



Part 5

Parental Mental Distress





Toughest job in the world!



WE CREATED A FAKE JOB





Parental mental distress

Whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing report:

- 'There needs to be more support for parental mental health.'
- 'We would like to see support services extended to the whole family.'
- 'We can handle children's mental health in school. It is when there is a problem outside of school that we struggle.'

Do you agree?





Parental mental distress

- Most illnesses don't have society making you feel guilty about raising a child while sick. Mental health conditions, though, make the guilt huge – it's as if others think you have a choice in it.”
- Many parents who experience mental health problems are excellent parents.
- Many children whose parents or carers have mental health problems go on to achieve their full potential in life, particularly if their parents receive the right support at the right time ([Hogg, 2013](#)).





Signs that a child might be struggling because their parent is unwell

- Withdrawing into themselves and becoming anxious or frustrated.
- Sudden changes in concentration or educational performance.
- Changes in attendance patterns (linked to fear of leaving an unwell parent), school refusal, being late.
- Other behaviour changes – particularly longer-term challenging behaviour.
- A change in how organised and ready for school they are.
- Physical health problems.
- Frequent, unexplained angry outbursts.
- Tiredness (often due to nightmares or anxiety).





Why should we know about it?

- Approximately 50-66% of adults with a severe and enduring mental illness live with one or more of their children under the age of 18.
- Parents with mental health problems may struggle to manage their parenting role
- If a parent is admitted to hospital, it can affect their children's stability
- Putting their children's needs first may mean that parents avoid hospital stays or stop taking medication due to side effects. However, this can negatively impact on the parent's mental health.
- Research has shown that children of parents with a severe and enduring mental illness experience greater levels of emotional, psychological and behavioural problems.
- Children may become young carers of their parents. Approximately 175,000 young carers are caring for a parent or other family member with a mental health problem.





ACEs



Abuse



Physical abuse



Sexual abuse



Verbal abuse

Neglect



Emotional neglect



Physical neglect

Growing up in a household where:



There are adults with alcohol and drug problems



There are adults with mental health problems



There is domestic violence



There are adults who have spent time in prison



Parents have separated

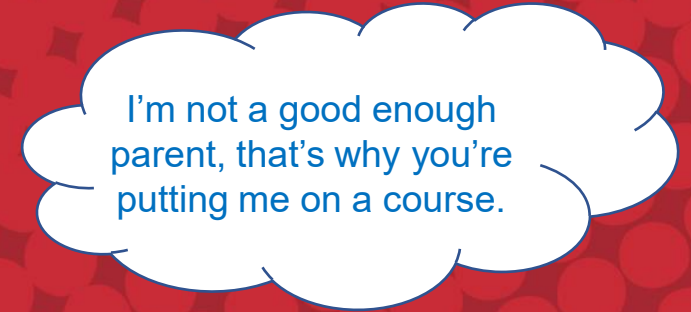
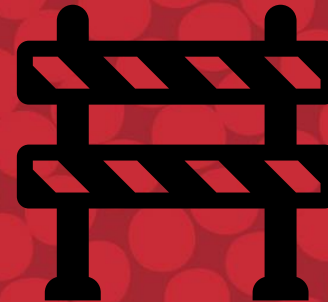


Cycle

The children of those affected by ACEs are at increased risk of exposing their own children to ACEs. This is often referred to as the 'cycle of violence'. Consequently, preventing ACEs in a single generation or reducing their impact on children can benefit not only those individuals but also future generations.



What are the barriers to parents?





Barriers

Common school-based issues or children whose parents have a mental illness...



Children are more likely to have issues with attachment due to parent struggling to maintain relationship



Parents struggle to cope with day to day routines which could result in lateness, failure to bring equipment; the child's general hygiene may be poor.



Children may experience stigma from peers or other parents around their parents' illness.



Children are more at risk to substance and alcohol abuse



Children may blame themselves for their parents' difficulties and experience anger, guilt or worry.



Assemblies, group parents meetings and even the school playground could provoke anxiety in some parents.



Children may not have their emotional needs met if parents are consumed by their own emotional needs.



Children may struggle to maintain friendships as they may feel different from other children and due to caring responsibilities they may not play outside of school.



Children whose parents have mental illness are more likely to develop one themselves.



Parents evenings could be challenging for parents with anxiety or neurodevelopmental disorders so parents may avoid these.



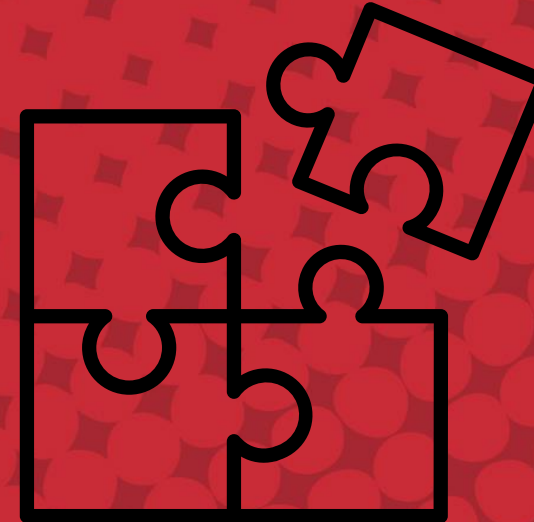


How to overcome!

