



GETTING THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

Unmasking stigma: Effects on families

Before you start ...

There are some important things to know before continuing.

Voices of lived experience

This fact sheet is part of a series we created with families who have been through tough times to spark hope and new ideas about how to recognise and respond to stigma.

We hope these resources have something to offer all families, but recognise they are simply a snapshot reflecting the lived experiences of the families who helped us create them – other families will have different experiences and stories.

We also intentionally create resources that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of *knowing, being and doing* with guidance from our National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultancy Group and partners.

For more information please see emergingminds.com.au/working-with-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples

Language notes: 'Parents'

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. In our resources, the term 'parent' encompasses biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising children. Our resources aim to support families and the children in their care. We acknowledge that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Hopefully you have had a chance to read our fact sheet [Unmasking stigma: Types of stigma](#). Now we will take a closer look at some of the many ways that families and children can be effected by stigma.

Before you continue, take a moment to think about ...



- What effects has stigma had on your family?
- Is it easy or hard to notice when you are experiencing the effects of stigma – or does it depend on the circumstances?
- What makes it easier to notice stigma and its effects?

Effects of stigma on children

Stigma can affect children's wellbeing in a few different ways. For example, if they are treated differently because of their race, religion, sexuality or some other part of who they are, they might feel sad, ashamed or 'not good enough'.

Or if a child hears people talk negatively about or make fun of mental health issues, it can make kids who are struggling with their mental health feel even worse. They might feel like they have to hide their feelings or that something is wrong with them, which can make it harder for them to get the help they need.

So, stigma not only affects how people treat children; it may also affect how children feel about themselves and their ability to get support.

Effects of stigma on families

Stigma impacts families by contributing to the effects of:

- poverty
- poorer health outcomes and shorter life expectancy
- exclusion from employment, education or services
- experiencing interpersonal violence
- experiencing state violence through police, prisons, child protection and immigration authorities.^{1, 2, 3, 4}

For example, when rental agents discriminate against single parents and children applying for a house, it can prevent many families accessing secure, long-term housing. Without a permanent address, it can be harder to get welfare payments, to get a job, to open a bank account

or to enrol children in school. That stress can make a parent feel the only option they have is to return to a living situation where their family experiences violence. In returning to a family violence situation, police and child protection authorities may become involved, meaning the family experiences even more stigma and discrimination.

Stigma can also have many social and personal affects on families, as shared in the following stories.

Isolation and disconnection

Stigma can stop us from wanting to connect with others and put ourselves out there.

'For years, our kids wouldn't have their friends over to our house because of the behaviour of their dad who was distressed, the state of the house, and not having the "right" food. I knew the kids felt ashamed and that made me feel ashamed as well.'

Stigma can also make it less possible for us to participate in our communities. The organisers of local groups and activities may not even consider what they could do to reduce stigma and help people feel more comfortable about joining in.

To read more stories about how stigma effects connection with others and can make us feel isolated, check out our fact sheet, [Why are connection and belonging important?](#)

Feeling like you have to keep proving yourself, explaining yourself or educating others

When stigma only tells one story about who we are, it can feel like we need to:

- constantly defend ourselves
- prove that there is more to our story; and
- explain our story to show people what we are up against.

And often we are expected to educate others, including the people who are paid to help us.

'I felt like I had to explain things all the time and I had to share my story (around violence and around what I felt was living my life in a "bad" way) so that people could put it into context. I had a really visceral feeling that people could see my stigma. I felt like people couldn't see the context and the nuances of all these things that I felt shame about, which is why I thought I had to explain it to get people to understand. And of course, that made it worse because then people made their own judgements about me because of what I was telling them. So, it was like this ongoing cycle.'

