

Supporting the Siblings of Individuals with Psychosis:

Tools for Parents and
Caregivers



About the Handbook



“Psychotic illness impacts the entire family, and the more we acknowledge that challenge, the easier it may be to find supportive paths forward.” - EASA Parent

Purpose

You already know this: Parents and caregivers play a crucial role in supporting all their children, especially when one child is experiencing mental health challenges. It can feel like a heavy lift at times. And yet, here you are. One decision, one moment at a time.

With this booklet, we hope to make this challenging time a little bit easier for you. It contains suggestions and tools to help the other children in the family understand what is going on, and to enhance THEIR well-being during their sibling’s recovery.

Remember...

- ◉ It’s a marathon, not a sprint.
You have plenty of time to develop and use these strategies.
- ◉ It’s understandable that you may want to try to ‘fix’ things or have things go back to the way they were before your child started experiencing symptoms
- ◉ Take a breath and then take things one step at a time. You have support as you navigate what your family is experiencing

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01

Memory of an EASA Parent



1.1 Memory of an EASA Parent

“My child, let’s call him Paul, is sobbing quietly in his room with the door closed. He doesn’t want me to see him. He says I have more important things to worry about. Paul’s older sister is in the midst of her first full episode of an early onset psychotic illness. I myself am scared and not sure what is happening. Now what?

As a parent, I found myself experiencing a doubly choking panic as I realized that I would not be able to protect Paul from the chaos and terror that accompanied a psychotic episode in our household.

Paul was also scared and extremely worried about having a seriously ill sister. He worried about seeing someone he loved suffer. He was confused by his sister’s unpredictable and violent behaviors. What would his friends think if she did something unexpected at school? He also had great anxiety about the likelihood of becoming ill himself. Does it run in the family? And what about the future? Would he end up having to take care of his sister? Would it be forever?

But maybe Paul’s sobbing is completely unrelated, something that happened at school today. High school is plenty hard just on its own. Does everything always have to be about his sister? Maybe he feels unseen and thinks he should be unseen. Psychosis seems to have sucked all the oxygen out of our lives.”

02

Let's Talk! Conversations 101



2.1 Let's Talk! Conversations 101

We know that parenting and caregiving can be full of ups and downs! Along the way, you will have conversations about many different topics. Leaving conversations about psychosis aside for now, here are some things to keep in mind when approaching conversations with your children.

Sticking to these principles will help your children engage and participate in the conversation:



Tips

- Be straightforward.
- Communicate at a level that fits your child's age and developmental level (see section 4: Know Your Audience)
- Ask your child if it is a good time to have the conversation (depending on their age) to ensure they feel safe, comfortable, and ready to talk
- Pay attention to how your child reacts during the discussion. Check in with them and slow down or back up if they are confused, upset, or need a break.



03

What do your other children need when their sibling is experiencing psychosis?



What do your other children need when their sibling is experiencing psychosis?

3.1 The Foundation:

*“Yeah, I mean there was a kind of lack of information. For me that was the most scary thing.” - **Sibling of a young person with psychosis***

- Provide honest information: Be real about the challenges the family faces and also highlight their sibling’s strengths and positive qualities and the supports and resources available to help them navigate what they are experiencing.
- Use clear language: Avoid medical terminology and explain things in a way that your children can understand.
- Use active listening: Truly listen to their concerns and perspectives without dismissing them. Reflect what you hear them say back to them to ensure you are understanding them.
- Maintain appropriate boundaries: You are going to need someone to talk to about your feelings. Find someone that you can let it all out with (not your children). With your children moderate your feelings and emphasize hope.
- Provide structure and predictability within your home: For children, predictability means safety and a sense of security, even when things with their sibling may feel unpredictable.
- At the same time, make needed adjustments to the rhythm and sensory load of your household to reduce the general stress level. Explain this to your children so they will know how they can help (i.e. “Loud sounds can really bother your sister, so we can help her by turning down the volume when we watch TV.”).

3.2 All About Feelings:

"It was scary. I didn't want my friends to come over anymore because he was so weird and it was embarrassing. I didn't know what was happening."

- **Sibling of a young person with psychosis**

- Acknowledge your children's feelings: Let them know that it's typical for siblings to experience a wide range of emotions, including confusion, frustration, sadness, anger, guilt, embarrassment, resentment, or shame.
- Pay particular attention to expressed feelings of guilt: Some kids may feel guilty for not having mental health challenges or for feeling negative emotions about their sibling. Reassure them that their feelings are typical and understandable. Emphasize to them that they are not responsible for their sibling's challenges.
- Help them bust shame around talking about mental health challenges by giving them language they can use when people ask them about their sibling.
- Let them know that they do not have to share details with their friends or other people if they do not want to.
- Let them know that they can set boundaries when people ask questions that feel intrusive. Saying things like, "(My brother/sister) is having a hard time right now, but I don't really want to talk about it" is okay.
- Let them know that confiding in someone about their own feelings can help them cope.

