

# Parents with Mental Illness

## Parents with mental illness should have access to:

- The Same rights as any parent
- Understanding and non-judgmental clinicians who are fully informed on how to access support services.
- Mental health services that include planning for families' needs, family counseling, ongoing care and continuity with a supportive mental health worker.
- Assistance while they are well to plan for the care of their children if illness makes them unable to parent.
- Visits in hospital by their children in a positive setting where a child space and toys are provided.
- Lawyers they can trust, practical support to access legal advice and assistance if parental ability is questioned.
- Someone to talk to. Peer support groups are ideal.
- Assessment that looks at their strengths rather than scrutiny of their parenting ability.
- Assistance to link with and coordinate help with broader needs such as housing, health, training and employment.
- Peer support groups for their children.
- Planned respite facilities that provide for children to visit or stay.
- People who believe in their ability to parent effectively.



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## Positive Parenting:

### Children need to feel:

#### Safe and secure

Children need to feel safe and secure so they can learn to trust others. If they don't feel safe and secure they can become anxious and unhappy.

#### Loved

Show your children plenty of physical affection. Play with them, cuddle them, pick them up and tell them you love them regularly.

#### Praised

When a child does something good praise them. Tell them how well they have done. Focus on the positive. Praising your children will encourage good behaviour.

#### That you give them attention

Smile at your children. Talk to them lots. Play with them and make time for them. Going out with your children does not have to cost a lot of money. Take them to the beach, park or for a picnic. Include them in decision making about what you will do together.

#### Respected

Try not to tell your children they are being silly or bad. Respect that they have feelings and encourage them to share their emotions with you. Reassure your children that it is OK to feel scared, sad or angry. If you show them that they are respected they are more likely to grow up respecting others.

#### Encouraged to learn

Encourage your children to see learning as fun. Teach them that the world is an exciting place full of new challenges and experiences. Expose your children to other people and other children



to play with. Read and sing with your children. This will all help them to grow their vocabulary and their understanding of the world around them.

### Comfortable in a routine

Children thrive when they have a set routine to follow. Be consistent with what is expected of them each day. Stick to the same meals times, and bed times. Set out clearly what the boundaries of the home are. Explain why you need boundaries and reward children when they behave within the boundaries. A reward can be as simple as a smile and a hug, accompanied by words of praise.

## Dealing with difficult behaviour:

- Don't shout, smack or threaten. Calmly tell your children what behaviour is acceptable. Shouting, smacking and threatening can damage your child emotionally and physically.
- Smacking is a short-term solution and will not teach your children correct behaviour. There are positive alternatives and these are a better way to encourage change, e.g. take away TV privileges or a favourite toy.
- Use TIME OUT
- It is effective because it gives both parent and child a chance to cool down. Put the child somewhere safe on their own. Tell them how long they will be in Time Out (e.g. 2 minutes) and stick to it. Tell them why you have put them in Time Out and why their behaviour was unacceptable. When they have come out of Time Out direct them towards another activity and praise them for behaving well.
- Do not buy into the guilt of "if only I was a better parent..." "If only I didn't have a mental illness he / she would not be like this."

# Parents with Mental Illness

## Helping children understand mental illness

Talking to your children about mental illness is the same as talking about any other serious illness.

Mental illness is complicated to understand, even for adults. There are many types of different illnesses and no easy way to explain them. But if you have a mental illness, discussing it with your children may be the most important thing you do. When someone has a mental illness it affects the whole family, including the children.

### Who should tell the children?

You have two options. Either tell them yourself, or a trusted close friend, relative or health professional could tell them. You may find it easier if you get someone else to talk to them first.

### When should I tell the children?

It may be easier to tell children about your mental illness when you are well. Prepare them with the fact you may become unwell at times. Emphasise that your illness is not their fault.

### If you need to go into hospital

If you are likely to require hospitalisation, reassure children that they will be looked after while you are away. Take the time to sit with them to complete the "Kids Plan" for these times.

If you are in hospital for a long period, your children may feel that you do not want to be home with them. Staying in touch will help reassure them that your illness has nothing to do with how much you love them.

### How should I tell the children?

It may be a good idea to speak to your children individually. The way you speak to them will depend on their ages.

You may want to practice what you will say and anticipate some of your children's questions.

Children are naturally curious, so expect and welcome questions from them. Answer as honestly as you can and if they ask something you are unsure about tell them you are not sure and that you will find out for them.

