

Tips for the extended family and others who care



“Things changed for the better when I stopped and asked them how I could help rather than just going in and doing things for them.”

Parents with a mental illness may need extra support from families and friends.

- Ask the family how best you can support them.
- Talk with the parent about their illness and ask if it's OK to find out more. Discuss any symptoms and warning signs and how you can support them.
- Be understanding and let the parents and children know that they don't have to manage on their own.

You have a right to ask for information that will help you support the family as best you can, but you must also respect the privacy of the person with the health problem or illness.

“It seemed sometimes that my teacher was the only one who asked how I was – everyone else was just so worried about Dad.”

- Remember to ask the children how they feel about what is happening or has happened.
- ‘Be there’ for the children and young people to talk to if need be but also think of practical ways in which you can help make the children's life as much like their school friends as possible.
- Let family members express their true feelings; try to be patient and non-judgmental.

“Look after yourself – caring can be exhausting.”

Discussing things as a family

We all have different ways that we prefer to communicate. Some children and parents love to talk best face-to-face, others prefer to talk when they're doing something together (such as building with blocks or preparing a snack together). Think about how and when it might be best to talk about things...and remember, talking isn't the only way to communicate. Ask your doctor or health worker about books written specifically for children about mental health problems. (A list of books and videos for different age groups can be found at <http://www.copmi.net.au>)

Preschoolers may require a lot of reassurance and they need explanations in simple words. Try talking in a story form or by drawing pictures or using picture books.



Primary School Children need information at their own level. They may be more able to talk about their own feelings and their parent's feelings



at this stage but also need 'straight forward' answers at a practical level about the illness and what will happen if the parent becomes ill. Try to keep your answers simple.

Teenagers often talk when they are ready to, rather than at a time of someone else's choosing. Leave the way open for communication, provide literature and discuss things as honestly as you can. It's not always easy to know when a young person is experiencing difficulties, so let them know that you love them and that they can talk to you at any time. It's also healthy for young people to talk things over with other key people in their life.

