

Emerging Minds.



The Family Talk Intervention

A Guide for Professionals



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Advancing the mental health of
infants, children and adolescents

*This guide was developed by Emerging Minds for the Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) national initiative. Further resources and information can be found at **www.emergingminds.com.au***

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The Family Talk Intervention

Introduction

The Family Talk intervention aims to support families to:

- talk about parental mental illness
- develop a shared understanding of the impact of parental depression or anxiety on parenting, children and the family
- develop strategies to strengthen child and family wellbeing.

The intervention involves a series of meetings between the practitioner and the parents, the practitioner and the children, and the practitioner and the family as a whole.

Stages of Family Talk

The Family Talk intervention involves between 6-8 sessions.

In the early stages, your role will involve helping the parents to build their understanding of mental illness and improving their confidence and skills to enable the family to develop a shared dialogue about the parental mental illness. The presentation of psycho-educational material should link directly to the family's life experience.

As the intervention progresses, your role will involve supporting the family to practice this dialogue. The Family Meeting will be the first step in an ongoing process. It is important to recognise and build on the family's strengths and strategies to improve the mental health of the parents and children.

Following the intervention, your role will involve reinforcing the importance of continuing the family's open communication and the strategies the family identified and practiced during the intervention.

Benefits

- Parental behaviour and attitude change regarding mental illness, resulting in improved mental health outcomes for parents.
- Improving parents understanding of the causes and symptoms of mental illness, and their understanding of their children's experiences.
- Supporting healthy parent-child relationships and promoting protective factors for children's wellbeing.
- Improving family communication about parental mental illness, resulting in more positive interactions and functioning.
- Improving family problem-solving regarding the experiences of parental depression and/or anxiety.

Key Principles

- Addressing guilt, shame and fear that can often prevent family members from discussing mental illness.
- Providing information that assists parents to reflect upon the impact of parental mental illness in the family.
- Encouraging parents to reflect on what the children have experienced in relation to their symptoms, moods and behaviour in order to increase the capacity for reflection.
- Starting an ongoing 'dialogue' that enables family members to communicate and understand the impact of each individual's experience in relation to the mental illness.
- Creating safe and receptive contexts for children to communicate their experiences and to express how they feel.
- Promoting the development of hopeful perspectives and the belief in each individual's capabilities.

Family Talk – Session One

Taking a History from the Parent

In session one you will explain the purpose of Family Talk, discuss confidentiality and address any questions that parents might have. Following this introduction, your initial questions will focus on the most recent episode of depression and anxiety from both parents' perspectives. This will include signs and symptoms, behaviour changes and how the depression or anxiety might impact on their parenting and family members.

- ☐ Introduce yourself and your role
- ☐ Discuss confidentiality and consent issues (including limitations).
- ☐ Introduce the Family Talk intervention (purpose, method and time frame), highlighting that the purpose is to promote resilience in children, not to provide treatment for the depression or anxiety.
- ☐ Ask parent(s) about the most recent episode of mental illness (including the signs, symptoms and behaviour changes) and how the depression and/or anxiety impacted on the parent's various roles (e.g. employment, social, family roles).
- ☐ Ask about the supports and/or treatments parents are accessing, and parent(s) perceptions of their recovery.
- ☐ Explore the parent(s) perspectives on how the illness may have affected them as a parent and other family members (including the children).
- ☐ Obtain each parents' perception of their family concerns and strengths.
- ☐ Set goals for the Family Talk intervention (based on the identified concerns and strengths).



Notes/Observations



Notes/Observations

Family Talk – Session Two

Psychoeducation and the Family's Story

Session Two links parents' experiences with factual information on depression and/or anxiety through the provision of psycho-education. It is important to explore parents' definitions, understandings and explanatory models and to provide information that is linked to their own experiences and appropriate to support their needs. You will help the parents to prepare their children for the upcoming Child Meeting by outlining that the purpose of the Child Meeting will be to provide an opportunity to get to know their children's experience of parental depression and/or anxiety.

