



# Parenting with personality disorder

**Parents keep their child in mind, but this can be hard when there is a mental illness getting in the way. Symptoms of mental illness need to be managed and discussed with trusted adults and health professionals as part of a treatment plan. If at all possible children should be shielded from the symptoms of mental illness. Parenting with children is best kept separate from the parent's difficulties.**

Despite mental health problems, parents should strive to keep family routines and activities that support the child's emotional, physical and education needs. Children need to attend school and participate in healthy activities with other children such as sport and hobbies. Education provides children with the best chance in life and parents can help them feel secure, giving them the space to grow up in a normal way.

## SPENDING TIME TOGETHER

Spending time together to share enjoyable experiences promotes loving and secure relationships for all members of the family. When caregivers follow the lead of children and share in the enjoyment of activities that interest the child, powerful messages such as, 'you matter to me', 'what interests you is important', 'your world matters' are sent to the child. Parents can also feel a deep sense of fulfilment and joy when they put aside busy routines, worries and daily stress to focus on what is important – spending time close to their children.



## SEPARATING PARENTING FROM PERSONALITY DISORDER SYMPTOMS

There are things that adults need to deal with separately from their children to allow children to be children and not take on adult roles and responsibilities. Children are vulnerable to many threats in the environment requiring caregiver's consistent attention to help and protect them from being hurt. While some threats may seem obvious such as emotional, physical and sexual abuse, children exposed to witnessing adults engaging in abusive or harmful behaviours - including drug taking, sexual behaviour, self-harm or domestic violence - can be highly distressing and traumatic for children.

In times of extreme difficulties parents can experience thoughts, urges and strong impulses to withdraw or leave the family. Expressing these thoughts to a child can be confusing and emotionally and psychologically distressing, often with the child thinking that they are the cause of the adult's distress and family difficulties. Similarly, talking about suicide and self-harm may worry and harm a child.



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## **TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT PERSONALITY DISORDER**

Once a child gets to an age where they can understand other people can get sick, it is a good idea to talk to them in a simple way about a parent's mental health problems. Providing children with an understanding that their parent has a mental illness called a personality disorder, can help them understand what is going on for their parent. Not telling children about mental health problems can leave them feeling confused, hurt and sometimes even feeling responsible for events that happen. Children who understand that treatment is in place can better trust their parent even when times are tough.



**Credits:** This fact sheet complements a film resource 'Parenting with Personality Disorder'. The film was developed as a training tool illustrating these parenting strategies for caregivers with a personality disorder. As part of a resource package this film supports a brief parenting intervention for mental health staff working to reduce the impact of personality disorder on families, children and parents. The goal of this resource is to assist parents in providing a safe, secure and loving environment for children. We would like to acknowledge and thank the consumers, families, and caregivers who have shared their lived experiences which have informed the development of this film. Original film script developed by Kye McCarthy, Heidi Jarman, Marianne Bourke, Jim Lounsbury and Brin Grenyer. Introduction and conclusion by Brin Grenyer. Film directed by Jim Lounsbury and produced by Sarah Crozier, Eponine Films. Film by the Project Air Strategy for Personality Disorders, supported by the NSW Ministry of Health in partnership with MH - Children and Young People, Mental Health Drug and Alcohol Office, NSW Ministry of Health.