

MHCC and DoCS partnership provides support for children and families affected by parental dual diagnosis

My mum is sick again. She gets sick a lot. This time she had to go away to hospital. I hate it when that happens because it means that my brother James and I have got to stay with a foster family for a while, like where we are staying now.

You see, our Mum has a mental illness and she takes bad drugs. She gets upset sometimes – she cries a lot and just sits around the house or she gets really crazy and busy and goes out late at night. When she’s not around to look after us, it can be a bit scary. One time we didn’t know where she was and had to call the cops.

I worry about mum...I wish she was more like other mums. I get really angry that she seems so weird. My friend Ashley’s dad is kind of the same - when he drinks he goes a bit funny – but most kids I know have normal mums and dads. How come my family has to be so different?

(Excerpt from *The Flying Dream*, Samantha Tidy, 2005)

The Dual Diagnosis Support Kit was launched on 6 February 2006 and is now available to support families affected by parental dual diagnosis across NSW. The Kit is the result of over two years work by the National Illicit Drug Strategy Dual Diagnosis Project – a partnership between MHCC and NSW Department of Community Services. Funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, the Dual Diagnosis Project was developed in recognition of the growing numbers of children affected by parental dual diagnosis in child protection and health services in NSW.

Research indicates that children affected by parental mental illness and substance misuse are at heightened risk for mental health and behavioural disorders, homelessness and substance use disorders, and child abuse and neglect. These children are also placed in out of home care at higher rates than other groups, which further increases their risk for adverse mental health outcomes. Research has also indicated, that where possible, timely access to information and support services can assist in reducing the risks for children.

The Support Kit forms part of a comprehensive approach to educating workers and carers about parental dual diagnosis, and complements a series of training packages available to NGOs and carer groups. The Dual Diagnosis Support Kit includes:

1. An Information Booklet for workers including information about parental dual diagnosis, impacts on children, strategies for supporting families and specific information about co-existing mental illnesses and drug or alcohol problems.
2. The Foster Carer Booklet is intended for carers with children in their care whose parents have a dual diagnosis and includes strategies for supporting children in their care.
3. The Parent’s Booklet was developed to assist parents affected by dual diagnosis around issues of parenting and to raise parent’s awareness of potential impacts on children.
4. A set of age-appropriate books and resources for children and young people affected by parental dual diagnosis. The children’s books include stories

written by Australian author Samantha Tidy, exploring children's thoughts and feelings in coping with parental dual diagnosis and out of home care.

The Blue Polar Bear - tells the story of Billy, whose father has a mental health problem, which is made worse by eating the Bluespike Eel - a type of eel that can make you very sick. Aimed at 5-7 year olds this story explores issues of separation and encourages children to talk to supportive people about their feelings.

And in The Flying Dream - Casey's mum is sick again – and Casey and little brother James are staying in foster care. This book is written for 8-12 year olds and addresses issues of hospital visitation and feelings of responsibility and parentification. It too encourages children to talk to someone they trust and to participate in activities that help them cope.

An Information Z-card for adolescents also provides information about parental dual diagnosis, coping strategies and support services for young people (13-16 years) who are affected by parental dual diagnosis.

Frontline workers, carers and families have applauded the development of the package. So far, 10,000 kits have been distributed to DoCS frontline workers, NGO and government health, mental health, drug and alcohol services, family support, child health, refuges, community Drug Action Teams, and government and non-government schools. The kit will also be placed in state and regional libraries.

The Dual Diagnosis Support Kit can be ordered or downloaded via the DoCS website www.community.nsw.gov.au