

# Chronic Physical Illnesses:

## the Effects on Mental Health

Factsheet for parents and teachers

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*Children with a long-lasting physical illness are twice as likely to suffer from emotional problems or disturbed behaviour. This is especially true of physical illnesses that involve the brain, such as epilepsy and cerebral palsy.*

### Why are mental health problems so common?

Serious illness or disability can cause a lot of work and stress for everyone in the family, especially the parents. Children who are ill have many more stressful experiences than children without an illness. Most children will, at some time, get upset by this. Sometimes, the upset feelings and behaviour can go on and on. If they do, this can add to the child's health problems by making their life even more difficult. Some illnesses and/or their treatments, also have direct effects on the brain and its function, just as illness can effect the kidneys, the liver, or other organ systems.

### How does this affect the child and family?

Following the diagnosis of a potentially serious or long-term illness, most parents and children go through a process of coming to terms with it.

<http://www.trippin.co.nz>

## Long-term effects

The affected child might have fewer opportunities to learn everyday skills, and to develop their interests and hobbies. Educational problems are also common:

- Your child might have to miss a lot of school and have particular difficulties with learning.
- Be sure to be in touch with your child's teacher on a regular basis. Your child might need extra help at school.
- Your child might see themselves as different from other children, and they hate this.
- Some children may become depressed (see Factsheet 34 on depression in children and young people).
- Some children may be vulnerable to bullying (see Factsheet 18 on the emotional cost of bullying).

It is easy for you as parents to be overprotective of your child. You may find it harder to say 'no' than you normally would, making it difficult to control your child. It is harder to allow them to manage the 'rough and tumble' of childhood. Sometimes it can be difficult and confusing to cope with all the different doctors, and other professionals involved with your child's illness. This can be very stressful for everyone.

Brothers and sisters sometimes feel that they are being neglected. They may feel embarrassed by their brother or sister. They may feel responsible for them. They can miss out on school or their social life, get bullied or lose friendships.

## How to help

It's very important to remember that although long-lasting illness does make things very difficult, most children and their families cope well. It is only a minority who experience problems in adjustment at a degree which seriously interferes with their ability to manage their lives.

- Live as normal a life as possible.
- Be open with your child about their difficulties.
- Restrict them as little as possible.
- Help them to get out and about with other children of their own age.
- Encourage your child to be as independent as possible.
- Meet other families with similar experiences.
- Seek help if you feel that you're not managing.

A lot can be done to prevent further problems developing. Parents who appreciate the emotional impact of the illness on the child, and on the rest of the family, are much better placed to spot problems early and do something about them.

## Where can I get help?

Making sure that there is enough help and support is very important. In addition to support from family and friends, try:

- paediatricians
- your general practitioner
- voluntary support groups
- social services
- school
- health visitor
- school nurse.

If there are signs that your child is developing emotional or behavioural problems, your general practitioner can refer you to the local child and adolescent mental health service for specialist advice. They may suggest that some family work could be helpful. Also, it often helps to link up with the other professionals involved in the ill child's care. This can help sort out any problems related to the treatment, and make sure that everyone is working together effectively.

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