‘Educating people is incredibly exhausting. It is a massive burden, and people who are experiencing stigma are considered somehow expert enough that they’re the ones who are expected to explain the entirety of the entire history of this issue for everyone they speak to. Yet also they are treated as if they don’t know anything. And therefore, other people tell you “Oh, I know how to help you. Have you tried juicing?” I got told to juice multiple times and that would fix my depression – so dumb! Somehow you are supposed to be both an idiot and also a master educator, and it is incredibly, viscerally exhausting.’

– Harley, young person from a rural area

Having to hide things

On the other hand, parents, carers and children can feel like we have to hide or not share about certain parts of our identity or experience because we know or fear that people will treat us differently. Sometimes this can have us telling our children to hide things to keep us or them safe.

‘When my son from my previous relationship was young, his grandmother was exceedingly religious and we didn’t want her to know I was transitioning gender because I worried, “If they find out they’ll take me to court, they’ll take my son away from me”. I was terrified. I thought,

“There’s no way I’m going to lose this boy”. No way. We had to tell him that he wasn’t allowed to tell anyone because it would not go down well. Once he slipped up, he said on the phone: “Oh, Dad’s in bed”. He felt really bad, he didn’t like keeping secrets. It was hard to say, “Look, you’re not allowed to keep secrets from us. We’re your parents. But you have to keep this secret from them because it could be bad”. It was really difficult. And he’s very secretive now. He doesn’t tell us a lot of stuff. I feel a certain level of guilt and shame about this, but I realise now that it was the only thing I could do at the time to protect myself and my son.’

‘When I was little, I was basically the mum. I was seven years old raising a newborn, a 12-year-old and a 13-year-old. I wouldn’t talk to no-one. My mum kept putting in my head that if I told anyone about what was happening that us kids would get taken off her by child protection. I would always lie every single day. Being a 7-year-old, having a newborn, being the parent towards him ... I would always tell a little bit of a lie and say that “I’ve got an appointment” or “I left something at home”. I would have to literally leave school to go feed him, change his nappy and everything.’

– Evelyn, young person from a rural area



JORDAN, 9 YEARS OLD

Impacts on our relationships and how we parent

Stigma doesn't just get used against families, it can show up inside our families and how we treat each other. It can pit us against each other and create disconnection. And in many ways can get in the way of parents and carers looking after our children in the way we want to.

'My son didn't want me to speak Farsi at school and he wants me to speak English. And I keep talking to him that "Yeah, you are half Australian, half Iranian", and he's just proud of his half Australian. And he talks about that more. It hurts me.'

'Not being "normal"; being told constantly that you are different to everybody else and that you need to blend in as best as possible so that nobody notices that you're "not normal". When you step out of that "normal" and what you're supposed to be, and then you get reprimanded for that, whether it's in the form of being bullied at school or your parent telling you to "shush" while out in public making a scene or things like that. That's what creates it.'

'Sometimes you will have parents that want to understand but don't know how to understand. And for a child who's already trying to work out their own situation to also have to educate the adult is so difficult and hard to navigate. And you can see that they're [the adults are] not trying to be stigmatising, but that's just how they were brought up.'

– KC, young person from a rural area

Blame and disbelief

Stigma can have us blaming each other and ourselves for things that are beyond our control. And it can mean we doubt ourselves or do not believe our loved ones when they tell us about what they are experiencing.

'All our kids are neurodivergent and both my mother and my mother-in-law did not believe in it. My mother actually said: "Why does there have to be something wrong with all of your kids?" and "They're just being naughty". My mother-in-law said their behaviour was because we were "Too soft as parents"... it was difficult explaining it to them because they just didn't want to hear it and they had made assumptions.'

'I was diagnosed with BPD [borderline personality disorder]. I would get told by my father to "just grow up" – he thought that my meltdowns were something I had complete control over and he often told me to "just get over it". My mum would try to convince my dad that this was something I didn't have control over and it was due to my BPD. This caused arguments between them, as my dad just didn't believe that I had a mental illness. He blamed my mum for "mollycoddling" me and said that I was just acting like a spoiled brat.'