Some examples you can use:

- "(He/she) is going through some challenges right now."
- "They are having a hard time and we're figuring things out as a family."
- "We're helping my (brother/sister) get help and recover."
- "It's a difficult time for my (brother/sister), but we're supporting them."
- "I'm learning a lot as I support them through this."



3.3 Nurturing the Needs of Your Children and Your Own Needs:

“Siblings often feel like the forgotten family members. Everyone else's problems are more important than theirs.” -Parent

- Let children be children. Avoid making any of the other children a “mini-parent”. While it’s natural for siblings to care for each other, avoid placing excessive caregiving responsibilities on the other kids. They need to have their own childhood and pursue their own interests.
- Protect their time and space: Make sure your other children remain able to engage in activities they enjoy without constant interruption or the need to be “on call.”
- Find ways to give your other children individual time and attention. Schedule dedicated one-on-one time with each child. This makes them feel valued and ensures their needs aren’t overshadowed. Even short, regular periods of focused attention can make a big difference and reduce feelings of being overlooked.
- Equal attention might not be possible but strive for some level of fairness in how you allocate your time and resources and explain the reasons behind any differences in treatment or expectations.
- Be kind to yourself as a parent. You only have so much to give, and you need to take care of yourself so that you have the energy and the emotional stamina it takes to be there for all your children.
 - Ask friends and family for help.
 - Attend single-family or multi-family group.
 - Find out if respite care services exist in your area. Your EASA team will know what is available in your county.
 - Reach out to organizations that understand psychosis for resources, information, and support.
 - Find an individual counselor that you can talk to.

You can go to **EASA’s Multi-Family Group** alone or with your (older) children and meet other families in similar circumstances and learn practical strategies to solve day-to-day problems. Ask your EASA Team about this.

Join **EASA’s Family and Friends Leadership Council**. This is a group of family members with a loved one who either currently is in EASA or has already graduated from the program. It is great to be among peers! Find out more [here](#).

NAMI offers free Family-to-Family classes that can help, as well as in-person or virtual support groups for families. It can feel like a huge relief to talk to other people who understand what you are going through.

The University of Washington offers free training for caregivers of young people with psychosis called Psychosis Reach. **Psychosis REACH** was developed for families, with families. Experts teamed up with families with lived experience to develop the training.

The CureSZ Foundation has a program to support parents and other caregivers through mentorship by families who have been through this. These people are available to offer you encouragement, friendship, and support on your journey.

3.4 Sibling to Sibling:

“My brother and I, we were always very close. When he started to get sick, it was very hard, because that connection was gone. He was there, but he wasn’t there, you know?”

- Sibling of a young person with psychosis



- Encourage your children to return to activities that they used to enjoy doing together before their sibling developed psychosis. Encourage these activities and adjust them as needed to make them fit for the child who is recovering. Treasure those moments of connection and point them out to everyone in the family. Let them know there will be more of these as recovery progresses.
- When conflicts arise, try to address them in a way that acknowledges everyone’s feelings and promotes problem-solving rather than taking sides with any one person. Here is where you can put the problem-solving strategies family members are learning in Multi-Family Group or Single-Family sessions to use!
- Teach empathy and perspective-taking: Help the other children understand their sibling’s experience and model for them how to interact in ways that are supportive and respectful.
- Acknowledge and praise your children for showing patience, understanding, and supportiveness.
- Celebrate the connection between all your children: Point out how special the bond between siblings is in life.

04

Know Your Audience





Know Your Audience

4.1 Consider your child's age and stage of development

- What you say and do to support your other children while their sibling is experiencing psychosis will depend on the individual child's age and developmental level.
- If you give younger children partial or metaphorical explanations about what is happening, younger children are likely to fill in the blanks using magical thinking, come up with self-centered explanations ("it's my fault"), or reach scary conclusions that aren't accurate ("he did something bad and that is why this is happening"). Older children will seek information on their own and not all of it will be accurate or helpful.
- On the next page you will find things to keep in mind as you are sorting through your child's needs.

Preschoolers:

Young children need basic information and fewer details due to their cognitive development. Use simple language to explain how the condition affects their brother or sister. Preschool children focus primarily on things they can see.

For example, they may have questions about their sibling's physical appearance or behaviors. They may be very aware of people who are crying, yelling, or upset.

