

Making Sure ‘The Kids Are Alright’: Parenting & Depression

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As any parent knows, children require a lot of attention. Regardless of their age, they rely on their parents to teach, nurture and support them. Parents suffering from depression, however, often experience functional limitations that may prevent them from fully participating in their children’s care.

Moderate to severe depression may impact the completion of routine, but necessary, tasks such as attending a school play, helping with homework, or arranging play-dates. Research tells us that children raised in homes with a depressed parent may face increased risks of developing social, emotional and behavioral problems, and are more likely to underachieve in school and, later, at work.

Children may not recognize that their parent is ill. However, if a parent’s behavior has changed significantly, children can find this confusing and frightening, often producing anxiety in the child. If the depression is severe, causing hospitalizations or prolonged absence from the home, the children may be more vulnerable to negative consequences. Additional assistance, from extended family, relatives and friends can be helpful in supporting both the depressed parent and the child.

When a child is able to sense something is wrong, parents should be prepared to discuss the situation with their child. Parents should emphasize that the depression is no one’s fault, that it is an illness that a doctor can and will treat. If they are old enough to distinguish different feelings, depression can be explained as a very extreme kind of sadness that leaves a person feeling tired and with less energy. Reassure children that the depression will get better and that their needs will be taken care of, even if someone else may be helping to see that certain things get done.

Young children are naturally egocentric, thinking only about their own needs and how they fit into the world. Without sufficient attention, they can feel their parent’s depression must be something they caused, that they aren’t good enough or that they are unloved. Children’s feelings need to be addressed paying particular attention to the possibility of hidden resentments, guilt, and fear. In some cases, children, particularly as they get older, feel it’s their obligation to take care of the parent, reversing the roles of parent and child. Assessing the impact of depression, not only on the individual, but also on the entire family, is critical. Frequent family therapy can help with these issues.

When one or both parents have untreated depression, acute disability, or limited functionality, it’s recommended that the parent enlist “extra help.” Delegate responsibilities to people who are able to assist. The support and help from extended family members, friends or surrogate aides (e.g., babysitter, neighbor) may be necessary.

Above all, it’s very important for children to know that regardless of their parent’s health, they are loved. There can never be too many hugs and kisses, words of endearment and patience practiced by everyone.

Additional Information:

- To find out more about family therapy, talk to your mental health specialist (psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, primary care physician) or contact the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (www.aamft.org) to locate a local therapist.
- Recommended reading: “What’s Happened to Mommy” by Renee Fran and “Why Are You So Sad?: A Child's Book About Parental Depression,” by Beth Andrews.