– Renee, reflecting back on their childhood and youth

'It took me a long time to accept that I was doing my best as a parent and that a lot of the time that was in very hard circumstances that were not all of my own doing. I blamed myself for us being homeless and having nothing and I really felt I was a terrible parent. Now I can see that I was holding it together despite what was going on and helping the kids through it pretty well, but it takes a lot to come to that point and turn around this strong belief that because we were homeless, we were faulty, dodgy, bad, wrong.'

Hypervigilance

Even when families are not responding to stigma, they are often anticipating when they might experience it next. This 'hypervigilance' – trying to plan for imagined conversations or comments, constantly making assessments about our or our children's safety and times they might be harmed by stigma – can be exhausting.

'There was a scanning and a hypervigilance. You never know when something's going to come up. Part of your mind, constantly working. It's quite draining, tiring and painful.'

'People haven't so brazenly told me I'm too sensitive, but they've suggested it quite strongly. And it is completely ignoring the fact that when you've been dealing with really hard stuff from such a young age, your nerves are completely shocked. You are constantly running at 10. So you end up being a bit sensitive when things happen because you're so used to being "go, go, go". And you're so used to needing to show up and do things or have to redirect what you're doing so immediately to meet the needs or circumstances you're in that people will call you sensitive or easily scared or something, when really you're just in "go" constantly.'

– Harley, young person from a rural area

Shame

Stigma can create shame for children even at a very young age. And for many carers and parents, we may be experiencing shame from stigma happening in the present as well as from our past. You can read more about this in our fact sheet [Getting to know where shame comes from](#).

‘Having experiences where people would decide your worth or put shame on you ... You can go to a housing network with your family because you’re about to be homeless, and you need to wear your church clothes so you look good enough that they perceive you as worth their time. Otherwise they put you in the basket of “useless bum”. But if they put you in that basket, you suddenly hold all the shame and all the stigma that has to do with that, even if none of it has anything to do with you.’

– Harley, young person from a rural area

Stigma is slippery – but it also sticks

Stigma can be very slippery. It’s constantly changing shape and sticking to new identities and experiences.

We could never describe all the ways that stigma effects families. But we hope that this resource is like a pair of ‘x-ray glasses’ that help you more easily spot stigma when it shows up.

**Before you continue,
take a moment to
think about ...**



- What stood out to you so far from reading about stigma?
- What kinds of stigma did you notice in the stories of these families?
- What effects of stigma have you and your family experienced that were not included in this resource?
- Who or what helps you put on ‘x-ray glasses’ to see through stigma when it shows up in your family’s lives?

Next, you might like to explore our fact sheets on:

- how to avoid getting captured by stigma in [Standing against stigma](#)
- getting to know shame in [Getting to know where shame comes from](#); and
- the ways families respond in [Families standing up to shame and stigma](#).

Recommended resources on stigma

Dive deeper into podcasts

- The University of Melbourne’s *On the Same Wavelength* is a [podcast series about stigma and mental health](#).
- The *Voices in Action* podcast is breaking the stigma of children and young people living in care, while also empowering them to help create positive change in the system: create.org.au/podcast
- NCD Child’s *Stand Up Speak Out* podcast series on YouTube shares the [experiences of people living with chronic health conditions](#) to raise awareness, inspire change and combat harmful stigma.

Streaming for free

- Check out the [You can’t ask that series on iview.net.au](#).

Books

See if you can find these titles from the *Growing up ... in Australia* series at the library:

- *Growing up Aboriginal in Australia*
- *Growing up Asian in Australia*
- *Growing up African in Australia*
- *Growing up disabled in Australia*
- *Growing up queer in Australia*

(blackincbooks.com.au/series/growing-series)

AVAILABLE HERE

View all Shame and stigma resources



Are you a practitioner wanting to share this resource with a person or family?

First, check out our practitioner guide: emergingminds.com.au/resources/practitioner-guide-shame-and-stigma

Emerging Minds Families

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