Things you can do:

Encourage your young child to use words to express their feelings. For example, *'Your face looks sad. Are you feeling sad?'* or *'I hear you using an angry voice. Are you feeling mad?'*

- Sit and draw with your child. Their drawings can give you a clue into their emotions. Drawing is also a great way to cope with stress. See the free printable activity book, *'Someone In My Family Has a Mental Illness'* in the Resource section for ideas.
- Spend time with your child each day. Carve out some time in advance, even if it's just a few minutes. Tell stories, read a book, listen to children's music or play with them.
- Reassure your child that they did not cause their sibling to experience symptoms.

School-aged children:

Older children may want specific information. They may ask questions about what is happening with their brother or sister. Their concerns and questions may be straightforward such as: "Why does he cry all the time? Why does she get so mad? Who is he talking to?". They may worry about their safety or the safety of their family and friends. Children this age may also can become focused on things being fair and may feel neglected when their sibling is getting attention.

Things you can do:

It is important to answer school-age children's questions directly and honestly and to reassure them about their concerns and feelings. Being able to talk to them about psychosis in simple terms can help with their questions. You can compare mental illness with physical illness, like catching a cold or a cough, and explain that sometimes their sibling will need to take medicine, or if symptoms become difficult to manage at home they may need to go to a hospital so that they can get more help to get better.

- Reassure them that they are not to blame, and that they will not 'catch' symptoms from their sibling.
- Consider your children's personalities as you talk to them. Is one a talker? They may benefit from casual check-ins during times that they are likely to be talking with you anyway, such as during a car ride, or while getting ready for bed. Is one a helper? If so, help them channel their feelings into helpful activities, such as letting them assist with some of the chores. Is one an athlete? Make sure they still get plenty of time to participate in the activities they love.
- A child who is sensitive may need you to listen and to acknowledge his strong feelings — as he learns to recognize and manage them himself. Is one a philosopher or trying to reconcile what is happening with her faith? She may get stuck on how unfair this situation is, why this happened or how her sibling suddenly seems like such a different person. She may also need you to listen and talk with her as she begins to grasp that life can be full of both terrible heartaches and wonderful gifts.
- As with children of all ages, set aside some time each day for each individual child. Even short bits of one-on-one time will go a long way.

Teenagers:

Teenagers are typically capable of handling a fair amount of information and ask specific and direct questions. Teenagers typically talk more openly with their friends and peers than with their parents. As a result, some teens may already have information about psychosis, however some of it may be misinformation that contributes to anxiety or fear.

Things you can do:

- Guide them to reliable sources of information. The free booklet, [“A Sibling’s Guide to Psychosis”](#) is written with and for adolescents. It contains factual information in language that is accessible to kids age 12 and up and responds to common concerns that many siblings have.
- Teenagers need dialogue, not lectures. Give them the opportunity to ask questions.
- Let them know it is okay for them to express their feelings no matter what those feelings are.
- Listen to them and validate their concerns and feelings.
- Share honestly what you know and don’t know about the mental health challenges their sibling is experiencing.
- Acknowledge the reality of the current situation. Let your guard down a little while managing your own feelings – it is okay for them to know this is hard for you too at times.
- Let them know that psychosis is a state and not a permanent condition.
- Talk openly about mental health and model the words to use to reduce stigma and shame.
- Model and share with them healthy examples of how to respond to questions (see section 3.2 All About Feelings).
- Encourage your teens to build a support network of their own. Let them know it’s okay to talk to their close friends. Acknowledge how doing this while still respecting their sibling’s privacy may sometimes feel like walking a tightrope. Encourage them to stay away from sharing their sibling’s diagnostic label and encourage them to talk about their own feelings instead.
- Reassure them that they will not necessarily also become ill.
- Let them know how they can help without overburdening them.
- Model healthy behavior and self-care.
- Make it clear to your other children that you support them in pursuing their own goals and dreams, and that you do not expect them to be responsible for their sibling’s care. As they get older, and when appropriate, involve sibling(s) in discussions about the future support of their sibling, respecting their choices and boundaries regarding their level of involvement.



05

When siblings need outside support

5.1 When Siblings Need Outside Support

Navigating life with a child experiencing psychosis can be stressful for everyone in the family. Siblings of individuals with mental health challenges may face emotional strain and stress. Siblings of individuals with mental health challenges have been shown to be at higher risk of developing anxiety and depression.

You can be proactive in this regard and help build resilience in your other children.

