

Parental Mental Ill-health

Mental ill-health is often a taboo subject, however parental mental ill-health can have a significant impact on children and young people. An estimated third of all children live with a parent with some form of mental ill-health. Whilst for some there is no impact, for others there can be a significant impact.

Definition

Mental wellbeing is about thoughts, feelings and how people cope with the ups and downs of everyday life. Having positive wellbeing means that every individual realises their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, help engage in work productively and can contribute to their community.

HM Government

What do we mean by mental ill-health?

One in four of us will experience some form of diagnosable mental ill-health in our lifetime. These may include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, phobias, bipolar disorder or personality disorder. Regardless of the diagnosis, it is important that we consider what this means for the child in the family, both immediately and the longer term. In the same way as the type and severity of a physical health condition dictates the treatment that is required, the same is true for mental ill-health.

Treatment of mental ill-health

There are many different treatments for mental ill-health, including self-help and alternative treatments, therapy (individual and group) and medication. Whilst this may seem obvious, what is important to consider is what the different effects of treatment may be. The way mental ill-health presents varies from person to person, and therefore there cannot be a “one size fits all” approach. Just because someone is receiving treatment does not necessarily mean that everything will improve,

or that the improvement will happen any time soon. There are also side effects to consider. For example, some medication may make the person taking it drowsy or emotionally unresponsive. For people having therapy, things may get worse before they get better as the therapy may involve talking about difficult subjects from the person’s life.

You will not automatically have a right to know what treatment someone is on, however if you are told, it can help to establish the potential impact on the child.

Impact on parenting

Many parents who are experiencing mental ill-health parent their children well. It is also important to remember even when they can’t, they are still a parent.

Concerns arise if the parental mental ill-health impacts on the emotional and practical support that is available to the child. The child may feel isolated, embarrassed and/or shamed; or they may believe that the mental ill-health is their fault. In practical terms, the mental ill-health can mean that what would be classed as everyday tasks become overwhelming for the parent (e.g. shopping, paying bills), and additional trips and treats are out of the question.

In extreme situations the parent’s behaviour may change from day to day, hour to hour, and such unpredictability can be very worrying and/or frightening for children. Some children may feel that they need to look after their parent in order to keep their parent safe.

What helps and what to do

Talking about things is often key. Like adults, children fear things that they do not understand. Knowing that they have a network of support available to them and they can talk about what’s going on and what might happen next can help to reassure. You may well be the person they trust enough to open up to. Speak with your designated safeguarding lead to make sure support is co-ordinated.