



PARENTING BEING A DAD

For dads with kids in mind ...



4 Dads

Understanding children

Seeking support

Being there

Creating stability

“I missed having him around. I could have dealt with it. It was much more painful without him.”

Kids Talk

“I think the most important thing I've done as a dad, is being there for my kids.”

Dads Talk

“Parents should explain to their children what mum or dad is experiencing, what to expect and where supports and safety networks are.”

Health Workers Talk

It takes effort being a father at any time. But when there's a mental illness in the family, the way you interact with your children can significantly affect their development and wellbeing.

Understanding your child

While every child is unique, many fathers can have specific expectations of them. If you understand your child's potential and what they need through each stage of development, you can adapt your expectations to match their needs.

When your expectations match your child's abilities and personal interests, you offer them a sense of reassurance and build their faith and trust in you. Developing a positive relationship with open communication will inspire your child. When you understand your child, you will make better judgements on how to support them.

What you can do

- **Take an interest** in your child's activities. Ask questions about what they did at school, how the music lessons are going etc.
- **Ask about their friends** and talk about them when it's appropriate to.
- **Explore their thoughts and feelings** and find out if they have worries or concerns.
- **Get to know your child** and if you have difficulty relating, visit the *Raising Children Network* at www.raisingchildren.net.au or read one of the many books available on child development or parenting.

Communication

Children might have lots of questions when someone isn't well in the family. Whether they can talk about their concerns or not, most will construct ideas about what's going

on. Discussing the issue with your children in ways they'll understand will protect them from thinking they are responsible for what's going on. They'll also find out they aren't alone with what they are experiencing which is comforting.

When you start talking to your child about mental illness, consider their age and ability to understand information. If you have children of varying ages, you might talk to them separately in a way suitable for their age. Even young children can learn to understand what is happening, but might not be able to express any worries they might have. When an adult who cares about them can explain what's happening and help them identify their feelings; that goes a long way in developing their emotional wellbeing.

What you can do

- Tell your child that what is happening is not their fault and they can ask questions.
- Let them know that mental illness can't be 'caught' like a cold; and it's common.
- Explain that people can get better.
- If appropriate, let them know the family can stay together.
- Develop a care plan with your children to action when you (or partner) are unwell.

Observing children

As a parent you are in a position to notice whether a mental illness in the family is impacting on your children emotionally. If you notice any signs of distress or stress,

comfort them or arrange for them to be appropriately supported.

Negative changes in your child's behaviour are often linked to distress and can indicate something's wrong. For example, if your child regularly complains they 'feel sick' or has a stomach or head ache, that could be a sign your child is stressed or worried.

Some children might withdraw from family and social activities. On the other hand, a child might seem their usual self at home but act out differently outside the home. It can help to speak to people at your child's school to better understand their thoughts, feelings and behaviours to decide if they need extra support.

What you can do

- Observe your child's behaviour for signs of distress.
- Watch for negative changes in behaviour.
- Ask teachers or a coach about your child's behaviour.

Seeking support for children

Sometimes it helps to get outside support. There's benefits developing social connections, within and outside the family. Having connections with peers can develop emotional resilience in young people, allowing them to better cope with the challenges of mental illness in family life.

Parents and children don't need to resolve feelings of distress or stress in isolation. If you are concerned your child is experiencing distress, it can help to work with a mental health professional.

There's a lot of information and support available for children. This includes some good websites with first-hand stories about living with mental illness. These can be helpful for them to read.

What you can do

- Encourage your children to talk to trusted friends, teachers or a coach and keep positive connections with friends, family or community groups.
- Get them learning more about mental illness (see www.copmi.net.au kids section) and join online discussions at au.reachout.com or www.headspace.org.au
- Give them the details for Kids Helpline; a 24 hour counselling service for 5-25 year olds — www.kidshelp.com.au or 1800 55 1800.
- Find a counsellor your child can speak with. Meeting your GP is a good place to start.

Be there for your children

Mental illness can be long-term and unpredictable but it can be manageable with the right support. Staying involved with the family, and particularly your children shouldn't be underestimated.

What you can do

- Involve yourself in your child's sport and school activities, go to the park or beach together.

- Share regular time together like watching a DVD, reading or playing computer games.
- Find support for you and your family when you (or your partner) aren't well.
- Advocate for your children when necessary, for example if bullying or stigma impacts on them.
- Rethink old-fashioned stereotypes of a father's role.

Old stereotypes don't help your children

- ~~If I can't be the breadwinner there's no point being around.~~
- It's good for my children to see me contributing in any way I can.
- ~~My job is to set and enforce the rules otherwise children won't respect me.~~
- Listening to my child's experience and setting some rules together can bring us closer together.
- ~~Children will feel burdened or vulnerable if I talk about my or my partner's mental illness.~~
- Children are more likely to understand and cope if I discuss what's going on where appropriate.

Creating stability

Routines and care plans can create security for children when a parent's mental illness is disrupting family life. Finding the balance between unpredictability and disorder; and too many rules with little flexibility can be difficult. Reviewing routines and plans to see how effective they are can help you reach that balance.

Conflict and disagreement are part of family life. But the way parents handle it is vital for their children's wellbeing. If you're not satisfied with how you've handled a situation, it might help to talk about it and apologise where appropriate.

What you can do

- Establish boundaries, routines and plans that provide some choice and flexibility. Getting the children to help with some (not all) decisions can be effective.
- Manage conflict and disagreement with respect.

Visit www.copmi.net.au/dads to view video and links to more information



Talk to someone | Get more info

Mensline | 1300 78 99 78 | www.mensline.org.au

Beyond blue | 1300 22 4636 | www.beyondblue.org.au

SANE Australia | 1800 18 SANE (7263) | www.sane.org