



COPMI GEMS

Gateway to Evidence that Matters

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The role of fathers when a parent has a mental illness

Quick facts

- Of all children in Australia, almost a quarter have a parent who has a diagnosable mental illness.¹ This is independent of any primary substance use disorders.
- Fathers, who experience mental illness, can maintain a positive relationship with their children.⁵ This is true even if the parents live separately.
- Fathers play an important role in family development when mothers have a mental illness.^{6,8} Current evidence describes their role not only as a parent, but also as a support person for the mother.
- The primary principles for engaging fathers are a respectful and appropriate service. This is best carried out by a service that continues to assess and evaluate its own practices in its ability to be father-friendly.¹¹

The role and impact of fathers with a mental illness

Over 23% of children in Australia have a parent with a non-substance mental illness, and almost one in five men aged 16-85 reported having a mental illness within the previous 12-month period.^{1,2} Since fathers have a key role in children's development, supporting their ability to parent effectively is an important goal.³

A father's relationship with his partner and children is likely to be affected by his mental illness which may give rise to conflicts, disagreements, distancing and impaired parenting.⁴ While a father's parenting may be challenged by mental illness, he can still maintain a positive relationship with his children even when they live separately.⁵ Children may also provide a sense of purpose to these fathers and motivate them to manage their illness.^{6,7}

A father's role when the mother has a mental illness

Fathers (including ex-partners) also have a key role when mothers (their partners) have a mental illness. Mothers with depression, for example, rate partner support highly when reporting 'what helped'⁶ and fathers may assist in women's recovery.⁸ Although support from fathers living elsewhere may help, sporadic contact may worsen the mothers' mental health.⁹ As well as providing support to the mother,

fathers can help reduce any negative effects of mothers' mental illness on their children through their parenting.¹⁰

Practice principles to engage fathers

There are six main practice principles that services might undertake to engage fathers for the benefit of families:¹¹

1. Policy and training: Ensure that fathers are seen as a core target of their practice.
2. Professional attitudes and staffing: Include father engagement in professional development and supervision in order to recognise fathers' potential to positively affect their child's development. Explore male staffing options.
3. A strengths-based perspective: Target fathers' existing skills and communication tools, and use solution-focused thinking to build on men's desire to have caring and nurturing relationships with their children.
4. Father friendly: Assess the environment, promotion material and practice protocols and language used to ensure males feel welcome. Consider revising practice hours to offer out of normal business hours services.
5. Raising awareness: Use methods across agencies and community contexts to maximise fathers' awareness of the services available.
6. Assessment and evaluation: Continue to assess and evaluate practices, demographic and user needs, so that training, education, and the service-appropriate

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environment can better identify and meet fathers' needs.

Limitations

There is limited information about the characteristics of fathers' mental illness, including age of onset¹² and protective factors for families prior to children being born. The evidence available on the impact of fathers' mental illness on children's development is focused on child outcomes and there is a dearth of studies examining fathering in these families.¹³ As well, we lack evidence regarding a

father's impact on children when the mother has a mental illness other than during the post-natal period.⁷

For information for father's experiencing their own (or a partner's) mental illness, see the COPMI website: www.copmi.net.au/dads

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