

Pupils with parents affected by mental ill-health

“My mum has a mental illness, but no one told me why she was acting so weird. None of the doctors told me. It was scary. I had to find out for myself. They didn’t think about how I was feeling and worrying.”

Who is this chapter for?

- All staff
- School lead or staff interested in becoming/establishing a school lead within your school
- Safeguarding officer

This chapter will support schools to:

- ensure that staff are informed about the specific impacts and needs of young carers affected by substance misuse or mental ill-health.
- help pupils find support and understanding at school.
- ensure that your school knows when and how to involve other support agencies and professionals.

Synopsis

Mental ill-health is often misunderstood; there is still great stigma associated with it. Research, guidance and practice highlights that children and young people who live and care for a parent or family member with mental ill-health are often more reluctant to tell anyone about their family than those caring for someone with a physical disability.

Like all young carers, children affected by mental ill-health in the family experience many common impacts associated with a caring role, but they may experience further specific impacts, such as emotional impacts and safety issues.

The main focus of this chapter is on parental mental ill-health, although a young carer may also be looking after a sibling. It is also important to remember that not all children whose family members have mental ill-health will experience difficulties or be young carers.



The statistics

Of the UK's 175,000 young carers, over 50,000 - 29% - are estimated to care for a family member with mental health problems.¹

Between 25% and 50% of children living with a parent with severe mental ill-health will experience some form of psychological disorder during their childhood or adolescence, and between 10% and 14% will be diagnosed with a psychotic illness during their lifetime.²

Stigma

Young carers looking after a parent with mental ill-health are often hidden because:

- there is no visible illness or disability.
- the illness may be episodic.
- the young carer and/or the family is reluctant to seek support.

Some young carers go to great lengths to conceal the mental ill-health within their families and make up excuses for their parent's behaviour. They can also experience significant confusion and emotional upheaval due to the episodic nature of mental ill-health.

Parents may worry about discrimination and the effect their illness has on their child. Issues surrounding their child's schooling, such as behaviour or attendance problems, can add to stress which may further aggravate their illness. Parenting ability may also be impacted.

Young carers whose parents have severe mental ill-health can live under large psychological stress which, in turn, can affect their own emotional health and well-being. Unemployment, poverty, familial stress and lack of support because the family fears intervention can all affect the young carer negatively. The young carer can be further impacted if the parent has to spend time in hospital and the family is separated.

Providing young carers with information

A parent's behaviour or even treatment is often not explained to the child or young person and this can lead to misunderstanding and confusion. Research indicates that age-appropriate information helps children to cope because:

- children often imagine that things are worse than they are and so providing information therefore reduces fear.
- understanding the illness can help the child empathise with and respect the person with the illness.
- the child will realise it is not their fault.

The child's age, level of understanding, culture and the parent's wishes must be considered when providing information in all cases. Parents may also require help to understand why the child might need information about their mental ill-health.



Additional caring responsibilities

Young carers of a parent with mental ill-health can have further caring responsibilities, including significant emotional support, such as keeping the parent company or cheering them up, and checking they take their medication.

The added emotional role is often the hardest for the child and can often result in a role-reversal between parent and child.

Children with parents who have mental ill-health can feel withdrawn, anxious, confused and worried which can cause them to have behavioural difficulties and be violent or self-destructive. In some cases, children can adopt paranoid or suspicious behaviour as they believe their parents delusions. These can all affect the child's education as they experience stigma and isolation leading to them being victims of bullying which in turn can lead to further isolation.

What do children say they need?

- Good quality, age-appropriate information.
- Someone whom they can trust to talk to and ask questions.
- Someone to contact in a crisis.
- Practical help.
- To know their situation is not uncommon.
- Issues to be discussed confidentially.
- Support and understanding at school.

Safeguarding children affected by parental mental ill-health

It is not inevitable that children are at risk of significant harm because they care for a parent with mental ill-health. If you are concerned about the well-being of a child, school child protection procedures should be followed. Please refer to Chapter 25 'Safeguarding'.

