

Children and hardship

Stuff happens

Looking after three children on her own has not been easy for Denise. Sometimes the pressure gets to her and she feels like she can't cope at all.

She doesn't know how she would manage without her 11-year-old daughter Alison. Every morning Alison makes the lunches and gets the younger children to school. She makes the dinner when Denise is not feeling well, and makes sure the washing up gets done.

Recently Denise got sick and had to give up her part-time job. Then they had to move house. Alison helped to organise things and looked after her little brother and sister too.

Just lately, though, something seems to be troubling Alison. She hasn't been as patient with the younger children as usual. The other day she lost her temper with Denise. "Why can't you look after us like other mothers do?" she said.

Denise was very upset. She wondered whether she had been relying too much on Alison. She worried that Alison might be having trouble coping too.

Life can be challenging

Families and children may experience pressures for reasons that they can't control. In the story above, Alison's family has had to face lots of challenges. Her Mum has been struggling with her health and her finances, while trying to bring up three children on her own. Alison has been her main support, but now it seems the responsibility may be wearing Alison down.

Is Alison likely to develop difficulties as her mother fears? Perhaps. It depends a lot on what else is going on for Alison, at school, with her friends, and with other important people in her life.

Mental health risk factors

The sorts of things that make it more likely that children will experience mental health difficulties are known as mental health risk factors. Risk factors are things that put stress on the child or family and make it harder for them to cope.

Examples of risk factors that can affect children's mental health include:

- experiencing serious illness – either the child or a member of the family
- having no friends and/or being bullied
- high levels of family conflict
- experience of trauma or abuse
- having a parent with mental health problems
- family financial problems.

Things that protect mental health

Just because one or more risk factors are present for an individual child it doesn't mean that the child will necessarily develop a mental health difficulty. When protective factors are present they help to balance out the risk of developing mental health difficulties. Examples of protective factors include:

- having a supportive parent, carer and/or teacher
- doing well at school
- having a positive coping style
- getting help with worries early
- having support from wider family, friends and community members.

How parents and carers can help

When children are exposed to mental health risk factors it is helpful to try to build up protective factors to support their mental health. Some of the ways you can do this include:

- Spend time listening to your child and help her or him to feel understood and loved.
- Take time out to have fun when you can – play games, go to the park, watch a movie together as a family.
- Set up a support network with people you trust (ie family and close friends). Talk through with them how they can best support you and your children during times when you have trouble.
- Teach your children what to do and who to contact when they need support.
- Help children learn coping skills for understanding and managing feelings. See the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on social and emotional learning for further ideas.
- Ensure your child's class teacher knows about any difficulties that may impact on your child's attitudes and behaviour at school. Schools may be able to provide:
 - extra support from school staff
 - special programs aimed at boosting children's coping skills
 - information that can help your child realise that they are not the only ones dealing with 'family stuff'
 - information about where to get further support for your child and your family.

Stuff happens

- Life is full of challenges. Some families face greater challenges than others.
- Challenges may build up slowly or strike suddenly. In the case of chronic illness, they may come and go repeatedly during a child's life.
- Sometimes these challenges get in the way of a child leading a happy, healthy and successful life.
- Having support from family, friends and school can help to protect children's mental health and build resilience to help them cope with challenges.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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