



Mental Health America of Franklin County

538 E. Town Street, Suite D, Columbus, OH 43215

Telephone: (614) 221-1441 Fax: (614) 221-1491

info@mhafc.org

www.mhafc.org

When a Parent Has a Mental Illness **From Risk to Resiliency: Protective Factors for Children**

The effect of parental mental illness on children is varied and unpredictable. Although parental mental illness presents biological, psychosocial and environmental risks for children, not all children will be negatively affected, or in the same way. The parental diagnosis of mental illness alone is not sufficient to cause problems for the child and family. Rather, it is how the diagnosis affects the parent's behavior as well as familial relationships that may cause risk to a child.

The age of onset, severity and duration of the parents' mental illness, the degree of stress in the family resulting from the parents' illness, and most importantly, the extent to which parents' symptoms interfere with positive parenting, such as their ability to show interest in their children, will determine the level of risk to a child.

The Prevention Perspective

Whether or not children of parents with mental illness will develop social, emotional, or behavioral problems depends on a number of factors. These include the child's genetic vulnerability, the parent's behavior, the child's understanding of the parent's illness, and the degree of family stability (e.g., number of parent-child separations). Preventive interventions aimed at addressing these risk factors and increasing children's protective factors increase the likelihood that they will be resilient, and grow and develop in positive ways. Effective prevention strategies help increase family stability, strengthen parents' ability to meet their children's needs, and minimize children's exposure to negative manifestations of their parent's illness.

Risk Factors

Children whose parents have a mental illness are at risk for developing social, emotional and/or behavioral problems. An inconsistent and unpredictable family environment, often found in families in which a parent has mental illness, contributes to a child's risk. Other factors that place all children at risk, but particularly increase the vulnerability of children whose parents have a mental illness, include:

- Poverty
- Occupational or marital difficulties
- Poor parent-child communication
- Parent's co-occurring substance abuse disorder
- Openly aggressive or hostile behavior by a parent
- Single-parent families

Families at greatest risk are those in which mental illness, a child with a difficult temperament, and chronically stressful family environments are all present. Many of these factors, however, can be reduced through preventive interventions. For example, poor parent-child communication can be improved through skills training and marital conflict can be reduced through couples' therapy.

Protective Factors

Increasing a child's protective factors helps develop his or her resiliency. Resilient children understand that they are not responsible for their parent's difficulties, and are able to move forward in the face of life's challenges. Protective factors for children include:

- a sense of being loved by their parent
- positive self-esteem
- good coping skills
- positive peer relationships
- interest in and success at school
- healthy engagement with adults outside the home
- an ability to articulate their feelings
- parents who are functioning well at home, at work and in their social relationships
- parental employment
- a parent's warm and supportive relationship with his or her children
- help and support from immediate and extended family members

Mental Health America of Franklin County is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We help people navigate the mental health system. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; free support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; Pro Bono Counseling Program where underinsured and uninsured individuals can receive free counseling; community and professional mental health education including Get Connected; and a quarterly newsletter featuring legislative updates and new happenings at MHAFC. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board and United Way of Central Ohio. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at www.mhafc.org.