

Understanding the impact of parents' mental illness

10 November 2014, by David Ellis

Research from the University of Adelaide has found that the children of parents suffering from an emotionally unstable form of personality disorder are at risk of developing behavioural and emotional issues - but the children can also be protected from experiencing similar difficulties to their parents.

For her PhD research, Dianna Bartsch in the University's School of Psychology has surveyed clinicians who work with parents who have been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD) and their families.

BPD is a [mental illness](#) that affects approximately 1-2% of people in the general population. It is categorised by difficulty managing emotions, impulsive and self-harming behaviour, intense and unstable relationships, chronic feelings of emptiness, stress-related paranoia and other symptoms.

In a paper published in the journal *Personality and Mental Health*, Mrs Bartsch says clinicians have identified a number of potential impacts on [children](#) whose parents suffer from BPD.

"The most frequently cited issues for children are behavioural problems - which may include impulsive and in some cases self-destructive behaviour - and situations where the child takes on a parental role," Mrs Bartsch says.

"Inability to express or regulate emotions, difficulties establishing and maintaining relationships, and feelings of guilt, shame and emptiness were also noted among children of parents with borderline personality disorder.

"Our further research with parents has shown that they may also suffer from stigma because of their condition and that this can be a barrier to accessing appropriate supports. It's important for us to discuss these issues so we can increase understanding in the community, reduce judgment

of the parents and focus on how to support and reduce the risk for vulnerable families," she says.

Mrs Bartsch's research suggests that the most common strategies for protecting children include providing them with supportive role models - such as an extended family member or member of the local community - and therapy for the children as well as the parents.

Her research has also produced a model to explain the potential for behavioural and emotional problems to be transmitted from one generation to the next in cases of borderline personality disorder. "More research is needed to further test and validate this model. However, it is hoped that through improving the understanding of parenting experiences within this population, [clinicians](#) can tailor their interventions to support this group, and ultimately reduce the risk of mental health problems among children," she says.

"While the symptoms of BPD may present challenges for some families, it's important to note that individuals with a diagnosis of BPD may still be capable [parents](#)," Mrs Bartsch says.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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