

CHILDREN OF PARENTS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

SOURCE: AMERICAN ACADEMY OF CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRY (AACAP)

Mental illnesses in parents represent a risk for children in the family. These children have a higher risk for developing mental illness than other children. When both parents are mentally ill, the chance is even greater that the child might become mentally ill.

The risk is particularly strong when the parent has one or more of the following: bipolar disorder, an anxiety disorder, ADHD, schizophrenia, alcoholism or other drug abuse, or depression. Risk can be inherited from parents, through the genes.

An inconsistent, unpredictable family environment also contributes to psychiatric illness in children. Mental illness of a parent can put stress on the marriage and affect the parenting abilities of the couple, which in turn can harm the child.

Some protective or positive facts that can decrease the risk to children include:

- Knowledge that their parent(s) is ill and that they are not to blame
- Help and support from family members
- A stable home environment
- Psychotherapy for the child and the parent(s)
- A sense of being loved by the ill parent
- A naturally stable and happy personality in the child
- Positive self-esteem
- Inner strength and good coping skills in the child
- A strong relationship with a healthy adult
- Friendships, positive peer relationships
- Interest in and success at school
- Healthy interests outside the home for the child

- Help from outside the family to improve the family environment (for example, marital psychotherapy or parenting classes)

Medical, mental health or social service professionals working with mentally ill adults need to inquire about the children and adolescents, especially about their mental health and emotional development. It is often useful for such youngsters to be referred to a child and adolescent psychiatrist for an evaluation.

Individual or family psychiatric treatment can help a child toward healthy development, despite the problem of the parental psychiatric illness. The child and adolescent psychiatrist can help the family work with the positive elements in the home and the natural strengths of the child. With treatment, the family can learn ways to lessen the effects of the parent's mental illness on the child.

Unfortunately, families, professionals and society often pay most attention to the mentally ill parent and ignore the children in the family. Providing more attention and support to the children of a psychiatrically ill parents is an important consideration when treating the parent.

