**Supporting Children with Parents or Siblings with Mental Health Issues**

**Statistics**

Parents with mental health problems and their children are a group with complex needs and many children will grow up with a parent or sibling who, at some point, will have some degree of mental illness. Most mental illness will be mild or short-lived, but a few children live with a parent or sibling who has a severe mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

* In 2019-2020 around 1 in 3 children in England lived with at least one parent experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression – up to 10 children in every class.
* In 2019-2020 around 1 in 18 children lived with 2 parents reporting emotional distress – this measure includes children living in couple parent families only
* These figures have increased on the proportions reported for 2018-2019
* Perinatal mental illness (psychiatric disorders prevalent between pregnancy and a year after delivery) affects up to 27% of new and expectant mothers and is more likely to in areas of high deprivation
* Ten percent of new fathers were also found to be affected by mental health difficulties in the perinatal period
* Children living in couple parent families were more likely to live with a parent reporting emotional distress if both parents were out of work compared to families with at least one parent working.
* The data also show a higher rate of mental illness for lone parents than for adults living as a couple with children. These findings suggest that children may be more vulnerable to harm and neglect when living with a lone parent who suffers from mental illness, because when the parent is experiencing the disorder there is likely to be no other caring adult living in the home to take on the parenting role.

**Risk factors and Protective factors**

It can be helpful to think about risk factors and protective factors when thinking about the young people in our care.

**Risk factors** decrease a person's resilience and so consequently increase the likelihood of negative outcomes for children and young people.

* In the child – e.g. communication difficulties, physical illness
* In the family – e.g. mental illness, bereavement
* In the school – e.g. bullying
* In the community – e.g. Socio-economic disadvantage, homelessness

**Protective Factors**: the positive influences in our lives. They do not eliminate risk but they can reduce our vulnerability to that risk.

* In the child – e.g. good communication skills
* In the family – e.g. at least one good parent-child relationship, consistent discipline
* In the school – e.g. a sense of belonging, positive peer influences
* In the community – e.g. range of sport/leisure activities

A strong support network around the child can make a huge difference because there is someone there to support the child and help them to make sense of the situation and access support because very often these children and young people might find themselves alone

In principle the more protective factors that are present, the more likely a person is to display resilient behaviours.

**Impact on children**

Just because a child has a parent with a mental illness, it doesn't necessarily mean they will experience a negative impact. A strong support network or another parent can make a positive difference to their mental health and outcomes because there is someone there to support the child, help them to make sense of the situation, and access support - the challenge for many of our young people is that they are in in single parent families.

Children can often cope well with all sorts of life upsets, especially if the problem is short lived and does not keep repeating and they can understand what is happening and as much as possible why.

* In 2020, 30% of children with a parent who had experienced psychological distress had a probable mental disorder, this compares to 9% of children whose parents were not experiencing psychological distress.
* Children can become isolated due to the responsibility of caring for a parent with a mental illness and this can have an impact on children’s mental health.
* The NHS Digital survey of young people in 2021 found that in all children, from preschool to secondary school, children of parents with poor mental health are up to 3.5 times more likely to have any mental disorder than children whose parents were considered to have good mental health. This was also the case for emotional and behavioural disorders.

Although there is an association between parental mental health and child mental health, it is important to highlight that this correlation does not show whether parental mental health is the cause or result of the mental disorder.

**Children may worry that:**

* They are to blame for their parent’s or sibling’s illness. A lot of young people also experience a fear and worry, especially when nobody explains their parent’s or sibling’s mental illness to them. They may wonder if they have caused their parent’s or sibling’s illness. They may wonder if they can fix it. They may make attempts to make their parent or sibling feel better or feel happy. And when that's not possible, often the young people will blame themselves.
* A very common fear for these children is that they may catch or inherit a mental illness
* They may be worried about being referred to social services and so may suffer in silence without getting the help they need
* They may worry that they may be separated from their parent – whether through hospital admissions or due to social services involvement
* Even when children have all the right support and explanation, they may still feel upset, frightened, worried by, or ashamed of their parent's illness or behaviour at times.

**If they have a sibling with mental illness they may:**

* Feel protective of them or responsible for them
* Get embarrassed easily
* Worry about the impact on the family
* Feel like they are not important
* Feel angry
* Worry about getting unwell too.
* Feel confused
* Feel or even be unsafe

**Signs in children to look out for**

* Worried
* Withdrawn
* Physical health problems
* Sudden changes in concentration or educational performance.
* Changes in attendance patterns
* Tiredness (often due to nightmares or anxiety)
* Frequent unexplained angry outbursts. Other behaviour changes – particularly longer-term challenging behaviour
* School avoidance
* A change in how organised and ready for school they are
* Unkempt appearance

**Common symptoms of attachment difficulties**

* Poor sense of identity
* Hyper-vigilant (jumpy and on edge)
* Becoming over-excited very easily
* Inability to describe their feelings
* Memory and organisational difficulties
* Mistrust in relationships
* Friendship difficulties
* Lack of empathy
* Overfamiliarity with strangers
* Heightened sense of justice
* Lying
* Stealing
* Difficulties with eye contact and touch
* Lack of cause-and-effect thinking
* Inability to cope with change or transition
* Dissociation
* Poor attention and listening sills
* Erratic progression in learning
* Difficulties with speech and language
* Difficulties with motor skills
* Don’t respond to rewards and sanctions

