

CHILDREN & MENTAL HEALTH

HOW COULD AN EARLY DIAGNOSIS AFFECT MY CHILD?

Labels are terms that we use to define or describe a person or thing. Whilst labelling can include simple things like 'she's smart,' labelling is also at play when we apply a diagnostic term to a child's mental health. When parents believe that their child may be struggling with a mental health disorder, they are faced with a tough decision about whether or not to pursue a diagnosis for their child and make them aware of it.

Even though research has found that around **1** in every **7** young people in Australia experience a mental health disorder, research into how a mental health disorder diagnosis affects young people is relatively scarce. However, the research interest is growing and there are resources available to help make sense of the difficult situation. Below are some of the arguments and research findings that can inform this decision...



HOW COULD A DIAGNOSIS HELP MY CHILD?

Diagnosis is often the first step to getting effective and life-changing treatment and support for mental health problems. Early intervention is often critical for addressing mental health issues.

A diagnosis helps people close to your child better understand and support them.

Some young people find a diagnosis empowering. It can help them understand why they might struggle with things other children do not.

A diagnosis can connect your child to other young people with similar challenges. Many young people find this comforting and helpful.



HOW COULD A DIAGNOSIS HARM MY CHILD?

Some people fear that applying a label to a young child can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the child will eventually demonstrate the behaviour of a disorder simply because of how they are treated and others' expectations.

Some young people struggle to accept their diagnosis because of the stigma around mental illness. This can cause intense emotional pain and distress for a young person.

Some children do not like how a diagnosis may change how people treat them. Some resent being treated as if they are incapable of doing things that they know they can do.

Some children are not mature enough to understand their diagnosis and therefore may not be able to benefit greatly from it.



WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

HOW MIGHT MY CHILD FEEL ABOUT A DIAGNOSIS?

Young people often feel many different ways about their diagnosis over time, and as a parent you can probably expect your child to express many different opinions about their diagnosis, both positive and negative. When reflecting on being diagnosed as children, young adults often see the diagnosis as a process that led to both stigmatisation and empowerment.

Research has found that children who have received a diagnosis may feel that they are treated differently because of their behaviour.

Children may be aware of more than you might think – they are reported to have noticed that their behaviour can bother peers and teachers as well as embarrass their parents.

Many of the struggles young people experience with their diagnosis are hard to separate from the disorder itself. A diagnosis does however provide a term and label for the child to express their troubles. It is worth noting that not all young people report experiencing discrimination as a result of a diagnosis.

"To be perfectly honest with you I'm fine with it because say I didn't have it I would have turned out a completely different person and my life would have gone in a completely way. Again yeah I've got it and it sometimes it upsets what I do but it's a small compromise with friends that I've got..."



WILL PEOPLE TREAT MY CHILD DIFFERENTLY AFTER A DIAGNOSIS?

Children have reported teasing and bullying from peers due to their differences, however just how much of this is a direct result of a diagnosis research is yet to find out.

Research has found however that parents may guide their children to avoid other children they believe to have a mental health disorder. Importantly, such research has also found that parents being aware of another young child's diagnosis doesn't really change how much they would stigmatise a child. Often, the symptoms of the disorder alone are what drives people to stigmatise those with mental illness. That is, diagnosis is not required for stigmatisation, and might not make much of a difference.

The researchers from this study argue that because there is such a small difference, the benefits of diagnosis likely outweigh the potential small increase in stigmatisation.



WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE SAY ABOUT DIAGNOSES?

THE GOOD THINGS

"A lot of people think 'Oh, it's a label' and all of a sudden it has to be some sort of prejudice - but I think that is sort of like a secure sort of thing for me. And just finding out that problems that I was dealing with were real problems and that they actually had names and labels and that they have diagnosis and treatments for that sort of thing. And that was a really secure thing for me."

"My Mom understands me."

"...if I know what is happening to myself, the attitude, even the effect of the treatment will be different."

"My mates look out for me."

"I saw it as more officially a problem once it was recognised by Dr F, you know, like medically. He told me you have to do something about it...because before that it just seemed like oh, if I just ignore it, it'll go away."



"Then I feel like I just want to be left alone, but I really want someone to tell me they understand."



I HAD TROUBLE WITH...

"Some people say I'm dumb because I'm slower. I just ignore it. I don't let it get to me, because, you know, I don't think those things are true."

"...a psychiatrist person told me that I had it and stuff, and then I was scared, and I told him that I didn't have it, and I refused to think that I had it."

"I feel like I am marked. Like people just have, some people just kind of treat me different, and I don't want to be treated different, I just wanted to be treated how I was."

"Because I told [peers] about my ADHD, they thought if they could wind me up I'd get really upset and they love to do that...They [teachers] know what I'm like but I don't think they really know how hard it is for me to cope."

"I wish people would notice that I'm, like, behaving well, but most people concentrate on bad behavior."

HOW COULD A DIAGNOSIS AFFECT OLDER CHILDREN?