What can your school do?

- The development of a whole-family approach is key to supporting young carers with parents affected by mental ill-health. Your school should work with other agencies to enable this.
- Consider offering the pupil, or referring the pupil for an assessment following the Common Assessment Framework (CAF).
- If there is another parent in the family who is not affected by mental ill-health, involve them in support and consider also involving the child's extended family.

Dual diagnosis

Some parents can have both mental health ill-health and substance misuse issues. It is, therefore, important to maintain effective links between all agencies involved to provide extra support should they need it.



In families affected either by mental ill-health or substance misuse, it is important to listen to the child and monitor how this impacts on their well-being and development. Please refer to Chapter 19 'Pupils with parents affected by substance misuse'.

Other chapters to help you understand this topic

- 4 Barriers to learning faced by young carers
- 24 Assessment and monitoring
- 25 Safeguarding

Key resources

→ Supporting children who have a parent with a mental illness

Produced by The Children's Society:

www.youngcarer.com/pdfs/Mental%20Illness%20Leaflet%206th.pdf

→ MyCare: Young carers' resilience, coping strategies and cultural differences in caring for parents with a mental illness

Produced by The Princess Royal Trust for Carers and the Mental Health Foundation, this document explores the experiences and needs of children and young people between the ages of 10-21 years whose parent/guardian(s) have a serious mental illness.

www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/children-and-young-people/mycare/

→ SCIE Guide 30: Think child, think parent, think family: a guide to parental mental health and child welfare

This guide is about working with parents who have mental health problems and their children. It provides guidance on policy and practice and makes recommendations for key areas of professional education, workforce development and research. It also provides links to useful resources and contact details of relevant organisations.

www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide30/index.asp

→ Keeping the family in mind

Resource aimed at anyone who works with parents with mental health difficulties, their children and their families.

www.barnardos.org.uk/resources/research_and_publications/books_and_tools_tools_for_professionals.htm

→ Partners in care

Leaflets produced through partnership between The Princess Royal Trust for Carers and The Royal College of Psychiatrists.

www.rcpsych.ac.uk/campaigns/partnersincare.aspx

→ Dual diagnosis toolkit – Mental health and substance misuse: A practical guide for professionals and practitioners

www.turning-point.co.uk/inthenews/Documents/Dualdiagnostoolkit.pdf

¹Dearden C. & Becker S. (2004). *Young Carers in the UK: the 2004 report*. Carers UK and The Children's Society

²Devlin, J.M. & O'Brien, L.M. (1999). *Children of parents with mental illness. I: An overview from a nursing perspective*. Australian & New Zealand Journal of Mental Health Nursing 8(1), pp19-29.



20.1 Information on mental health for young carers

The following resources contain age-appropriate information for children and young people.

→ YCNet

Section on caring for someone with a mental health problem section:

www.youngcarers.net/i_care_for_someone_who/30/#

→ When a parent has a mental illness

Film produced by produced by Dr Alan Cooklin with funds from the Royal College of Psychiatrists' Images of Psychiatry Campaign:

www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfo/youngpeople/caringforaparent.aspx

→ Need to Know: A guide for young people who have a parent with mental illness

Booklet for children or young people with a parent being treated for mental ill-health which is particularly helpful for those aged 11 to 14:

[www.nsfscot.org.uk/uploads/attachments/1250083009___NSF\(Scotland\)-Needtoknow.pdf](http://www.nsfscot.org.uk/uploads/attachments/1250083009___NSF(Scotland)-Needtoknow.pdf)

→ Mental illness in your family?

A *Young Minds* booklet for children and young people with someone in their family with mental ill-health:

www.youngminds.org.uk/publications/all-publications/mental-illness-in-your-family/file

→ Minds, myths and me

Fact pack for young people who live with someone with a mental illness produced by Gloucestershire Young Carers:

www.glosyoungcarers.org.uk/Website%20copy.pdf