



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.

When you hear the word stigma, what does it make you think of?

Stigma tries to tell one story about us while ignoring the context of our lives, what difficulties we are up against, what matters to us and all the other things that make up who we are.

What is stigma?

Stigma is made up of harmful ideas, assumptions or attitudes about an individual or a group of people based on a particular identity or experience (e.g. from being a single mother to cultural or racial identity, disability, or experiencing poverty or homelessness). When these harmful ideas, assumptions or attitudes are turned into words, actions, policies and laws, they become **discrimination**.

It is not always easy to spot stigma when it shows up in our lives, thoughts and actions, or in the lives of others. But the reality is that most of us will experience the effects of stigma at some time in our lives. And none of us are immune to believing or acting on stigmatising ideas, assumptions and attitudes about others, though it may be unconsciously done.

It takes work to see, respond to and change the impacts of stigma but it can be easier to create change by working together.

Our [Shame and stigma](#) collection of resources were created by families who have experienced stigma to help other families unmask, name and respond to stigma. Perhaps some of the stories will inspire you or remind you about the ways your family is already responding to stigma and reclaiming your lives from its effects.

“

It takes work to see, respond to and change the impacts of stigma but it can be easier to create change by working together.

Kinds of stigma

There are different kinds of stigma that effect our lives in different ways and they often interact with each other. As you'll see in the stories below, we may experience multiple, different types of stigma at the same time.

Public stigma

Public stigma includes harmful ideas, assumptions and attitudes held by those we are closest to (our family, friends and communities) and by strangers that shape what we see (and do not see) on TV and movies, in the news, in workplaces, on social media and in books.

Next, read some stories of families who have experienced public stigma.

Relationship assumptions

‘People assume that we (my foster parent and I) are mother and daughter. Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, and the terms ‘mum’ and ‘dad’ being everywhere all the time, can be very tricky and mean lots of fake smiles and lies.’

– A child in foster care

Getting shoved in a box before they have even talked to me

‘I have a service dog that comes around with me, so automatically there’s a visual to me not being normal, and I automatically get shoved into a box before they’ve even talked to me. I often get people touching me without my consent because they think I’m blind, or people just immediately thinking that they can ask what my disabilities are ... things like that. It’s really frustrating. I get asked the same question 500 times a day, so stop asking me!’

– KC, young person from a rural area

Isolation and making it harder to open up

‘Poverty is very isolating as a parent. Because you can’t really open up to the people who are in your life, which is often your children, because you wanna keep it from them. But you also find it hard to open up to friends because there was that whole stigma of being a parent. You have to be able to provide for your children and if you are living in poverty, then people see you as a bad parent.’

Being judged by our appearance

‘When the children and I were homeless, the longer we stayed homeless the more stigmatised we became. Because we were living in the car and a tent and driving to different towns to try and find a place to live, we didn’t have access to regular showers and the kids started to become a bit over the top in their behaviour. So we looked like this unshowered, unruly family, and me as a single mum on government benefits as well.

‘I had fudged my rental history to try and hide the homelessness but I would walk into a rental, the person would literally look me up and down, sometimes openly staring, and say, “Sorry there’s nothing available”, but on the website there would be lots, so I knew it wasn’t true. This was before housing became so rare and we should have been able to get a rental easily.’

The discrimination of being excluded

'We joined a parents group when we first moved down to Tasmania. We didn't know anyone and we just had a little six-month-old baby.

'Two years later we had the twins and then we discovered the twins had Autism. And we were talking about that with the other mothers and suddenly we started getting ostracised and it was like, "What's going on?" The other parents started to distance themselves from us. And eventually we stopped going to the group because they weren't engaging with us.

'That really impacted us as parents because that is people going, "There's something wrong with your kids and we don't want them near our kids." It was really hurtful for our kids because they lost all that connection that we had built up with those families. We felt really bad as parents because we thought we'd failed somehow.'

“

As a Muslim, I feel there is a high level of discrimination in my [local] community, which makes me feel unsafe.

SECONDARY STUDENT, SOUTH EAST QUEENSLAND, IN *VOICES OF HOPE: GROWING UP IN QUEENSLAND 2020*¹

Structural stigma

Structural stigma is when harmful ideas, assumptions and attitudes in our culture shape the:

- laws
- policies
- education system
- healthcare
- services; and
- employment opportunities.

