



# PARTNERS IN PARENTING

For dads with kids in mind ...



## 4 Dads

What's best for my child?

**Parenting** with the mother of my child

**Relationship** changes

**Working** with differences

“He always stuck by mum even when it was really hard for him sometimes but he knew it would get better.”

Kids Talk

“You get frustrated, slip up and say ‘you’re not trying hard enough’. But apologise because being supportive is a big, big thing for your partner and child.”

Dads Talk

“Working together as a team is what’s going to work for your kids.”

Health Workers Talk

Children accept that all families have problems at times. They don't expect them to be perfect. But when you and your partner disagree, it's how you sort it out that's important for your child's wellbeing.

### What's best for my child?

A major factor contributing to a child's emotional development and wellbeing, is a positive, supportive relationship between parents. Cooperative relationships between mum and dad help children feel secure. When a father shows respect towards his children's mother, he is supporting his children. This is also true if he is separated from the mother.

When you demonstrate cooperation, especially throughout difficulties which stimulate conflict, you are effectively teaching your child how to work through problems effectively too.

### What you can do

- **Demonstrate respect** During tense times children can feel the stress between parents. Speaking respectfully to and about their mother helps them develop positive attitudes about themselves.
- **Think of your children** Sometimes when it's hard focussing on the positives, try thinking of your child's wellbeing for extra motivation.
- **Understand the consequences** While an emotionally supportive relationship between parents is a protective factor for children, the opposite is also true.
- **Talk with your children** Discuss the effects of the mental illness to help them

understand what might happen when you (or mum) becomes unwell.

- **Think about what you say** Talk about the illness rather than the person. eg. don't say “your cranky mother!” Rather, “the illness is making mum cranky”.
- **Make time for yourself** Find time to do things for yourself while a family member or another support person helps out.

### Parenting with the mother of my children

When mental illness is part of your relationship, partnering can become more complex.

Being a partner and parent is very challenging, particularly when you're unwell. This is when you might need to seek support (see overleaf). If it's your partner who experiences mental illness, you may encounter additional responsibilities, especially during periods when they're unwell. Get help if you are having to juggle multiple roles and manage conflict. Learning to be flexible and sharing the parenting responsibility can be difficult when mental illness creates unpredictability. Discuss the shared responsibility of raising children, whether you live with the mother of your children or not, or are part of a blended family.

### What you can do

- **Talk with a trusted friend**, support group or counsellor to help you work out difficult situations.
- **Make a plan** to help guide you (or your partner) in your parenting and other duties during times when you (or your partner) is unwell.
- **Develop a support hand** with your children (see our *Finding Support* information sheet).
- **Stay connected to your children** because being involved in their life is vital for their wellbeing.

### Stay connected to the kids

- ✓ If you don't live with your child all the time, make a scrapbook of photos and reminders of the things you do together (eg. a leaf from a walk in the bush, a bus ticket, greasy finger prints after fixing a bike, the outline of your hands or feet, a drawing, a joke). Add a new page each visit. The memories will soon build to a treasure.
- ✓ Kids of all ages love rough and tumble play, like pillow fights, play fights and touch footy. Physical contact reinforces a bond with your child and reduces stress by releasing 'feel-good' hormones in the brain.
- ✓ Build a bike track, hang a swing, play rock/paper/scissors, arm wrestle, picnic outside in the back yard, at the beach or a park. You will remain connected through any shared activity.

### Dealing with relationship changes

When mental illness is part of your life, your relationship may change, especially during periods of ill health. If you (or your partner) becomes unwell, behavioural changes can affect communication, intimacy and trust. If you both gain an understanding of the mental illness and its effects, you can be prepared for changes and be aware of what to expect. By adjusting your expectations of each other, you may be able to move through periods of ill health and accommodate the changes.

A partner of someone experiencing mental illness can have mixed and challenging emotions themselves. While practical demands can increase significantly, extra patience and acceptance toward the person who is unwell is needed. These increasing demands can take their toll. To continue meeting these challenges while supporting your family, you (or your partner) need to manage your own individual needs too.

### What you can do

**Make an agreement.** Understanding the effects of the mental illness and planning how to address it with your partner can help avoid conflict. Describe in terms you both understand what to do when one of you becomes unwell, for example:

- Stage one, **leave me alone**
- Stage two, **be kind, patient, and attentive**
- Stage three, **insist I call my mental health worker**
- Stage four, **take me to the hospital**

### Working with differences

Differences can stem from cultural beliefs and parenting attitudes and can add additional pressure in partnerships, especially when a family is affected by mental illness.

Children can adjust to a parent's different styles, but if clashes aren't managed, you should seek conflict management support, for the wellbeing of your children.

### What you can do

When differences between you and your partner need moderating:

- discuss your differences when your children aren't present (not just in another room).
- listen to your partner's point of view or beliefs, acknowledge them, then present your view.
- find a way forward by finding a mutually agreeable solution.
- get help from a support organisation or a counsellor (if practical) when difficulties appear insurmountable.
- keep in mind your child still benefits when the parent with the mental illness continues being involved in their lives, where practical.

Visit [www.copmi.net.au/dads](http://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](http://www.mensline.org.au)

**Beyond blue** | 1300 22 4636 | [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

**SANE Australia** | 1800 18 SANE (7263) | [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

**Relationships Aust** | 1300 364 277 | [www.relationships.org.au](http://www.relationships.org.au)