"I wanted to be labelled because I suddenly knew what I could do and I knew there was a way I could cope with that problem once it had been identified."

Although research has found no 'perfect age' to diagnose a young person, it has discovered that young people who had a delayed diagnosis stated that they would have preferred to receive their diagnosis earlier.

Research suggests that a knowledge and understanding of psychiatric labels in young people makes them less likely to see mental illness as a sign of weakness. Additionally, young people who are aware of accurate labels are not only more likely to seek help, but also to seek professionally recommended sources for support. This suggests that accurate labels may actually help young people to fight stigma around mental illness.

"At first I was like, 'no, I can't be bipolar.' That's just not me. I don't want to be it and then when I started actually seeing what was really going on, I'm just like, oh my god, I can't believe I just said that I wasn't this, and now I am."

"I wanted them to have their own opinion before they find out something that could...you know, let them treat me differently...I didn't want to be perceived as different."

Adolescents often report that diagnoses help them validate their life experience and feel a strong sense of relief and hope. However, many adolescents still experience the effects of mental illness stigma, with some studies finding that labels lead to children being treated as different and abnormal by others.

Some adolescents express that they feel a diagnostic label affects their sense of identity too much and prefer more generic and normalising language when seeking help. Others will outright reject their diagnosis, and fear being seen as a 'freak.' On the other hand, diagnoses can be helpful as they help adolescents to separate symptoms from their 'true self,' and therefore maintain a better self-image.

"Well it's like a label I've always had, and I've always been different. I've never really fit in, I always felt different, and now I know why."

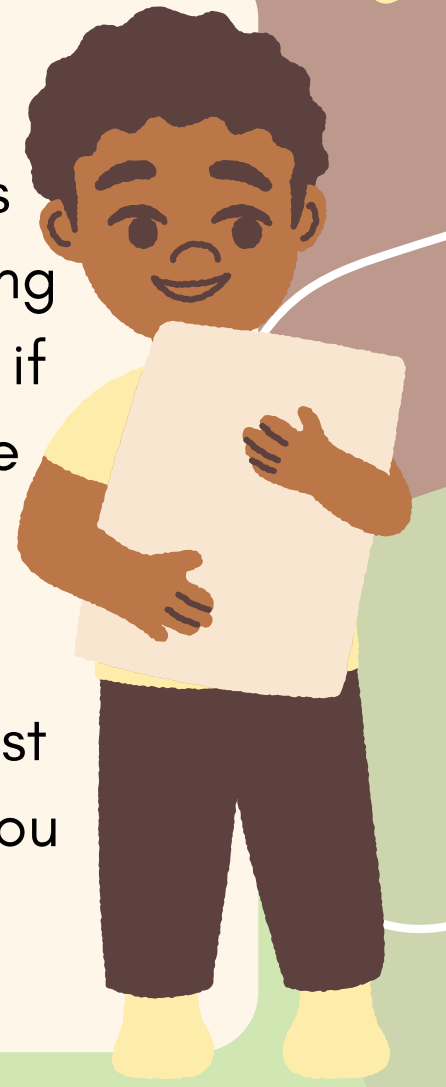


WHAT'S NEXT?

SUMMARY

Many young people experience different emotions and opinions about their diagnosis over time, with some finding it empowering and others never accepting it. Whilst deciding whether you should inform your child of their diagnosis can be difficult, it is crucial that if your child is expressing symptoms of mental illness that you ensure they have adequate support and access to mental health services.

Sending your child to therapy does not mean that they have to receive an immediate diagnosis, and your mental health professional will be able to discuss your options. Whilst young people who experience mental health issues have mixed opinions on diagnosis, you can be sure of their need for help and support.



WHAT CAN I DO?

You can book an appointment to discuss your concerns about diagnosis with your child's GP. From there, they may refer you to a mental health professional who can provide you with more detailed information and options for treatment.

If you have a diagnosis for your young child, whether or not you inform them of it, you can make positive change for them by working with their school to identify supports and tools to suit their needs.

Many parents also find it rewarding to reach out to other families who have children with the same diagnosis or symptoms for understanding and guidance. See below for some places to start.



RESOURCES

Headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, providing support to young people aged 12-25 years, but it also has resources and regular online sessions for parents of young people with mental health issues <https://headspace.org.au/services/parent-and-carer-events/>

SANE is a mental health resource that has a large moderated forum space for families, friends and carers of those with mental health issues to connect <https://saneforums.org/t5/Friends-Family-Carers-Forum/ct-p/carers-forum>

See here for an in-depth list of resources available to you which you may find useful [https://www.adolescenthealth.org/SAHM_Main/media/Clinical-Care-Resources/Mental-Health-One-pager-for-Parents_jhedt-FINAL-\(002\).pdf](https://www.adolescenthealth.org/SAHM_Main/media/Clinical-Care-Resources/Mental-Health-One-pager-for-Parents_jhedt-FINAL-(002).pdf)