Coffee Morning

Why would I go to school for a coffee?

Inform parents



Give needed school information every term

Termly updates





What are primary schools already doing to address this?



- Offering support for parents of children who are receiving counselling.
- Involving parents in the school - maths workshops, ESOL classes, bring your parent to school day.
- Coffee mornings with a mental health professional present (key worker/IAG worker).
- Open communications
- Effective signposting





How else can schools can help?

- Ask children open questions.
- Tackle the stigma attached to mental health so children don't feel embarrassed to talk.
- Talk to parents/carers if you are concerned. You can phrase this as noticing a change in their child and this may encourage them to open up.
- Focus on family strengths, rather than problems.
- Include information about mental health support services as part of your newsletter, so that parents don't feel singled out.
- Youth Connect 5 *understanding that parents are the experts!*





R

Recognise the signs and symptoms

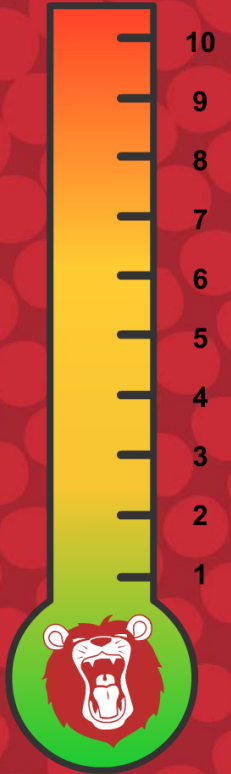
- Some of these signs may be similar to the signs of anxiety, as the child may be preoccupied with worrying about their parent(s).
- Look out for signs a child is a young carer:
 - Having no time for extra-curricular activities or homework,
 - Appearing to have a lot of adult responsibilities at home (a child who is caring for a parent may not identify as a young carer).
- Children also might be struggling with peer relationships, or appear unkempt.
- Their attendance and punctuality may be fluctuating; they may be displaying disruptive behaviour.
- Parents may be unreliable in their attendance of appointments and likely to avoid coming into school if they can. They may over-react to concerns you have and seem to blow things up out of proportion.
- They may take things to the extreme such as beliefs and concerns about the world. They may feel that the school is against them. You may also see the child taking on some of these beliefs.





Ask **Open** questions
(try to spot the BIG thought)

- Look underneath the iceberg, is something going on at home, or to the parent/carer, that may be affecting their behaviour or the child's.
- It's best to ask parents open questions when they are not feeling particularly distressed. It's important to keep these questions based around their thoughts on their child and the school rather than other factors around their mental health – you are not their therapist.
- If a parent appears distressed, express empathy by acknowledging how they feel, i.e. 'I can see you're feeling upset, would you like to come and sit down for a moment?'. Try to create a calm environment for the parent to be in.





A

Access Support, Services & Self-care

- Parents may be reluctant to talk about mental health problems for fear of being judged. Having an open-door policy, and letting parents know there is a familiar person in the school they can talk to, may help parents to feel more comfortable.
- When helping parents to access support, be aware of any barriers that the parents might face. For example, consider if a parent might need support completing a self-referral form
- Send support services numbers in emails or newsletters so it reaches all parents/carers.



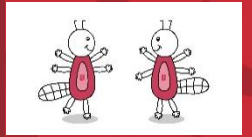


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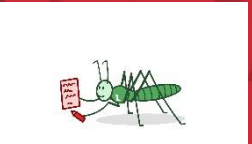
Build Resilience



Basic - consider whether a parent has access to all the support they are entitled to. Check the child is eating proper meals in the evening, as they may be having to prepare food themselves.



Belonging – joining a mindfulness or relaxation group can have a positive impact on a parent's sense of belonging. Encourage the child to get involved in fun activities during lunchtimes. There are also parenting courses such as YC5 and Incredible Years that can offer support and friendship to parents, whilst also giving them valuable parenting skills.



Learning – involve the parent in their child's learning. Stay and Play/Stay and Read groups have become increasingly popular, as have Maths and English workshops, which help the parents to become more familiar with their child's curriculum.



Coping – support parents in accessing outside support, and reassure them that this is a positive step – it is not a weakness to ask for help. This is an important message to for the child who will probably be reluctant to ask for help themselves.



Core Self – instil hope. Remind parents that they have taken a brave step in accessing help and that they are now working towards things getting better. Encourage the child in their role as a carer, but also help them to recognise their other talents and celebrate those.