



## The Children Of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) initiative

**A 'Hidden' Issue:** The children of parents with a mental illness have been described as 'hidden' or 'invisible', due to the stigma associated with mental illness, the lack of awareness on the part of health professionals of their needs and the fear (on the part of both parents and children) that if they ask for help the child will be removed from the parents' care.

**Increased Risks For Children and Young People:** Children of parents with a mental illness have long been recognised as being at increased risk of mental and or physical health problems and a combination of factors impact upon the child's risk. These include genetic inheritance, adversity (e.g. poverty, homelessness, social isolation), the age of child, the nature of the mental illness, family relationships, and the involvement in the child's life of adults other than the mentally ill parent. A minority of children may also need extra protection and care when their parent is mentally unwell.

**'Young Carers':** The care provided by children for their parent with a mental illness (especially in sole-parent situations) may greatly affect their participation in school and social life.

**Risk Doesn't Equal Destiny:** Not all children in this situation will experience difficulties as a result of their parent's ill health but many children and their parents would benefit from supports including information, domestic help and respite.

**Key Messages for Children and Young People:** You did not cause your parent's mental health problem. You have a right to feel safe. You are not alone; many families are affected by mental illness. Mental illnesses can be treated. If you are feeling stressed by your family life, ask for help (e.g. speak to a trusted adult or *KidsHelpLine* 1800 55 1800) and take time out for you.

**Information and Support for Families and Children/Young People:** Information booklets have been developed for expectant parents, families and children. These are available via mental health services and the COPMI website [www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au) or by phoning the COPMI Office (08) 8367 0888. The website was developed to provide specific information for people working with families and includes details of local support groups and programmes for young people, and links to more 'young person friendly' sites (e.g. VicChamps [www.easternhealth.org.au](http://www.easternhealth.org.au) champs/ for 5-12 year olds and itsallright [www.itsallright.org](http://www.itsallright.org) for teenagers).

**Advocacy:** "*Principles and Actions for Services and People Working With Children of Parents With a Mental Illness*" (downloadable from [www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au)) have been developed for services and workers by the national COPMI initiative and various groups around Australia are advocating for them to be implemented in all States and Territories.

COPMI is the Children Of Parents with a Mental Illness initiative being undertaken by the Australian Infant Child Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association (AICAFMHA) for the Australian Government.

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