



[www.parentalmentalillness.org](http://www.parentalmentalillness.org)

## **Parent Support Needs Tip Sheet For Service Providers**

### **Facts about Parents with Mental Illness and their Families**

- ✓ Parents with mental illness parent at the same rate as the general population.
- ✓ Their children are at greater risk for developing mental health problems.
- ✓ Parent's illness may cloud their ability to see that it can affect their parenting.
- ✓ Their parenting capacity may be diminished which impacts their child's mental health and emotional development (in severe or mild disorders alike).
- ✓ These parents want to be good parents but stigma and fear of losing their children may prevent many from seeking help they need.
- ✓ Parent's illness may affect their ability to provide basic care and can result in repeated parent/child separations (e.g., hospitalization) and family instability.
- ✓ Effective early intervention improves outcomes for children and parents.

Succeeding at parenting is as important to parents with mental health issues as it is to anyone else. A basic principle of parenting is that people will often do for their kids what they might not for themselves. If their parental concerns for their children are sensitively discussed, typically parents will have greater motivation for treatment adherence because of the positive effects for their children. Like most parents they are anxious to do and be seen to be doing a competent job as parents.

With support, parents with mental illness can parent effectively.

**Best practices for supporting parents include services\* that:**

- ✓ honour the parent as a good parent at times when they are unable to parent well
- ✓ address the needs of children for ongoing care, consistency and predictability
- ✓ help children have a voice about their parent's mental illness and provide a mechanism that maintains connection and support
- ✓ help parent understand the impact his or her mental illness may have on their child
- ✓ empower parent and enable them to have their wishes, concerns and intentions be clearly known before they may be feeling out of control with their illness
- ✓ allow parent to minimize disruption for the child by communicating about their child's particular needs

## Support Needs for Parents with Mental Health Issues

- Demonstrated interest about their family life, social network, recovery motivators, strengths and possible stressors. Expressed interest in the “whole person” fosters the ability to manage illness.
- Positive attitudes from all supports. Mental health is a health problem like any other. Service providers can help to de-stigmatize the parent’s and their families’ perspectives. The analogy to diabetes is often helpful.
- Openness to discussing positive parenting and strategies. Parents with mental illness are prone to interpret their difficulties in managing the stresses of everyday life as illness-related personal deficits.
- Help assessing their parenting strengths, needs and goals, including clarifying their parental role and setting realistic expectations for their children; distinguishing the normal stress of parenting role from symptoms of their illness; differentiating normal development in children from early signs of a mental health problem; improving parent-child communication/bond; and building their set of child management skills.
- Resources\*\* that give parents the knowledge and tools to build their capacity as parents help them feel greater control over their lives. Such empowerment is paramount to the recovery process.
- Effective early intervention that improves outcomes for children and parents by increasing family stability, strengthening parenting ability, reducing parent-child stressors, mitigating risks & future child exposure to negative manifestations of parent’s illness and enhancing healthy relationships/resiliency.
- Encouragement to use informal supports and build their support network. Ask parent to invite others such as their partner, spouse, or close friend to appointments. A support team that includes partners, other family members, close friends and professionals is helpful.
- Help with meeting practical needs. Services providers can often assist parents to access other community resources that provide income support (education/employment), subsidized housing, transportation/recreational expenses, advocacy and childcare.
- Assistance with psycho-education\*\*\* for the entire family. Sensitive and thorough psycho-education often fosters dialogue in the whole family unit about how to preventively deal with relapse and increase the family’s capacity to cope. All family members usually benefit from the development of stress management techniques.
- Encouragement to prevent or address social isolation. Referrals to parenting resources such as play groups and peer support/mentoring can also help build parenting capacity.

Services that are family-centered and strength-based have proven to be the most effective in providing needed support to these families.

\*See “Ulysses Agreement Tip Sheet”: [www.parentalmentalillness.org](http://www.parentalmentalillness.org)

\*\*See “Parenting Well Through Depression”: [www.parentingwell.org](http://www.parentingwell.org)

\*\*\*See “Family Toolkit”: [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)