



# Invisible Children's Project

## Helping Children Cope with the Stress of Having a Parent with a Mental Health Problem

Children are often confused, embarrassed, ashamed, guilty or scared when their parent or caregiver has a mental health problem. Children may think it's their fault that their parent is having problems or acting in unusual ways. They may wonder if their parent still loves them and what will happen to the family.

**Here are some tips to help children:**

- 1. Let children know that what is happening with their parent / caregiver is not their fault.**

Example of what to say: *Sometimes people's minds get confused and mixed up. This makes your mom/dad not feel well – they may cry a lot or be angry or irritable. It may seem that they do not love you. They are feeling too overwhelmed and distracted to show you how much they love you right now.*

- 2. Help children talk about their feelings.**

Listen and reflect, give them your full attention, and ask questions when you do not understand. Avoid being judgmental or assuming you know how they feel. Explain that feelings are OK and everyone has feelings. Let each child know that feelings can be expressed in healthy and productive ways.

Example of what to say: *You are stomping and yelling. Draw me a picture of your feelings. I'm here to listen and talk about all the feelings you have inside.*

- 3. Help children understand their parent's mental health problem.**

Use age appropriate language and explanations. Find books to help the child talk about what is going on in the family.

Example of what to say to a young child: *Remember when your throat was really sore and your ears hurt? You cried a lot and did not want to play with your toys or friends. Right now your mommy does not feel well. That's why she is crying and sad. She still loves you, she just can't tell you right now.*

- 4. Help children identify other caring adults that they can go to for emotional support and care.**

For children who can read, you can make a list of names, phone numbers and email addresses of support people they can call or contact. Find a counselor skilled in working with children if you feel the child needs some extra help in coping.

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Example of what to say: *You can talk to me and the people on your list when you need help. I know you are missing your dad and he cannot help you right now.*

**5. Help children feel safe and secure by keeping a consistent routine.**

Make sure they know what to do and who to call if they do not feel safe. Prepare them for what to do in an emergency. Teach coping skills to help them deal with their feelings.

Example of what to say: *Here is a list of people to call when your mom is not able to fix you supper. They will be glad to make sure you have a good meal so you sleep well and do well in school. Your mom loves you and she is too ill to do this right now.*

**6. Help children gain skills to deal with teasing.**

Teach them to explain their parent's illness to others. Practice how to respond to hurtful comments. Help them tell others that their parent/caregiver is not acting this way on purpose.

Example of what to say: *My dad has an illness that makes it hard to feel happy. He sees a doctor who helps him find ways to feel better. I would not make fun of your mom if she were sick. Please do not make fun of me. It is hard enough with my dad sick.*

**7. Find outside activities to provide a creative outlet.**

Activities such as art, music, dance, sports, and clubs help children gain social skills and engage in life in fun and creative ways. Fun activities teach children that it is OK to do enjoyable things and not be consumed with thinking about their parent/caregiver.

Example of what to say: *Today the chess club is meeting. I know you are very good at chess. Let's go to see who is there and let you show them what a great chess player you are.*

**Resources**

**Books**

- I'm Not Alone: A Teen's Guide to Living with a Parent Who Has a Mental Illness. Available at ([www.seedsofhopebooks.com](http://www.seedsofhopebooks.com))
- Sad Days, Glad Days: A Story about Depression, by DeWitt Hamilton
- Sometimes My Mommy Gets Angry by Bebe Moore Campbell
- Wish Upon a Star: A Story for Children With a Parent Who Is Mentally Ill by Pamela L. Laskin & Addie Alexander Moskowitz
- Why Are You So Sad?: A Child's Book About Parental Depression by Beth Andrews

**Workbook**

Wishing Wellness: A Workbook for Children of Parents with Mental Illness by Lisa Anne Clark

**Movie**

*Canvas* focuses on one family's struggle with schizophrenia. (PG-13, for mature audience)