

## Parenting and mental illness: the school years

*Bringing up children can be tough at the best of times. When a parent has a mental illness it's even more of a challenge. What are the problems that they face? And what do parents with a mental illness say would help support them in their role and make a difference to their families?*

Parents living with a mental illness want to do their best for their children. The challenges faced by all parents are made more stressful, however, by the effects of mental illness, and by lack of sufficient understanding and support in the community.

A previous SANE survey investigated parenting in the early years, when the child is an infant (*Research Bulletin 13*). This new study asks about the experience of being a parent with a mental illness when the child is of school-age. It asks about what support has been available to parents, and what assistance they would like for themselves and their family. This is especially important, as having a parent with a mental illness is a recognised risk factor for the child to develop mental health problems later in life, such as depression and anxiety disorders.

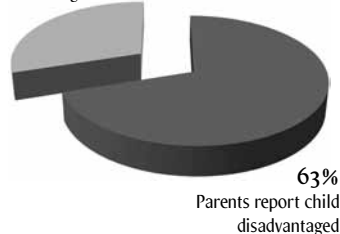
The survey was conducted in May 2012 in partnership with COPMI, the national initiative for Children of Parents with a Mental Illness.

The convenience sample of 331 people completed an anonymous online questionnaire. Most respondents were female (84%). Around half (54%) lived in urban areas, and 45% in rural and remote areas. The most common diagnoses reported were depression (50%), bipolar disorder (23%), anxiety disorders (15%) and schizophrenia (3%).

Around a quarter of respondents (24%) had one child only, and the ages of all children were between five and 15. Approximately one-third of responses (36%) were from sole parents.

### What is the impact of mental illness on being a parent?

37%  
Parents report child not disadvantaged



Almost two-thirds (63%) report that their child had been 'disadvantaged' by having a parent with a mental illness. For example, many indicate that their child's education (32%) and ability to attend out-of-school activities (48%) have been disrupted. Over three-quarters (87%) report difficulty in communicating effectively with their child. It is also disturbing that over three-quarters report feeling embarrassed or ashamed at the idea of needing to ask for help.

### What are the main concerns of parents with a mental illness?

50%  
Fear losing custody of child



All parents have a natural worry about what would happen to their child if they became unwell. This concern is especially acute when the parent has a mental illness, and if they need to spend time as an in-patient in hospital.

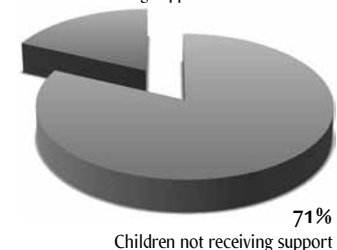
Half of all parents surveyed report they live in fear of losing custody of their child because of the mental illness. Many (40%) report that they had not sought help for their mental illness on occasions because of this fear. An even greater proportion (64%) indicate they would resist

going to hospital because of concern for their child. Despite these concerns, a majority (62%) report that mental health professionals had not adequately considered the needs of their family when developing a treatment plan. Nearly half (45%) report that they do not have a care plan in place for their child for when they become unwell or have to go into hospital.

Only around a third (31%) had disclosed their illness to their child's school. Of these, half found the disclosure unhelpful, leading to stigmatisation by other parents and, in some cases, bullying of their child.

### What support is available for parents with a mental illness?

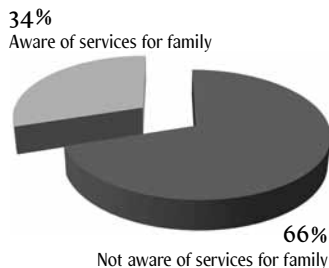
29%  
Children receiving support



Almost three-quarters of respondents (71%) report that their child lacks the support they needed. Of those who had found support such as COPMI programs, 43% had been referred by a health professional, and 40% had located it themselves via an Internet search.

While many turn to family and friends when ill, around one in six (13%) report they have no one to call on for support. A higher proportion (19%) also report that their child had no other trusted person to talk to about their parent's mental health.

## What helps parents with a mental illness?



Almost all respondents express a need for help with support, training in skills for parenting with a mental illness, and better understanding by staff in schools and health services.

Two-thirds of parents (66%) are unaware that specialist services exist specifically for young people in families affected by mental illness. COPMI lists over 80 of these programs for children and families in Australia. However, they are unevenly distributed and inconsistently designed. Even where they exist, the information does not always reach those who need it.

## In summary

- Parenting a school-age child is especially challenging when someone has a mental illness. Many parents report disruption to their child's school and home life.
- Parents living with a mental illness care deeply about how this may affect their child, but report inadequate understanding from health professionals and school staff.
- Parents living with a mental illness rely primarily on family and friends for support, where this is available. The majority report that their child lacks access to the information and support needed to better cope with the situation.
- Parents living with a mental illness express a strong need for support for themselves and their child, including guidance on better communication with their child, and better understanding and support from health and education professionals.

## Recommendations

### 1 PROMOTION OF SUPPORT SERVICES

*The majority of parents with a mental illness are unaware of specialist support services for their children. It is recommended that promotion of these services be expanded through appropriate health and educational networks to improve awareness and access.*

### 2 BETTER ACCESS TO SUPPORT SERVICES

*The Australian government has supported a national initiative for children of parents with a mental illness. To build on this, however, it is recommended that all tiers of government work together to ensure sufficient on-the-ground programs are funded where they are needed, and that consistent service standards are applied.*

### 3 EDUCATION FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

*Many parents feel health professionals do not understand the extra challenges faced by people living with a mental illness who have children.*

*It is recommended that education and training for health professionals are expanded so that acknowledgment, support and referral to specialist services become part of routine care.*

### 4 GREATER USE OF CARE PLANS

*Nearly half of parents living with a mental illness do not have a plan in place regarding their children, for when they become unwell or need to go into hospital. This is a cause for ongoing anxiety and stress, as well as leading to problems when they are in crisis.*

*It is recommended that health professionals work with parents to prepare a plan for care of children as a part of routine clinical care.*

### 5 POSITIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

*Many parents living with a mental illness find that disclosing their condition to the school is unhelpful, and even leads to stigmatising attitudes.*

*It is recommended that schools review policies and practices to help families where a parent has a mental illness, so that they feel welcome at the school, and that it is a place where support for issues concerning their children can be found.*

## SANE Australia

A national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness – through campaigning, education and research.

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