- ☐ Check in with parents and invite them to feedback or ask questions about the last session.
- ☐ Summarise each parent's description of the history of the depression and/or anxiety.
- ☐ Ask parents' about their understanding of depression and/or anxiety and provide additional information.
- ☐ Ask about the children, their strengths, concerns and what is happening for them in the family, at school and outside the home
- ☐ Identify how the family adapts when the parent experiences an episode of mental illness (e.g. household roles and responsibilities, emotional responses).
- ☐ Explore what the children in the family may have experienced during a recent episode of parental mental illness.
- ☐ Ask parents what their children understand about their mental illness, what has previously been discussed and concerns highlighted
- ☐ Identify the different supports that the children currently access (or could access) if they are feeling sad, stressed or worried.
- ☐ Provide an explanation of resilience and outline some of the ways that parents can promote resilience in their children.
- ☐ Prepare for the Child Meeting by providing information on why you would like to meet with the children (this will include supporting parents to prepare their children to attend the session).
- ☐ Ask the parents about how they think each child will respond to being part of the intervention and what might help you to build rapport with their children.



Notes/Observations



Notes/Observations

Family Talk – Session Three

Seeing the Children

Session Three involves introducing children to the Family Talk intervention and hearing about their experiences of parental depression and/or anxiety. Ideally, all children in the family should have their own individual meeting. It is important to carefully consider developmental and temperamental differences when planning the Child Meetings and tailor the amount of information covered to the individual needs of each child.

- ☐ Introduce yourself, your role and the purpose of the intervention.
- ☐ Outline what will happen in this session, your reasons for talking to them and the importance of their involvement.
- ☐ Reassure the child that they can choose the aspects of the meeting that they are comfortable for you to share with their parents, whilst being honest about the limitations of confidentiality.
- ☐ Ask about the child's involvement in school and social activities.
- ☐ Ask about the child's relationships and friendships, both inside and outside of school.
- ☐ Ask about how the child gets along with each parent and their brothers and/or sisters.
- ☐ Explore the child's perception of their parents' relationship with each other and with other family members
- ☐ Ask about what they already know about their parent's mental illness, including what their parents or others have shared with the child and what they have tried to make sense of themselves.
- ☐ Explore the child's knowledge and explanations of depression and/or anxiety (causes, symptoms, behaviours, treatments, recovery).
- ☐ Explore the children's understanding of how they are impacted by parental depression and/or anxiety, including the changes that they experience when the parent is unwell.
- ☐ Ask about the how their parent's depression and/or anxiety affects other family members.
- ☐ Discuss any questions and topics that the child would like to discuss at the Family Meeting and decide who will raise the topics for discussion.
- ☐ Ask what information that the child is comfortable for you to share with their parents and the information they would like to keep private.



Notes/Observations



Notes/Observations

Family Talk – Session Four

Planning the Family Meeting

Session Four involves reviewing the Child Meeting and answering any questions raised by the parents. It is important to link the parents experiences of mental illness with their children's experiences so that their narratives become woven together to form a shared understanding. Your role in Session Four also includes supporting the parents to develop a plan for the Family Meeting (including identifying the main topics for the meeting) and helping the parents to prepare how they will respond to the questions or concerns their children raised.

- ☐ Highlight the children's strengths
- ☐ Discuss any evidence of the children's stress and vulnerabilities (consider referrals to other services if a need has been identified).
- ☐ Link the parent and child experiences by highlighting what the children have noticed and experienced about their parent's mental illness (based on the specific events or general experiences that the children described).
- ☐ Share the children's observations and concerns about other family members
- ☐ Share the questions, issues and topics that the children would like to be discussed at the Family Meeting.
- ☐ Identify any experiences that the parents have been worried about that they would like to discuss with the children.
- ☐ Develop a plan with the parents for the Family Meeting which includes topics to be discussed based on the children's and parents' concerns and questions.
- ☐ Negotiate your role and the role of each parent in the Family Meeting. Support the parents to recognise that they are taking the lead and for them to decide how they think the meeting would best work, taking into consideration their family's style of communication.
- ☐ Provide opportunities and resources for the parents to practice their responses to questions and concerns that their children have raised.



