

Answering questions from children and young people



Children may have unfounded fears and worries relating to the illness, so encourage them to ask questions. It may be useful to think ahead about how you might respond to questions from your children and/or their friends. Your doctor or other health worker can help if you'd like to talk it over with someone first.

It may also be useful to think about what, if anything, you might tell your child's teacher or someone like the parents of your child's best friend, though it is certainly your right to retain your privacy.

If the children aren't living with the parent with the mental illness, it is still important for their questions to be answered.

The other parent or caregiver needs to be well informed and non-judgmental in sharing information with children about mental illness.

Common questions children ask

“Did I do something wrong?”

Children often blame themselves when things go wrong. Make sure they realise that mental ill health is no-one's fault and can be treated like other illnesses.

“Can I help make it better?”

Some children think that their parent will recover their health if they try harder at school or try to behave perfectly. However, when this doesn't seem to work, they may become frustrated or angry or bewildered. It is important to let them know that they are not responsible for their parent feeling unwell.

Remember to ask the children occasionally how they are feeling about what is happening.

“Why aren’t you like other mums/dads?”

Children and young people are as vulnerable to the stigma and negative attitudes surrounding mental illness as the person with the mental health problem. Illness or medication may cause you to act differently from other parents or may restrict the activities you can be involved in. However, lots of young people naturally appear to be embarrassed by their parents or don’t want to be seen sometimes with them; its quite normal for that age. Talk with your children about the impact of your illness or medications and be sensitive to their feelings.

“Will I catch it?”

Children and adolescents who may be concerned about their own future often ask this question. While it’s difficult to answer simply, it is important that it be addressed. Let children know that mental illnesses are not contagious and cannot be caught like measles or chicken pox. It may be helpful to learn

Children’s understanding of the world changes as they develop, so you may need to answer these questions more than once. Children can manage more complex information as they get older.



about the mental health problem and whether or not it has a hereditary component, but let them know that ‘risk’ is not the same as ‘destiny’. A range of information about different mental illnesses is available (your GP, other health worker or public library can assist you or you can call the numbers or visit the websites listed on the back cover) or you may wish to make a joint appointment with your doctor/case worker and your child to discuss these issues.

“When will you be better?”

It’s important to answer children honestly about the mental health problem or disorder and its treatment, especially when it is likely that although with help their parent may feel better, there may also be times in the future when they feel unwell and need help again.