**What support can school staff offer families?**

* More understanding and less stigma and discrimination in relation to mental health problems
* Signposting to support in looking after their children
* Practical support and services – ask families how you can help
* Reasonable adjustments made for their children
* Ongoing support from services beyond periods of crisis

**What support can school staff offer children?**

* Age-appropriate information about the illness and prognosis
* Someone to talk to – not necessarily formal counselling - opportunities for children to talk about any fears, confusion and guilt
* A chance to make and see friends.
* Recognition of their role in the family practical and domestic help
* A contact person and minimal disruption of routines in the event of a crisis
* School staff should take active responsibility for managing the support required by the chronically ill child and not rely on the sibling to ‘help out’ or have expert knowledge.
* SENDCOs can raise awareness across the school of the needs of chronically ill children and their siblings
* Some siblings may appreciate talking to others who are going through the same experience. Check with the sibling if this would be helpful and sensitively put siblings in contact with each other
* Have appropriate books in the library (https://ourtime.org.uk/resource/our-recommended-reads/)

**Key recommendations for practice**

* Speak to Designated Safeguarding Lead

Check-in

* Notice changes and find out more
* Ask students if they are OK. This helps them feel less alone, helps you understand whether their wellbeing is deteriorating and helps link to early support.
* Children and young people may find it hard to talk about a parent’s illness. They may feel embarrassed, frightened or confused. A lot of these young people don't want to draw attention to themselves or their family situation.

Curiosity

* Be open and inquisitive, asking open questions, and listen to what they have to say. You could say I've noticed you haven't quite been yourself recently, I've noticed you've been quite tired or preoccupied? Is everything okay at home? Is there something that's on your mind?
* Don't put too much pressure or force on the young person to talk if they don't want to.

Consistency

* Don't force the young person to talk but be consistent with your interest. Perhaps try to check in every couple of days or once a week.

Confidentiality

* Inviting outside intervention or intervention from social services is something that the young person might fear. Be clear about the confidentiality you can keep.

Creating space

* Perhaps you could give a young person the opportunity to go to the library to catch up with homework
* Make an agreement that, if it's not a good day, they can go to a space or have time within the classroom to quietly get on with their work or do some reading or whatever might be appropriate.
* Talk to the young person in a confidential space where they are not singled out amongst their peers
* Be compassionate, not punitive.

**Key things that have been shown to help**

* Having a good explanation helps the young person to make sense of their situation. It also helps to combat the negative misconceptions that exist around mental illness (see an animation called ‘Making sense of mental illness’ on the OurTime website)
* Knowing they're not alone. Reassuring them that actually mental illness is very common. It affects lots of people. It's not just their family, it's something that affects very many of us throughout our lifetime and helping the young people to access resources and support where they can understand that better and perhaps connect with other young people in a similar situation
* Having a neutral trusted adult to talk to.

**References**

**Websites**

* Anna Freud – Poor parental mental health

<https://mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/risks-and-protective-factors/home-based-risk-factors/poor-parental-mental-health/>

* [BBC One - Joe Wicks: Facing My Childhood](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=92e43e651651902aJmltdHM9MTY2NzE3NDQwMCZpZ3VpZD0yN2Q3N2Y4YS0yZTA5LTZmYTctMzg4Zi02ZGFiMmZlOTZlNDcmaW5zaWQ9NTE4MQ&ptn=3&hsh=3&fclid=27d77f8a-2e09-6fa7-388f-6dab2fe96e47&psq=joe+wicks+documentary+bbc&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYmJjLmNvLnVrL3Byb2dyYW1tZXMvcDBjM3Ftenk&ntb=1)
* Carers trust

<https://carers.org/how-your-school-can-support-young-carers/young-carers-in-schools>

* Creative education courses

Spot and support attachment disorder

<https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/spot-and-support-attachment-disorder/>

How to Enable Families Fleeing from Danger to Feel Safe https://www.creativeeducation.co.uk/courses/how-to-enable-families-fleeing-from-danger-to-feel-safe/

* The Children’s Society, 2020. Hidden from view: The experiences of young carers

https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/hidden\_from\_view\_final.pdf

* Mind

https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/parenting-with-a-mental-health-problem/parenting-and-mental-health/

* Our Time charity for children of parents with mental illness

https://ourtime.org.uk/

* Royal college of psychiatrists

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/young-people/when-a-parent-has-a-mental-illness>

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/information-for-parents-and-carers/parental-mental-illness-the-impact-on-children-and-adolescents-for-parents-and-carers>

* Young Minds

https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/parental-mental-illness/

* **Young carer resources**

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/young-carers/resources-for-people-working-with-young-carers>

[young-carers-in-families-affected-by-parental-mental-illness.pdf (childrenssociety.org.uk)](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/young-carers-in-families-affected-by-parental-mental-illness.pdf)

**Books**

Geddes, H. (2006). Attachment in the Classroom, Worth Publishing, London

Marshall, N. (2014). The Teacher’s Introduction to Attachment, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London