

Help, Hope, and Healing

ReDiscover



Parents Can Find Hope and Help for Kids with Bipolar

Sometimes parents cry when they receive the news that their child has Bipolar Disorder.

Parents naturally feel concern, fear, and even helpless about what could be ahead. Yet few moms and dads who hear the diagnosis doubt that something is seriously wrong with their child. Diagnosis for early-onset Bipolar Disorder typically occurs after months or years of living with a troubled child who may have a history of very unstable moods, noticeable difficulty learning, and obvious problems making and keeping friends.

The official diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder can be a traumatic event for parents, but it can also be a turning point that brings hope and help to the entire family.

Dr. Nancy Osborn is a ReDiscover psychologist who specializes in working with youth and families in ReDiscover's Adult and Family Services program. "Once the child's illness is identified, the good news is that real help can be found. It can be a relief to the entire family to finally have an understanding of what is behind the problems the child is experiencing."

What kind of problems does Bipolar Disorder cause?

Warning signs of early-onset Bipolar Disorder include hyperactivity, extreme temper tantrums, irritability, and difficulty sleeping. Unstable moods may cycle quickly from feeling hopeless and depressed to feeling energized and grandiose. Red flags for parents can include destructive rages, particularly if the rages are long in duration; a significant change in school performance or relationships with others, or a child trying daredevil-type stunts like attempting to leap out of a moving car or jump from a window.

What can a parent do?

First, get past the stigma of mental illness. Bipolar Disorder is not a reflection of the child's character or the family's parenting skills. As with other chronic medical conditions such as diabetes or asthma, Bipolar Disorder is a significant physical health impairment that requires special ongoing treatment and care.

Dr. Osborn has worked with children for over 20 years, helping kids and families who range from moderately to extremely challenged. She advises, “Learn all you can about Bipolar Disorder. Read articles and books. Join support groups and network with other parents who are also living with the struggle of managing this illness. It is particularly important to have your child’s symptoms assessed by a mental health professional that specializes in working with children. Seek out mental health services for the child as well as for your own needs. It is critical that parents help the child successfully navigate this illness. One of the most important roles for the parent is to advocate for the child.”

But how does a parent become an instant advocate for a child who has a mental illness that they may not know much about?

“Start by connecting with the people in your child’s life. For many parents that means reaching out to the child’s school,” says Marsha Palmer-Thelwell, a Program Manager and Licensed Clinical Social Worker for ReDiscover’s School & Community Services. Through her program, ReDiscover has worked with students at over 52 schools in the Kansas City metro area. “Bipolar Disorder and the medications used to treat it can affect a child’s school attendance. Your child’s teacher is already active in your child’s life. The child needs and is entitled to accommodations in school to benefit from education. Having the family and the school involved in the child’s treatment plan can help improve the child’s ability to function successfully. A strong treatment plan can help restore wellness.”

What is a treatment plan?

“A treatment plan is a way for parents to approach managing the child’s illness,” says Alan Flory, President and CEO of ReDiscover, a community mental health agency that serves Lee’s Summit and southern Jackson County. “For parents with children who have Bipolar Disorder, a treatment plan may include taking medication, learning ways to effectively monitor the child’s symptoms, formally learning about the illness, creating strategies to reduce stress, increase good nutrition, maintain regular sleep and exercise, and finding ways to participate in a network of support, including counseling or psychotherapy for the child and the family.”

When a child is diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder or any illness, two of the most important decisions a parent can make are to decide to learn how to recognize and manage their child’s symptoms and to decide to do what it takes to advocate for others to help the child manage.