

**Inverclyde Practitioner Guidance**

**Children Affected by Parental Mental Health**

With thanks to the NSPCC

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**Introduction**

Many parents with mental health problems are able to give their children safe and loving care, without their children being negatively affected in any way. But sometimes, parents with mental health problems need support from family members, friends, neighbours and/or professionals, to help them care for their children.

We're using the term ‘parental mental health problems’ to mean that a parent or carer has a diagnosable mental health condition. This can include:

* depression
* anxiety disorders
* schizophrenia
* bipolar disorder
* personality disorders.

(See link to NHS web page at the end of this document which explains conditions in more detail)

Mental health problems can vary in severity and impact differently on people’s day to day lives. This depends on parents’ individual circumstances and the support they receive. Parental mental health problems might occur alongside other stressful life experiences. Challenges may arise as a result of the condition, contribute to the condition developing, or make it worse. For example if a parent is experiencing financial problems, this can negatively affect their mental health. And if the parent becomes unable to work due to their mental health, this can exacerbate their financial problems. Coping with lots of challenges at once can make it difficult for parents to provide their children with the care that they need.

## Impact of parental mental health problems

Many parents with mental health problems are able to manage their condition and minimise its impact on their children, particularly if they are able to access appropriate support. But sometimes it does affect their ability to cope with family life.

Parental mental health problems may affect children differently according to the severity and type of mental health condition, the child’s age and stage of development, and the child’s personality.

### **Coping with challenges**

Some parents experience mental health problems along with other challenges such as:

* divorce or separation
* unemployment
* financial hardship
* poor housing
* discrimination
* a lack of social support
* domestic abuse
* substance misuse.

If they are facing several challenges at once, it can be very hard for parents to provide their children with safe and loving care, particularly if they are isolated or aren't getting the support they need. Research has found there is a greater risk to children’s safety if parents with mental health problems are also experiencing domestic abuse or substance misuse.

### **Caring for children**

Some parents and carers with mental health problems may need support to cope with the routines of daily life, such as housework, mealtimes, bedtimes, taking children to school, and taking children to medical and dental appointments.

They may also find it more difficult to:

* control their mood and emotions around their children
* recognise and respond to children's physical and emotional needs
* engage socially with their children
* set and maintain safe and appropriate boundaries and manage their children's behaviour.

If parents don't get the support they need from family, friends, neighbours and/or professionals, these challenges may escalate. In extreme cases, children may experience abuse and/or neglect.

### **Babies and younger children**

Babies and young children rely on their parents and carers to give them the warm, nurturing care they need to grow. If parents experience mental health problems in pregnancy or the first year of a baby’s life, this can affect the way they are able to bond with and care for their child. This can have an impact on the child’s intellectual, emotional, social and psychological development.This means it’s important that practitioners are able to recognise if a new parent or carer is struggling with their mental health and help them access appropriate support.

### **Children’s wellbeing**

Many children whose parents have a mental health problem do not experience any negative effects. But if parents are not getting the right support to care for their family, this can have an impact on their children's wellbeing.

Signs that a child might need extra support include:

* being worried about their parent or carer’s condition
* taking on a caring role for parents and other family members
* putting the needs of their family above their own
* having negative feelings about their parent’s condition
* finding it hard to make friends, feeling isolated or being bullied
* not feeling able to talk to their parents or another trusted adult about their worries.

If a parent has severe mental health problems, children may have to cope with frightening and upsetting situations such as:

* being separated from their parents, either because parents need to go into hospital and/or because the child is taken into care
* a parent attempting to take their own life
* a parent displaying extremely volatile behaviour.

If these things happen, it’s important to consider how this has affected the wellbeing of everyone in the family and what support can be put in place.

### **Stigma and barriers to seeking support**

Sometimes families experience stigma related to mental health problems. Parents, carers and their families may experience discrimination from others, and this may be displayed consciously or unconsciously. For example, children may experience bullying, it may be difficult for parents to get work or families may experience social isolation.

Parents and carers might find it hard to speak out and ask for support, if they:

* are worried that disclosing mental health concerns might make people think that they are incapable of looking after their child
* feel unable to talk about mental health because professionals don’t seem interested or don’t ask them about it
* feel that they should be enjoying pregnancy or being a parent or carer.

New parents and carers may also assume that what they’re feeling is normal when having a new baby.

Professionals have an important role to play in raising awareness about mental health problems, taking action to tackle discrimination, recognising if a parent or carer is struggling with their mental health and making sure families get the support they need.

### **Risk and vulnerability factors**

All families experience challenges from time to time. This doesn’t necessarily mean children are at greater risk of abuse. But when problems mount up, it can be more difficult for parents to cope – particularly if they are isolated or lack support.

The risks to children are greater when parental mental health problems exist alongside domestic abuse and parental substance misuse (see link to other Inverclyde guidance in this area [Child Protection - Inverclyde Council](https://www.inverclyde.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/public-protection/inverclyde-child-protection-committee))

### **Assessment**

The impact of parental mental health problems varies according to the nature of each parent's condition, their child’s health and stage of development, and relationships with other family members.

