

The impact that a serious illness can have on a child

When someone in a family has a serious illness children may experience a number of difficulties and changes to their lives. The ways in which they cope with these depends on their individual circumstances and the influencing factors.

Influencing factors

- Who is ill (e.g. parent, sibling, grandparent) and the role that person has played in their life
- Their relationship with the person who is dying
- The nature and stage of the illness
- Their age and level of understanding
- Their support network
- How those around them are affected by the situation
- The level of disruption to their daily life
- What they have been told about what is happening
- Overhearing adults conversations but not understanding all the details

Difficulties and changes that children may face

Children can experience a whole range of emotional and behavioural changes or difficulties that impact on their lives at home and at school. These can include:

- Experiencing a range of emotions including shock, disbelief, sadness, fear, anger, confusion etc.
- Witnessing the grief and stress of those around them
- Seeing the physical and mental deterioration of the person who is ill
- Being frightened that other people they care about will die too
- Being scared they might die
- Feeling that it is their fault
- Worrying about who will look after them
- Feeling they need to put on a brave face to protect others in the family
- Finding it hard to sleep

There may also be practical changes to their routines and life at home:

- Life being dominated by hospital appointments or hospital visiting
- Constant reminders within the home such as a stair-lift, ramp, wheelchair, bed downstairs, commode, regular visits from health professionals, lots of phone calls
- Taking on a carer role for the ill person or for siblings
- Taking on more responsibilities within the home such as cooking, cleaning and ironing
- Financial difficulties caused by the illness; the ill parent is unable to work and the well parent may also have to stop working to take on the carer role
- In single-parent families there may not be another adult to give support
- Pre-existing difficulties within the family may become heightened

These changes may lead to children:

- Feeling frustrated that the ill person is unable to do the things with them that they used to be able to do e.g. play games or football, take them to school
- Feeling neglected as the focus of attention shifts to the person who is ill or the well parent being too busy or tired to spend time with them
- Feeling bored that they are not able to have friends round, make lots of noise, or do out of school activities
- Finding it hard to concentrate at school; worrying about the ill person or what they will find when they get home that day, or feeling very tired
- Feeling that friends are treating them differently, sometimes in unexpected and negative ways such as name calling and teasing
- Feeling different from all their friends
- Finding it hard to manage their feelings; getting into arguments or fights with friends, getting into trouble at school
- Worrying about caring for the person who is ill.

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