

Handout 1: Key aspects to communicating with children about parental mental illness and addiction

Children are especially tuned to the moods and behaviour of their parent(s) (safety mechanism). If the topic is avoided, a child may draw correlations between what they have done and their parents' behaviour (blaming self).

Benefits of talking with children:

- Being listened to, and taken seriously, helps them to deal with difficult situations
- Clarify misconceptions and reduce anger and guilt about what has happened.
- Lessens the risk of any anger and mistrust a child might feel if left to discover on their own the ways, that their family life differs from their friends' during episodes of illness.
- Lessens some of the vulnerability, sensitivity, confusion and surprise a child might feel when confronted with negative comments from others about their parent(s).

Engagement is the key, some suggestions include:

1. The child is the expert: Be the student rather than the teacher, become the 'naïve' enquirer.
2. Be aware of cultural differences (ethnic and social) Counseling 101: 'how come' 'I wonder' rather than 'Why!'; open ended questions 'tell me about'; Encourage children to ask questions. Let them know you think questions are good, even if there aren't always answers.
4. Understand the child's experience with mental illnesses.
5. Priorities: Identifying the children's concerns and priorities - do not assume base on yours or parents perspectives - let them take the lead
6. Be patient: Children, like adults, get angry when something unfair happens to them. It is important to remember, though, that if a child does not want to talk to you, you should not force them. Just let them know that you are there for them and ready to listen if they do want to talk.

7. Support parent - child interaction
8. Don't let children down: be reliable, honest and accountable. If a child asks you a question you don't know how to answer, be honest and tell them you don't know, but you will try to find out. Being honest and reliable with children helps them trust you.
9. Learning: Assist in developing the capacity to articulate feelings, fears, concerns and aroha. A child needs to express their emotions (even difficult ones) in order to better understand and learn from them.
10. Get creative in reducing tension: Don't just talk or use forms (tick boxes / checklists). Humor, art and recreation can help to make the whole communication seem positive.
11. Understanding the child's developmental stage (ability to understand and articulate feelings and concerns). Use language and explanations that are appropriate to each child's age and intelligence, using examples that are familiar to them.
12. Gauge the right time and place: Children who have lived in very stressful situations are often tense and watchful in order to detect early signs of trouble or danger. Also, be aware of adverse events affecting children's responses, and be sensitive to children's plans / schedules. Have the discussion when the child feels safe and comfortable, and watch their child's reaction during the discussion, slow down or back up if the child becomes confused or looks upset
14. Parent(s) may have said or done strange things when he or she was ill. Reinforce that these things were related to the illness-not to anything the child did.

Based on 'Coping you are not alone' Helping children understand mental illness: A resource for Parents and Guardians. The Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania. Online: <http://www.mhasp.org/coping/guardians.html>

Handout 2: Strategies for exploring feelings and experiences

- Create an atmosphere that encourages children to talk about their feelings and experiences.
- Talk about your own feelings (model).
- Take advantage of moments that lend themselves to a discussion of feelings and experiences, e.g., when watching a television show or movie about a parent or character who becomes separated, unwell or disabled.
- Utilize stories, pictures and activities (i.e., drawing) to allow children to express their feelings and experiences.
- Give them your full attention, i.e., body language, praise and use of minimal responders.
- Check out what you are hearing in their words or interpreting from their behavior (clarify).
- Explain that feelings are neither right nor wrong. It's okay and natural for them to have the feelings they're having. Explain that feelings do not have to control what we do. Give examples such as *"It's OK that you're angry at your Father and I, but the way you're acting toward us now is not OK"*

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Handout 3: Exploring mental illness with children

Discussing mental illness with children can be awkward and difficult on many levels. Often we do not understand it; our explanations may increase fear and confusion, and children are at different cognitive and emotional levels (ability to both understand and process/manage);

Some basic first steps include:

- Start with yourself. What are your attitudes and knowledge about the illness? What are the parents? The more you both know, the better you'll both be able to answer their questions matter-of-factly.
- Find out how the child explains their parent's behavior. It can be less threatening to start by asking children why they think their mom/dad sometimes acts "different" or "sad," then use their comments or questions as an opening to talk more about mental illness.
- Build on what the child says: Acknowledge any truth in what they say; Respectfully correct anything that is based on wrong information or fantasy. For example, "Daddy isn't acting this way because of anything you or I have done."
- It is recommended to use the name of the disorder i.e., depression (depending on understanding of child). Represent the symptoms the child and parents have experienced rather the DSM-IV 'list' as these may not be applicable. "You know how daddy sometimes seems more 'grumpier' than usual..."
- If a child has witnessed trauma i.e., violent or suicidal behavior, or police intervention, don't underestimate how terrifying this experience can be. Explain to the child that their parent didn't know what was best for them at the time and explain how the doctors/police/whomever are going to help their parent.
- When explaining to a child about how a mental illness affects a person, it may be helpful to make a comparison to a physical illness. Understanding that there's an illness involved can help children feel for and respect their parent.