Practitioners should assess whether a parent or carer’s mental health problems pose a risk to their child’s safety and wellbeing, and whether these risks can be mitigated with appropriate support. You should also consider whether there are any protective factors which will increase the family’s overall resilience, for example if the parent or carer is already receiving effective support from mental health services.

[The 5 GIRFEC questions are used to help identify concerns about a child or young person](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=82e287413653a5e4JmltdHM9MTcxODY2ODgwMCZpZ3VpZD0zOTdhZTU3ZS1jNTM4LTZkZjMtMzAyNC1mMTM2YzRkODZjZWImaW5zaWQ9NTczMA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=3&fclid=397ae57e-c538-6df3-3024-f136c4d86ceb&psq=5+girfec+questions&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cubmhzYm9yZGVycy5zY290Lm5ocy51ay9wYXRpZW50cy1hbmQtdmlzaXRvcnMvb3VyLXNlcnZpY2VzL2dlbmVyYWwtc2VydmljZXMvdW5kZXJhZ2Utc2V4dWFsLWFjdGl2aXR5LWludGVyYWdlbmN5LWd1aWRhbmNlL3RoZS1maXZlLWtleS1xdWVzdGlvbnMv&ntb=1)

are:

1. What is getting in the way of this child's or young person's well-being?
2. Do I have all the information I need to help this child and young person?
3. What can I do now to help this child and young person?
4. What can my agency do to help this child or young person?
5. What additional help, if any, may be needed from others?

You should carry out a holistic assessment which takes into account:

* the child’s wellbeing and development
* the child's thoughts and feelings
* the impact of every day parenting on the parent or carer’s mental health
* the parent or carer’s ability to meet the child’s needs
* whether the child has taken on a caring role
* the parent or carer’s background, medical history and current circumstances
* the parent’s thoughts and feelings about caring for their child
* the views of colleagues from other agencies who are involved with the family, such as teachers
* whether the parent or carer has support from another parent or relative, or if they are coping with parenting alone.

You should also consider broader factors that might make it harder for the parent or carer to cope. These include:

* substance misuse
* domestic abuse
* financial hardship
* housing problems
* relationship problems
* social isolation.

Always take threats of suicide or threats to kill a partner or child seriously and take immediate action to keep children safe.

### **Protective factors**

Factors which can help reduce the risk to children’s wellbeing include:

* parents and carers who acknowledge their difficulties and are willing to accept support from services
* friends or relatives who are able to care for children and help with household chores when needed
* families receiving support for other challenges, such as income support, benefits and housing advice
* families receiving additional support from other professionals who can also monitor the situation and share concerns if necessary, for example teachers
* children having a trusted adult they are able to ask for help when needed
* wider community support such as young carer’s projects (Cleaver, Unell and Aldgate, 2011).

## Supporting children and families

### Early help is crucial. It is vital to identify parental mental health problems as soon as they emerge and provide families with appropriate support.

### **Prioritising children’s needs**

Anyone working with parents or carers who have mental health problems must maintain a focus on their children’s wellbeing.

#### Advocacy and mentoring

* Children should be given access to a mentor and/or advocate who they can talk to about their parent or carer’s mental health and who can help make their views heard.
* Children need someone they can contact for support if they need to, especially if there is an emergency.
* Be aware that children may be wary about being offered therapy or counselling. Depending on their parents’ experiences, they may have negative associations with this kind of support. They may also have fears about developing mental health problems themselves, and think that being referred to a counsellor is a sign of mental illness

#### **Peer support**

Children whose parents have mental health problems should have the chance to interact with other children in similar situations. This allows them to both offer and receive support. Successful peer support networks can have a positive impact on children’s wellbeing and resilience by:

* increasing self-esteem
* improving understanding of parental mental health issues
* teaching communication and coping skills (Foster, 2016).

Many children and young people use Childline’s [peer support message boards](https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/message-boards/) to express their feelings, talk about their experiences and share advice with others.

#### **Empowering children**

Children and young people should play a positive role in, and contribute to decisions about, their parent or carer’s care

Children want to be involved in interventions to support their parents, and they want their views to be taken seriously

* Giving children and young people accurate, age appropriate information about mental health problems can address any misconceptions or fears they may have and can give them the language to express themselves
* Allowing children and young people distance from their parent or carer’s emotions and behaviours can enable them to develop their own thinking and emotions
* Explaining a parent or carer’s mental health difficulties can be a platform for wider discussions about relationships and emotions in general.

Educating children about parental mental health problems can have a number of benefits including:

* increasing the child’s resilience
* challenging the child’s misconceptions about mental health
* increasing the child’s understanding and empathy for their parent or carer
* improving communications between the parent or carer and child

### **Speaking out**

It’s vital to build safe and trusting relationships with children so they can speak out about any problems they are experiencing. This involves teaching children what abuse is and how they can get help.