Structural stigma shapes things like who is more likely to:

- be arrested or go to prison
- have their children removed from their care
- find a job or have enough work; and
- access sufficient healthcare.

Next, read some stories of families experiencing structural stigma.

Assumptions, suspicion and disbelief from service providers

'I remember when one of my children was quite young, still an infant, and we were in a really difficult situation and very isolated, I couldn't keep the house warm as we couldn't afford it. And she ended up getting quite sick with bronchiolitis.

'So I took her to the hospital. I'm trying to express how urgent I knew this situation was. I could tell the doctor placed me as just a poor, anxious mother. And we got sent home.

'I was incredibly lucky that somebody in my life was a trained nurse and she saw my daughter and she said, "You need to get into the hospital now". And on the way to hospital, her lips started turning blue. She could have died. I was poor and I looked poor, but I also have autism and come across as "different" in many situations. So stigma acted in my disabilities too.'

'People assuming because you come from a family where your parents are substance abusers, means that you automatically must be or that you have been sent in [to hospital or doctor] to get stuff for 'em. When in reality you have a fracture and pain and you actually need help, and them just associating you by a last thing or the fact that they've seen you with someone and deciding you are exactly the same as that.'

- Harley, young person from a rural area

'When I walked into a police station in a PTSD response over a recent action my violent ex had taken, the officer thought he already knew the situation. He saw an hysterical woman overreacting. As a result, he denied me the service his role offered - that of protecting me and my children from harm. Instead, he gave me ridiculous reasons about why someone had been on my property, looking through the windows and taking pictures - one being perhaps the electricity person was doing a meter reading. Stigma can result in differential treatment, mishearing, not listening to someone, or a denial of service.'

Racism in the family court system

'When I was in family court, my lawyer, the judge, everyone in that room were white Australian and they were deciding things for the best interest of my child and they didn't have basic knowledge about my culture, religion, and who I am.'

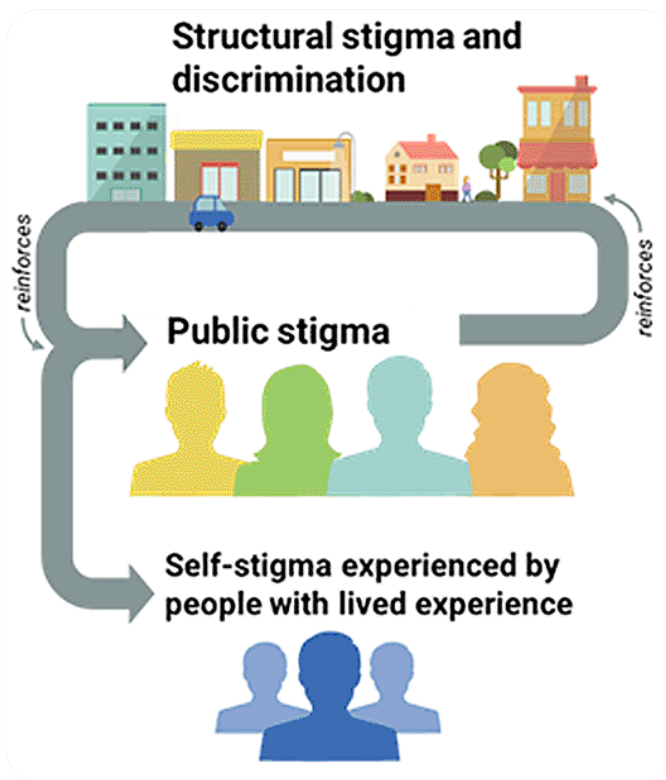
'I didn't see justice. It added to my mental health, I was depressed, stressed, anxious, upset. And when I was like that, it had an effect on my parenting and it's just like a loop that keeps going because of this issue in the system. I was really struggling, I couldn't sleep all night, reading my files. I tried to be a lawyer myself because my lawyer wasn't helping. And then in the morning I was tired, couldn't function very well. And that doesn't help because I was less of a good parent.'

Self-stigma

Having harmful ideas, assumptions and attitudes about our identity or an experience we have had put on us by others over and over can trick us into believing those things about ourselves. They can make us think we are the problem, blame ourselves, doubt our own knowledges, avoid others and stop us from seeking opportunities because of feelings of shame, unworthiness and self-doubt.

