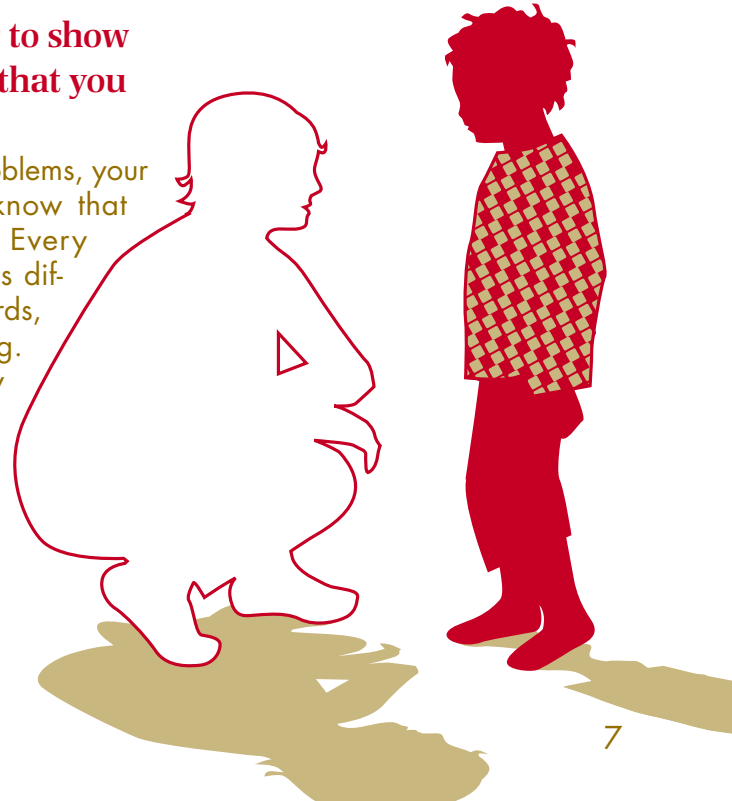
9 Get professional help if necessary

For some children the strain can become too much. They may not talk to anyone, or find that talking

doesn't seem to help. If so, it's important for you to get professional help for them. You'll find suggestions on page 10.

10 Remember to show your child that you love them

Whatever the problems, your child needs to know that you love them. Every one expresses this differently – with words, a smile or a hug. If you can show your child that you love them, every day is a new start. This helps more than anything else!



Frequently Asked Questions

“At the moment I find it hard to cope when my child brings a friend home to play. But I want her to be able to play with her friends...”

Your child is likely to be unhappy if they can't bring friends home any more. But if you explain why, and that they will be allowed to in the future, then they may find it easier to accept. In the meantime, can your child play safely with friends somewhere else, maybe outside, at a community centre or at someone else's house?

“I'm worried that my child will end up like this too.”

Very little is known about the causes of psychiatric problems – too little to say whether your child

will suffer the same problems. But you can reduce the risks by encouraging your child to express feelings – even the negative ones, and by praising your child. This will help your child develop confidence. Self-confidence is an important protection factor against mental illness.

“I'm a single parent. Everything is fine at the moment. But what will happen to my children if I have to go into hospital?”

Although everything is fine at the moment, it's worth making back-up plans. One suggestion is to ask friends or relatives whether they would look after your children if you ever had to go into hospital. If you do have to go into hospital, a

social worker will discuss with you the best place for your children to stay. It is important that you are happy with any decision.

“I’m scared that my children will be taken away from me because I have problems and people will think I can’t look after them properly. Can they be taken away just like that?”

Children will not “simply” be taken away from their parents. For that to happen the safety and the stability of the child must be at risk. The main consideration is the best interests of the child, and the first aim will be to enable the child to stay at home with their parent(s). A social worker will speak to you and the children. If the social worker thinks a child is at risk they will refer this to the Children’s Panel. The Children’s

Panel (made up of three non-legal people) will make a decision about the child’s best interests.

“People often don’t know how to behave towards my family. What can I do?”

There is still a stigma about mental illness. Many people avoid talking about it. If you speak openly about it yourself, which will help, at least with people close to you. Explain to your family and friends about your illness and how you feel.



Further Help

All parents, at times, feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of bringing up children and it's not unusual for parents without mental illness to get professional help and advice about their children.

However, if you have a mental health problem, practical support, care and advice are vital. This may be help around the house and in looking after the children; advice on how to cope with the children; or support for the children themselves.

Support in Mind Scotland can advise you or put you in touch with other agencies. You can contact us on 0131 662 4359 or email info@supportinmindscotland.org.uk. You'll also get more information on our website at www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk

Your GP, or the psychiatrist or psychologist treating you should be able to suggest local sources of help. You can also contact your local social work department, or an advice centre such as the Citizens Advice Bureau.

The idea for this booklet began in Holland. The text was put together by various centres working with the children of mentally ill parents. It was then translated to German and adapted by a child psychiatrist and child psychologist in Switzerland and Germany. It has been adapted for Scotland and Ireland by members and supporters of Support in Mind Scotland.

Other booklets in this series are:

A guide for children who have a parent with mental illness

A guide for young people who have a parent with mental illness

Support in Mind Scotland would like to thank the young people, adults and organisations who helped in developing these booklets.

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