

How to talk to your child about mental illness

Information and advice for parents

It's natural to have lots of thoughts running through your head when you are diagnosed with a mental illness, not the least if you have children. How do I talk to my child about the condition? Do I risk harming them by telling them? And how old should my child be before I say something? How do I talk to them about the illness without making it all about the negatives?

” I sometimes get angry when my mum doesn't remember something. But when she doesn't have the illness, she is very sweet.”

– Boy, 6

” They should have told me, so that I understood what was happening.”

– Girl, 11



Why you should talk to your child about mental illness:

- When parents experience mental illness, the children will notice it. It affects the entire family.
- Children need an explanation to better understand their experiences. Otherwise, they might create their own explanations, and often they will think that it is their fault. It is possible to explain to all children that something is different because of mum's or dad's illness.
- Children might need answers to very basic questions: Is the illness contagious? Can mum or dad die? Is it my fault?
- Children can keep thoughts, feelings, and worries to themselves and avoid asking questions. Especially if the adults are trying to hide symptoms to protect them.
- Children might try to protect their parents by not talking about the illness.
- Children sometimes take on too much responsibility as their way of helping.
- The child's welfare can be at risk when they feel alone with worries about their parent's illness. It might be expressed as stomach pains, headaches, restlessness, difficulties concentrating, problems in their social lives, sadness, or anxiety.

What makes a positive difference?



Here is some of our best advice on how to tackle the illness in relation to your child:

- Give your child some specific and age-appropriate information about the illness. Use a language suitable for their age.
- It helps your child to know someone is helping mum or dad to get better.
- Include people in your family's network, who can provide extra support for the child.
- It might be beneficial for your child to meet other children who have a parent with a mental illness, e.g. in a support group ("børnegruppe").
- Make sure you confide in other adults about your worries and problems. It is not the child's responsibility to solve these.
- Tell your child that it's not their fault that you have the illness.
- Be open about when you are experiencing a bad or good day or period, so they don't have to monitor how you are feeling. Prepare the child if you can. And address it as soon as possible if you wished you had reacted differently in a certain situation.

” I was told very late. That made me very sad. Children can feel let down when they are not told until much later.”

– Girl, 11

How to talk to your child



Be the one to initiate a conversation with your child. Ask what they have noticed themselves. Be honest and age-appropriate in your answers to any questions.

It can be difficult, and it is okay to address it for instance by saying to your child: "I think it's difficult to chat about, but we'll work it out together. It's important you know what is happening in our family, maybe you have noticed I react a bit differently to normal?"

Here are examples of what you could say. Adapt to your own situation:

- Mental illness can jumble up thoughts and emotions
- People can become quite poorly from the illness, like if you have a high fever. Then you can go to a psychiatric hospital – it's like a hospital to fix your thoughts.
- People sometimes become so unwell that they need looking after for a while
- I sometimes get sad/tired/angry more easily. That is not because of you; it is because of the illness.
- Mental illness can clutter your thoughts and feelings, and at times that can make me behave differently to normal.
- Mum/dad can be really low on battery - that is because the illness uses up a lot of energy.
- Mental illness makes normal feelings extra intense, so maybe I become more worried/sad/angry/scared... than what seems reasonable.
- When the illness takes over, I can't always do what I promised, even if I really want to.
- Sometimes the illness makes it a little difficult for mum/dad to listen properly.
- It's never your fault when the illness makes mum/dad grumpy/sad/tired/scared.
- Mum/dad is getting help from a doctor/psychologist. There are grown-ups, who will help mum/dad.





Adult talk. What you can do.

Remember there are issues only adults should deal with.

Don't share pessimistic or gloomy thoughts with no filter.

For instance, don't share financial worries. And it's important for the child to know that there are no right or wrong ways to feel. It's best to be specific and adapt the information to the situation at hand. If it's about poor finances for instance, you could say:

- Unfortunately, we can't afford that.
- If you have been ill a while, you will have less money to spend.

Problems between you and your partner you can explain by saying things like:

- Grown-ups can sometimes find it difficult to talk, too.
- Sometimes it can take a while to become friends again when you have had a fight.
- We do our best to be good parents. I know that we sometimes make mistakes.
- We love each other and we'll work it out
- You don't have to worry about it, some clever grown-ups are helping us.

” Sometimes when I'm sad inside ugly words come out of my mouth.”

- Girl, 11

” It was when my mum went to hospital and the grown-ups didn't tell me that I kicked the door and made a hole in it.”

- Boy, 7





How another significant adult in your child's life can support them

It gives the child great comfort and support when one or several people know about the child's situation. Adults who understand if your child reacts outwardly/aggressively and who can provide extra support for your child.

Teachers and nursery staff are skilled in caring for children. Your child coping well in everyday life away from home is also linked to your family's total life situation.

Talk to teachers and key contacts about what is best specifically for your child. They can, in agreement with you, talk to the class about mental health issues. Also, without it being about your family. That way everyone in the class will have more knowledge and understanding about mental illness. And maybe your child will want to tell their closest friends later. Psykiatrifonden has made a 'Talk about it in class' film ('Snak om det i klassen'). You can watch it here: www.psykiatrifonden.dk/snakomdet.

If your child needs longer-term support, you can also address this with teachers or staff at your childcare provider or school. They can help in relation to school life. If you need support at home, you can contact a social worker at your council to hear what options there are.

Professionals around your child are responsible for their welfare. If there is a concern for a child, they have a duty to respond in the best interests of the child. Teachers and childcare providers will cooperate with the family and PPR ('Pædagogisk Psykologisk Rådgivning') about initiating steps to improve the well-being of your child. Sometimes that will not be enough. When that is the case, you can ask for extra support by making a referral.

Why do a childcare or teaching professional need to make a referral when there is a worry about a child?

A referral is a tool to ask for help at your council. Then you can have the help and support needed, when a parent is ill and where there are concerns about a child.

Many parents are concerned about what impact it will have when the council knows about your mental illness. What will it mean for the whole family? Some might be afraid their children will be placed outside the home. But local authorities work by the principle that a child fundamentally is better off staying in their home. The council will therefore from the outset prioritize offering support over the option of removing the child.

” It is not mental illness, you know, if I have been bruised and I am crying and sad.” –Girl, 8

Support at your council:

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