Notes/Observations



Notes/Observations

Family Talk – Session Five

The Family Meeting

The Family Meeting includes discussion of the topics that were identified in the earlier sessions. This might include family strengths, family members' experiences of parental mental illness, the impact of mental illness on the family, psycho-educational material for children, questions and concerns raised by the parents and children, and plans to address these concerns. Some families will need more guidance and support than others. It is important to be flexible to the needs of each family and reassuring that no one is guilty or to blame for their parent's mental illness and that Family Talk is a positive step towards a hopeful future.

- ☐ Welcome everyone to the meeting, and introduce the purpose, structure and topics for discussion during the Family Meeting.
- ☐ Describe the role that you and each family will undertake in the meeting (as previously agreed upon). Make everyone aware that you are available to assist when needed.
- ☐ Support each family member to share their questions, experience and concerns
- ☐ Talk about some of the changes that the family could make in the future and how the can the family can work together to make positive change.
- ☐ Reinforce to the family members that these are the first steps and the change takes time.
- ☐ Seek each individual family member's feedback on how they felt the family meeting went.
- ☐ Encourage the family to have regular family meetings at home in the future.
- ☐ Acknowledge and thank the family for their participation in the Family Meeting



Notes/Observations



Notes/Observations

Family Talk – Session Six

Review of the Family meeting and follow-up

In Session Six you will review of the Family Meeting with parents. Going over the content of the Family Meeting helps the parents to understand and integrate new information into the family depression narrative. It is important to emphasise to parents that Family Talk is the beginning of an ongoing process and that it is not expected that all concerns and issues can be adequately addressed in this short-term intervention. The purpose of the intervention is support parents and children to have an enriched understanding of mental illness, improved communication skills and learned new approaches to promote resilience.

- ☐ Review the parent's impressions of the Family Meeting.
- ☐ Discuss the children's responses to the Family Meeting.
- ☐ Provide an opportunity for the parents to discuss and ask questions about the Family Meeting.
- ☐ Reinforce the benefits of ongoing family communication. Support the parents to recognise that the process of moving from individual understanding to a shared understanding is a journey that will take time and that they have already started the 'talking' process.
- ☐ Discuss the parent's original concerns and how they were and were not addressed in the intervention.
- ☐ Encourage the parent to continue with their individual treatment goals for depression and/or anxiety.
- ☐ Reinforce the parent's strengths and what they have achieved during Family Talk.
- ☐ Reinforce the strategies that the parents can utilise to promote their children's resilience.
- ☐ Make plans for Follow-Up Meetings (a phone call or preferably a face-to-face meeting at six months following the intervention).



Notes/Observations



Notes/Observations

Family Talk – Session Seven

Follow-Up Meeting (3-6 month)

The Follow-Up Meeting is an opportunity to reconnect with the parents, hear about how the family has been going, help with any problems that have been encountered since the review, discuss family communication and review opportunities to promote the children's resilience. Similar to the Family Meeting, the Follow-Up Meeting may take different forms. Some families will be doing very well, while others will have encountered problems and challenges. Use the opportunity of the follow-up to reinforce the principles of the intervention.

- ☐ Review Family Talk and discuss the family's strengths and concerns from the original intervention.
- ☐ Check how the family has progressed in 'talking' about and facilitating an ongoing dialogue about their experiences of parental mental illness.
- ☐ Check whether the family members feel the intervention has helped them to move forward.
- ☐ Review the parent's symptoms and check if there have been any changes with the depression and/or anxiety.
- ☐ Discuss how the depression and/or anxiety has impacted on each family member since the intervention.
- ☐ Ask about the children's behaviours, experiences and relationships at home, at school and in the community.
- ☐ Check if there are any current or new concerns regarding the family's experience of depression and/or anxiety.
- ☐ Reinforce that you are available to be contacted about the intervention.
- ☐ Continue to highlight the importance of the parent seeking treatment for their depression and/or anxiety and for their family.



Notes/Observations



Notes/Observations