### Some ways to say things

#### "I have an illness called..."

Sometimes it will make me feel very sad / tired / confused. I might want to sleep / cry a lot. I still love you lots and I still want to take care of you but sometimes it might be hard for me."

#### "I have an illness called..."

The Doctor has given me some medicine to help me feel better. Sometimes I might have to go to hospital to get looked after but Dad / Grandma / Auntie will take care of you when I am away."

#### "Remember when you had a really sore tummy and didn't feel very well?"

My illness is making me feel sick and I need to go to hospital to get well."

#### "It is not your fault that I have this illness."

Nothing you said or did made me sick. Your love and support will help me get better though."

### Language

Mental illnesses are described in a variety of ways. It is helpful to use the correct terms and descriptions when explaining your illness to your children, in the same way it has been explained to you.

Children may be exposed to discriminatory slang such as crazy, psycho, loony, nuts. It is important to discuss with your children that these words can be hurtful. They need to understand that there are other ways of talking about mental illness that do not hurt people.



You are welcome to copy and distribute this fact sheet.

This fact sheet was produced by: Kites P O Box 9392, Marion Square, Wellington with funding from the High and Complex Needs Unit, a joint strategy of the Ministries of Health and Education and the Department of Child, Youth and Family Service.

# Parents with Mental Illness

## Information for workers

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. Ask your clients if they are parents.
2. Case managers should do an audit of those they support to identify those who are parents.
3. Seek opportunities to enhance the parent-child relationship for non-custodial parents. If the child is not seeing the non-custodial parent, find out why. Is it in the child's best interests?
4. Ask parents if they have any concerns or difficulties regarding their parenting role and if they would like any assistance in this area. (See Fact Sheet Five: 'Where to get parenting help'.)
5. Identify any unmet needs with the parent (services they require but they have not received).
6. Work with parents to identify what services they are using and make links with those services.
7. Find out what services are available in your area for parenting support.
8. Identify opportunities for networking with other services.
9. Work with others to find ways of meeting unmet needs. This might involve developing new services or exploring new ways of delivering current services.
10. Establish and maintain collaborative relationships with other services. Work together to fill in the gaps.
11. Make contact with your local Strengthening Families Coordinator to see if their process is right for this family.
12. Ask for the parents consent for you to negotiate with other services on their behalf (when appropriate).
13. Ask parents about the supports they already have: friends, family etc. The input of a parents support network can be very important in forming a successful collaborative framework.
14. Can your service be more user friendly for parents with a mental illness (e.g. child-friendly waiting areas, home visits?)
15. If the parent is not the primary caregiver of the children, information about where their children are and who is caring for them is important for parents and workers to know so that connections can be maintained.
16. If the parent is the primary caregiver for the children, ask them if they have a plan for the care of their children in the event they become unwell and need to go to the hospital. If they don't have a plan provide them with the Kids Plan.
17. Are there any consumer-run support, advocacy and information services in your area? Peer support can be vital to the recovery.

Useful Website:  
[www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au)



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# Parents with Mental Illness

## Where to get parenting help

Parenting poses many different types of challenges. But practical help or advice is available, and although it can be difficult sometimes to ask for help, one or more of the agencies listed below could be useful if you want support.

The contacts provided are for Wellington, but they would be able to provide you with the correct contact number for the office nearest you.

### **Barnados KidStart**

Home-based care where caregivers provide care in their own homes. Locally based, flexible hours and useful for working parents or those needing relief care. Babies to school age.

Barnados New Zealand National Office  
85-87 Ghuznee St, PO Box 6434, Wellington  
**Tel: 04 385 7560 or 0800 543 782**

### **Birthright NZ**

Birthright is a national organisation which works to support, strengthen and advocate for One Parent Families.

5<sup>th</sup> floor, 75 Ghuznee St, PO Box 706, Wellington  
**Tel: 04 384-7966**

### **Challenge 2000**

Professional community, social work and youth development agency. Includes holiday programmes, child and family services, counseling, advocacy and crisis intervention.

27 Dr Taylor Tce, Johnsonville, Wellington  
**Tel: 04 477-6827**

### **Child Adolescent and Family Service**

Assists where a child is having emotional, behavioural or psychological problems. Children 0 to 20 years will be seen.

21 Hania St, Mt Victoria, Wellington  
**Tel: 04 801 2960**  
**Intake worker Tel: 04 237 2860**

### **Child Youth and Family Services Department**

Provides adoption, care and protection and youth justice services. Receives and investigates reports of child abuse.