Examples of explaining mental illness based on physical illness

You might say to a 5-year old: *"Do you remember when you had the (name an illness such as the flu or chicken pox)? You cried a lot, you didn't feel like doing anything and you were grouchy toward all of us. It wasn't because you didn't love us or wanted to be that way but because you didn't feel well."*

"Right now your mommy doesn't feel well. That's why she's crying a lot, not doing anything and acting grouchy. She still loves you and me, but she can't show it right now"

Whereas you might tell a 10-year old: *"You know how parts of our bodies get sick sometimes, like when we get stomach aches or sore throats. Well some people get sick in the part of their brain that controls feelings. That's what's wrong with dad. He has a sickness in that part of his brain that controls feelings. This sickness has a name. It's called manic depression."*

"Mental illness is not like a cold. You can't 'catch' it. Just because your mom/dad has it does not mean you or I will get it. Scientists still don't know what causes it, but they are trying to find out."

You may also say to a school age child, or teenager: *"Your mom/dad has a mental illness. Mental illnesses are diseases that affect the brain. The brain contains many chemicals that help us think, feel and act" - " So sometimes mental illnesses can make people say things or do things that they would not normally do if they were feeling healthy", also:*

"When a person has (name disorder), his or her brain works differently because the chemicals are out of balance. This imbalance also happens with other disorders in the body, such as diabetes and high blood pressure";

(More in-depth) "many people get sick with a cold or the flu, but only a few get really sick with something serious like pneumonia. People who have a cold are usually able to do their normal activities. However, if they get pneumonia, they will have to take medicine and may have to go to the hospital; similarly, feelings of sadness, anxiety, worry, irritability, or sleep problems are common for most people. However, when these feelings get very intense, last for a long period of time and begin to interfere with school, work, and relationships, it may be a sign of a mental illness"

Family Tree

PURPOSE: To explore family values and behavior that encourages whanau ora (family wellbeing)

MATERIAL: Family tree poster: either felt pens, crayons, and/or pencils; flower Cut-outs.

DIRECTIONS:

(1) With parents and children, talk about the different parts of the tree, i.e. Roots - sustenance (water, nutrients); Trunk – strength; branches – stability. Collectively these bear flowers or fruit. These are the special things of the family. Also talk about how trees often grow towards the warmth of the sun, away from the cold of the shade.

(2) Write inside the roots or draw pictures on top, of things that have nourished your family values. What Iwi, tribe(s), country are your ancestors from? What were these tipuna well known (famous for). Where have you lived? Who has passed away or left that taught you or your parent's values, kawa and tikanga? (i.e. grandparents, great aunties/uncles etc..)

(3) The trunk is the sturdy part of the tree. What are the important values in your family, about:

- Treating others
- Caring for each other when unwell
- Sharing work/chores
- Learning new things
- Spirituality / religion

Write some of these in the trunk

(4) The branches are the shade for the tree, add stability, and hold the flowers and or fruit. These are the people in your family. Write down the names of people in your family in the branches. More than one name can be on each branch (include extended family). Let them colour in the tree to encourage participation for those who may not be able to write.

(5) The flowers and or fruit are the special things (feelings) created by the whole tree (whanau). Write something you like about each person (i.e. that is nice about them or how they make you feel) on a flower and glue it to the branch that person is on. Write two (or more) things for each person. Everybody have a turn.

(6) Questions for the whanau:

- What can we do each day / week to keep the trunk (whanau values) strong.
- Can we set some goals from this?

My World

PURPOSE: To explore the social resources of children/young people

MATERIAL: Large paper (A3), felt pens / crayons / pencils, family photos, magazines etc..

DIRECTIONS:

(1) Provide material and ask children to: Draw themselves in the middle of the page and draw people around the page (alternatively children can use photos) that they either:

- Trust and feel safe with;
- Have fun with and like being with or;
- Can talk to about important 'stuff'.

(2) Have children draw or paste pictures from magazines which represent things they like (favourite things) or like to do (favourite activities) Dependant on age/literacy have the child write names under people and activities

(3) If the child is willing or interested to talk about the poster – listen:

- Who in his/her support networks?
- Who have they not connected with for some time?
- Do you have common interest, knowledge, connections?
- Are their family activities identified that can be supported / encouraged to occur?