NSPCC Speak out Stay safe service for schools helps children understand abuse in all its forms and know how to protect themselves.

[> Find out more about Speak out Stay safe](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/services/speak-out-stay-safe/)

### **Family support**

Family members can be reluctant to discuss mental health with each other. Lack of communication can result in misunderstandings and may make children feel worried or alone.

Interventions which encourage families to communicate with each other can help everyone understand the impact of the mental health problems.

Families can benefit from meeting and sharing experiences with other families. This can:

* prevent relapses
* reduce feelings of isolation and stigma
* offer positive ways to interact with each other
* support more open discussion about mental health across the wider family

Some interventions help family members to design and implement ‘staying well’ plans. This could include:

* sign-posting to other helpful services
* setting goals
* developing problem solving skills
* offering advice on managing stress
* recognising the early signs of a relapse

### **Monitoring progress**

Practitioners must maintain a focus on the wellbeing of the child. They should monitor and review children’s progress throughout the period of intervention and respond appropriate

## References and resources

Cleaver, H., Unell, I. and Aldgate, J. (2011) [Children's needs: parenting capacity: child abuse: parental mental illness, learning disability, substance misuse, and domestic violence (PDF)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182095/DFE-00108-2011-Childrens_Needs_Parenting_Capacity.pdf). London: The Stationery Office (TSO).

Cooklin, A. (2013) Promoting children's resilience to parental mental illness: engaging the child's thinking. Advances in psychiatric treatment, 19: 229-240.

Foster, K. et al. (2016) [Outcomes of the ON FIRE peer support programme for children and adolescents in families with mental health problems](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.12143). Child and family social work, 21: 295-306.

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Hogg, S. (2013) [Prevention in mind: All Babies Count: spotlight on perinatal mental health](https://library.nspcc.org.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/search2?searchTerm0=C4577). [London]: NSPCC.

Scottish Government (2021) [Perinatal mental health - peer support: action plan – 2020 to 2023](https://www.gov.scot/publications/peer-support-perinatal-mental-health-action-plan-2020-2023/).

Scottish Government (2020) [Perinatal and infant mental health programme board 2020-2021: delivery plan](https://www.gov.scot/publications/perinatal-infant-mental-health-programme-board-2020-2021-delivery-plan/).

Scottish Government (2019) [Perinatal mental health services: needs assessment and recommendations](https://www.gov.scot/publications/delivering-effective-services-needs-assessment-service-recommendations-specialist-universal-perinatal-mental-health-services).

Scottish Government (2017) [Mental health strategy 2017-2027](https://www.gov.scot/publications/mental-health-strategy-2017-2027/).

Wolpert, M.et al. (2015) [An exploration of the experience of attending the Kidstime programme for children with parents with enduring mental health issues: parents’ and young people’s views](http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1359104514520759). Clinical child psychology and psychiatry, 20(3): 406-418.

### **Childline**

If a child or young person needs confidential help and advice direct them to Childline. Calls to 0800 1111 are free and children can also [contact Childline online](https://www.childline.org.uk/) or read about [supporting a family member with a mental health issue](https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/mental-health/someone-family-mental-health-problem/) on the Childline website. You can also download or order [Childline posters and wallet cards](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/childline-posters-wallet-cards/).

**NHS Website link to mental health conditions**

[Agoraphobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/agoraphobia/)

[Anorexia nervosa](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/anorexia/)

[Antisocial personality disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/antisocial-personality-disorder/)

[Binge eating disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/binge-eating/)

[Bipolar disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bipolar-disorder/)

[Body dysmorphic disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/body-dysmorphia/)

[Borderline personality disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/borderline-personality-disorder/)

[Bulimia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/bulimia/)

[Claustrophobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/claustrophobia/)

[Cyclothymia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/cyclothymia/)

[Depression](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/depression-in-adults/)

[Dissociative disorders](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/dissociative-disorders/)

[Eating disorders](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/eating-disorders/overview/)

[Fabricated or induced illness](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/fabricated-or-induced-illness/)

[General anxiety disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/)

[Health anxiety](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/health-anxiety/)

[Hoarding disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/hoarding-disorder/)

[Munchausen syndrome](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/munchausen-syndrome/)

[Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/)

[Panic disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/panic-disorder/)

[Personality disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/personality-disorder/)

[Phobias](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/)

[Postnatal depression](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/post-natal-depression/)

[Postpartum psychosis](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/post-partum-psychosis/)

[Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/)

[Psychosis](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/psychosis/)

[Psychotic depression](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/psychotic-depression/)

[Schizophrenia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/schizophrenia/)

[Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder-sad/)

[Selective mutism](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/selective-mutism/)

[Skin picking disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/skin-picking-disorder/)

[Social anxiety (social phobia)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/social-anxiety/)

[Stress](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/stress/)

[Trichotillomania (hair pulling disorder)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/trichotillomania/)

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