All Enquires  
**Tel: 0508-326-459**

### **Citizens Advice Bureau**

Provides free, impartial and confidential advice on all matters including information, personal problems and budgeting advice.

Central City Wellington, Wellington City Library  
PO Box 1992, Wellington  
**Tel: 04 472-2466**

### **Department of Work and Income**

Provides benefits and pensions to families and children.

**Tel: 0800 559 009**

### **Early Intervention Service**

Early Intervention works in partnership with parents and families who are concerned about a child's development.

Pipitea House, Thorndon Quay  
PO Box 1729, Wellington  
**Tel: 04 494 9161**

### **Mothers Network Wellington**

Structured 8-week discussion groups set in local neighbourhoods for mothers and babies. There are also groups for single mothers and preschool mothers.

PO Box 9600, Te Aro, Wellington

**Tel: 04 499 2844**

### **Open Home Foundation**

Christian Child and Family Support service providing support for families under stress or in crisis. Respite, short-term and long-term solutions for children and young people from birth upwards.

Suite 1, 31-35 Railway Ave, Lower Hutt  
**Tel: 04 566 3990**

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**Parents Centre NZ Inc**

Educates parents, holds antenatal and early childhood classes and provides postnatal support and information for members.

PO Box 54128, Mana, Wellington

**Tel: 04 233-2022**

**Parent Help**

Offers 24-hour telephone support line.

Face to face counseling for individuals and families.

Parenting programmes and/or individual parenting skills sessions. Anger change groups for women.

1st Floor, Peoples Centre

2 Lukes Lane, Wellington

**Help Line: 04 499 9994**

**Plunket**

A free service to assist families with growth and development advice for children under five. Home visits, coffee mornings and playgroups. In most suburbs.

Plunket National Office

Level 5 Payroll House, 126-132 Lambton Quay

PO Box 5474, Wellington

**Tel: 04 471 0177**

**Plunketline: 0800 933 922**

**Post and Antenatal Distress Support Group**

Support and information on PND to women/partners.

Therapy-based support groups, telephone support, lending library, newsletter and resources.

PO Box 36-035, Moera, Lower Hutt

Support Line

**Tel: 04 472-3135**

**Presbyterian Support**

Offers family counseling, social work, parent education and support for families in their own environment.

Presbyterian Support Central

264 Cuba St, PO Box 6862, Wellington

**Tel: 04 801 6912**

**Salvation Army Community and Family Services**

Emergency housing, food bank, counseling service, Community care of the elderly, practical assistance.

26 Riddiford St, Newtown, Wellington

**Tel: 04 389 0594**

**Parent to Parent**

Empower parents, caregivers and Whanau of children with disabilities, health impairments or special needs, through peer support and provision of information. Parents will feel supported and informed as a result of their contact with Parent to Parent. It will be provided at no cost to families and will be confidential.

9 Bough Street, Seaview, Lower Hutt

**Tel: 04 569 9398**

**Atareira**

Support for families and friends where somebody has a mental illness.

Level Two, 163 Thorndon Quay

PO Box 355, Wellington

**Tel: 04 499 1049**

**skylight**

New Zealand agency supporting children and young people who are facing change, loss and grief. It also supports those caring for them such as families, friends and professionals.

2nd floor, National Bank Building

143-145 Riddiford St, Newtown

PO Box 7309, Wellington

**Tel: 04 939 6759 or 0800 299 100**

**Strengthening Families**

Gives power to families to decide the key problems and who will work with them.

PO Box 2199, Wellington

**Tel: 04 801 3443**

**Wellington City Mission**

Mission for families, providing budgeting support and social workers in client's homes.

St Thomas Mission Centre, 200 Riddiford St, Newtown, Wellington

**Tel: 04 389 2033**

**Wellington Mental Health Consumers Union (WMHCU)**

Represents the experiences, needs and ambitions of mental health consumers and tangata whaiora in ways that enable them to determine their own lives.

1st floor, 41-47 Dixon St, PO Box 6228, Marion Square, Wellington

**Tel: 04 801 7769**

**YWCA Mothers Alone**

Support for women parenting alone or facing pregnancy alone. Individual assistance, plus group activities and education.

YWCA, PO Box 9563, Wellington

**Tel: 04 385 0505**

**Vakaola**

(meaning boat or canoe of life)

Supports people with experience of mental illness in the community in conjunction with mental health teams, families and other health providers.

Welsey Church, 75 Taranaki Street, Wellington

**Tel: 04 384 3432**

Useful Website:

[www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au)