Figure 1. The stigma cycle²

This diagram shows how the different kinds of stigma reinforce each other. Structural stigma reinforces public stigma, and vice versa. And when we are exposed to structural and/or public stigma, we may come to believe those stereotypes or negative messages (self-stigma).



In the following stories, families share their experiences of self-stigma.

Not inviting people to visit because of shame

'When the kids were younger and making friends at school they would never invite them around. It wasn't just that we didn't have a lot of things and they were worried about being judged, it was also because our family in general held shame for them that I think they just wanted to get away from in any way possible. The shame of being poor, homeless, living in refuges, having a history of family violence and intervention. All that become this deep heaviness that was hard to get away from. It felt like it was carried around everywhere with us.'

Body shame

'I've experienced a lot of shaming towards bodily image or clothing and everything. It's really, really degrading and hard to cope. I know I used to get angry or now I get a little bit distant. Sadness is my main response now, knowing kind of where the shame stems from. It's caused the long-term effect of always questioning my outfits or whether it's too revealing or basically discriminating against myself from all the shame that I've experienced from others. So yeah, it's a long game trying to train my brain to know that it's OK to wear what you feel comfortable in.'

– Jess, young person from a rural area

Shame about being in foster care

'You don't, as a kid, have the confidence to tell them they aren't your mum (when people assume your foster parent is your biological mother). How do I tell people who don't know this info about me? When I have kids they will know I didn't live with my parents.'

– 15-year-old in foster care

When shame means missing out on school

'Our son knew that his mother was different to most other mothers because of her illness and was ashamed of what people thought about her and what they thought about him. One year he virtually spent half a year sitting in the corridor at school because he was too ashamed to go in and face his classmates. And the school didn't know how to deal with that.'

Self-stigma about mental illness and not getting help

'When I realised that I had a mental illness I was horrified. I was so ashamed, I didn't want to go to the GP. To me, mental illness happened to unfortunate people, unemployed, uneducated, weaker people, not people like me who had a job, a good family, good upbringing and an education. I believed that having a mental illness made me a failure and meant that I was weak. Self-stigma was so strong, it stopped me getting help for a long time and that had impacts for my family and children, too.'

These are just a few examples of stigma. Your experiences might have been very different.

It is not always possible to tell which type you are experiencing. But by unmasking stigma and the way it shows up in our lives we may be more able to respond to it and reduce the effects it has on our families.

Why is it helpful for parents to understand stigma?

When parents understand stigma, we can teach our children about empathy, inclusion and the importance of treating others with respect. Learning more about stigma and where it comes from can help families to see, understand and find ways to connect or reconnect if stigma is impacting our relationships with each other, or with others in our communities. It can also help parents to support and advocate for our families and children if we encounter stigma.

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



- Did any of these stories stand out to you or remind you of your own experiences?
- What kinds of stigma has your family experienced?
- So much stigma can be invisible – what has made it possible for you to notice the kinds of stigma that have impacted your family?



CAELIN, 16 YEARS OLD

Next you might like to explore our fact sheets on:

- how stigma affects families in [Unmasking stigma: Effects on families](#)
- how to avoid getting captured by stigma in [Standing against stigma](#); and
- the ways families respond in [Families standing up to shame and stigma](#).

Recommended resources on stigma

You can read more stories of families experiencing and responding to specific types of stigma in our following resources:

- Stigma around accessing welfare and support services in [Skills for navigating services](#).
- Stories about the stigma of living in poverty in [Experiences and skills of families living in poverty](#).
- Mothers share their families' experiences of surviving and responding to racism in [Struggling with money and racism at the same time](#).
- The stigma of experiencing homelessness in [Myths and misunderstandings about family homelessness](#).

Dive deeper into podcasts

- The University of Melbourne's *On the Same Wavelength* is a [podcast series about stigma and mental health](#).
- *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.abc.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

For more resources to support the mental health and wellbeing of your family visit emergingminds.com.au/families

Or you can follow us on social media or our podcast channel:

 [instagram.com/emergingmindsau](https://www.instagram.com/emergingmindsau)

 [facebook.com/EMFamilies](https://www.facebook.com/EMFamilies)

 emergingminds.com.au/families/podcasts

References

1. Queensland Family and Child Commission. (2020). *Voices of hope: Growing up in Queensland 2020*. Queensland Government.
2. National Mental Health Commission. (2022). *(Draft) National stigma and discrimination reduction strategy summary*. Australian Government.