

Working with parents with mental illness – clinical interview prompt sheet

Queensland Health is committed to promoting the protection, safety, health and wellbeing of children and young people who have a parent with a mental illness. Mental health clinicians are required to make decisions about how a consumer's mental illness affects their parenting role in order to provide improved services and attend to the legal and ethical responsibilities of their role as a health professional. The prompt questions outlined have been developed as a guide for use by mental health workers if they are unsure of the types of questions to ask a parent with a mental illness. It should be noted that these questions have been developed as a guide only and are not to be used as a structured interview.

This fact sheet should be read in conjunction with the Queensland Health guidelines – Working with parents with mental illness – guidelines for mental health clinicians.

The following prompt questions can assist you to obtain the range of information needed to assess the impact of a consumer's mental illness on children in their care.

Questions about the parent:

- the nature and extent of parental mental illness
 - the impact of mental illness on parenting tasks
 - co-morbidity
 - available supports
 - parent's response to stress and coping strategies.
- It can be hard work looking after a child at the best of times but it can be really difficult when you are unwell. Some parents find it difficult to get everything organised, such as cooking meals, getting the children to school etc. How is it all going for you?
 - Are there some things that end up just not getting done when you are unwell? (What happens then? Do the children get to school? Do the children take on adult responsibilities?)
 - Do you have any extra support at times when you are unwell? (How supportive are your family, extended family, neighbours and friends?)
 - Who do you ask to look after your child when you are unwell/in hospital? Is it hard to find someone to care for your child?

- Are there any other difficulties or illnesses (substance abuse/health/learning difficulties) that you or a family member/person living with you are dealing with?
- How do you usually cope looking after your child? What about when you are unwell?
- Do you find that the way you are with your child changes when you are unwell?
- Are there any things about your own upbringing that may make it more difficult for you in your role as a parent?
- Are there some things you find difficult and wish you had more support with in your parenting role? What are they?

Questions about the child:

- child's physical, emotional and social functioning
 - child's understanding of parental mental illness
 - child's ability to cope.
- How are your children going at school? Do you ever find it difficult to get them to school or help them with their schoolwork and other activities?
 - Are there any academic, relationships with friends or teachers or behaviour concerns?
 - What activities are they involved in outside school? (With friends, sport, hobbies, jobs, etc)
 - Do you have any concerns about your child? Has anyone else expressed any concerns regarding your child?
 - How do you think your child manages during difficult times? (Does he/she seem distressed/sad/angry/worried/ or have difficulty sleeping or eating?)
 - What understanding does your child have about your mental illness? How do you think your mental illness affects your child?

Questions about the parent-child relationship:

- quality of attachment
 - parent's perception of child's needs and behaviour
 - parent's knowledge and attitude towards parenting.
- What are some of the good things in your relationship with your child? How close do you feel to your child? Does this change when you feel unwell?
 - What are some of the strategies that you find work well with parenting your child? (coping, planning, discipline)
 - How do you get along with your child? What things do you like to do with your child when you get the chance?

- Is there anything about you or your child's personality that sometimes makes parenting more difficult for you?
- Do you ever feel criticised by your child? If they criticise you, how do you react? How often does this happen and in what situations?
- What are your expectations of your child when you are well/unwell? (With helping out around the house/behaviour etc)
- When you and your child have arguments or fights, what are they mostly about?

Questions about the family's social and physical environment:

- living situation – housing quality, relationships within household
 - financial and employment status
 - extended family and community supports available.
- How do your children get along with one another and with other family members?
 - How well do you get along with your partner? Does your partner support you in your parenting role or are things made worse by him/her?
 - Is the school supportive and understanding of you and your child?
 - Do you have the support of family or friends? If so, how do you or your child feel about this?
 - Are there things that either you or your child are exposed to that make it harder to be the parent you would like to be? (negative influences, drugs and alcohol, domestic violence, crime, etc)
 - Does your child have friends and other adults with whom they have close relationships?
 - Do you feel comfortable in your living environment? If not, what are your concerns for yourself, your child and your family? (poverty, alcohol and substances, violence)

Questions to ask if the parent does not have primary care of child:

- history of caring responsibilities
 - nature of and satisfaction with current shared care arrangements
 - impact of part-time care on parent-child relationship.
- Where is your child living now? How long have/will they be living there?
 - Who is your child living with? (e.g. other parent, grandparent/family member, foster carer)
 - How often do you get to speak with or see your child? Is contact consistent or variable? Would you like this to be more or less often?
 - Does your child ever stay with you? Do the arrangements change when you are well/unwell?
 - What effect has living apart had on you and your child?

Important points to note

- Phrase the questions in your own words as part of usual clinical assessment, monitoring and review processes.
- Make sure your language is appropriate for each consumer's circumstances.
- Basic principles of empathy, understanding and respect apply.
- For an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander consumer the involvement of an Indigenous mental health worker is recommended and the Cultural Respect Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health should be considered.
- For a consumer from a non-English speaking background, it is recommended that an interpreter and/or transcultural mental health worker be consulted.