Here are some suggestions:

- Help them establish a support network of their own (see above).
- Look for local or online support groups specifically for siblings of individuals with disabilities and/or mental health challenges. Connecting with others who have similar experiences can be incredibly validating and provide valuable coping strategies.
- The Sibling Support Project is a national program dedicated addressing the concerns of siblings of people with developmental, health, and mental health concerns. They are best known for helping local communities start ‘Sibshops’, which are described as “lively peer support groups for school-age brothers and sisters of kids with disabilities and health concerns”. See if one already exists in your community.
- **Family therapy:** Consider family therapy to address the impact of the sibling’s challenges on the entire family dynamic and to develop or build healthy communication patterns. While the EASA team’s focus is to provide treatment for the individual experiencing psychosis the EASA team is also a resource for siblings, parents, and caregivers.
- **Individual therapy outside of EASA:** Individual therapy provides the sibling a safe space to process their feelings about their own lives and will help them develop coping mechanisms, new strategies and skills, and resilience.



06

Emphasize the positive





6.1 Emphasize the positive

“It’s brought our family to a new level of love, understanding and respect.”

- **Sibling of a young person with psychosis**

“It does get better and there’s a lot of learning and a lot of loving that can take place. And it can be good.” - **Sibling of a young person with psychosis**

- Despite the challenges that siblings of a child with psychosis may face, many find positive ways to cope with the experience.
- Long-term impacts can include increased resilience, empathy and flexibility. Because of what they have experienced some children become more confident and skilled in their ability to deal with life’s challenges. Others find new purpose in their lives and may develop new career interests that allow them to help others.
- *While nobody would choose for their sibling or themselves to experience this type of challenge there is hope and strength in going through difficult experiences together.*



07

Common Q&A



7.1 Common questions and answers

*“When my sister got sick, she was acting really bizarre and the police had to take her to emergency. It was really scary. My friends didn't understand at first that it was just because her brain was sick, but they do now.” - **EASA Sibling***

Below are some of the most commonly asked questions that your other children may have about their sibling’s psychosis, and some possible answers.

This section relies heavily on [this source](#).

Why is my brother/sister acting this way?

Psychosis is a condition that can change how people think and act. It can be difficult and even scary at times. The good news is that there are many things that health professionals (like doctors, therapists, social workers, peer support specialists, occupational therapists, and nurses) can do to help your sibling get better.

Psychosis can be a symptom of mental health challenges. It may be caused in part by genetic (inherited) factors. Stress, lack of sleep, and/or substance use may make it more likely that someone will experience psychosis. When someone experiences psychosis it may be difficult for the person themselves to know what is happening.

The person experiencing symptoms of psychosis may try to make sense of what they are experiencing in different ways. It may be challenging for them to tell the difference between what is real and not real. Psychosis is treatable, and the earlier it is treated, the better their recovery is likely to be.

Will I also develop psychosis?

Approximately 3 out of every 100 people experience symptoms of psychosis at some point in their lifetime. If you have a sibling who is experiencing symptoms of psychosis, your risk of experiencing symptoms of psychosis is 1 in 10. You have a much higher chance of NOT experiencing symptoms of psychosis than of experiencing symptoms. However, if you feel that you are starting to experience symptoms, talk to your parent or doctor and let them know what you are experiencing.

Making healthy choices, such as avoiding substance use, will help avoid stress on the parts of the brain that are involved when someone experiences psychosis. Members of the EASA team that provides care for your sibling are available to talk with you and answer your questions. They may also help connect you with resources or with siblings of individuals with psychosis if you are interested in finding additional resources or supports.

Was it something I did?

Psychosis is a set of symptoms for which there can be multiple causes or explanations. Sometimes when something difficult happens in someone's life or to someone they love they may blame themselves. There is nothing that you did or could have done to cause your sibling's symptoms of psychosis.

How can I help?

You can help by offering to talk, by being positive, by giving sincere compliments and by gently encouraging your sibling to do things they enjoy. Engaging in one-on-one activities with your sibling that you both enjoy may be better than doing things in crowds or larger groups. Talk to your sibling about what they would like to do with you. You can help them by encouraging them and by reminding them that things will get better.

How long will it take for them to get better?

Symptoms of psychosis are typically treated through therapy and sometimes low doses of antipsychotic medication in addition to education and support for the person and their family. Once someone starts treatment for psychosis it can take time for the person to feel better. Sometimes different therapies or medications need to be tried to find the right treatment. While your sibling is recovering they may have less energy to do things, be quieter, need alone time, or prefer not to be in large crowds or noisy places.

Why do things at home feel harder since my sister started experiencing psychosis?

When a loved one experiences psychosis, it can be challenging for the whole family. Symptoms of psychosis cause changes in how your sibling perceives things and thinks about things. Their perspectives and goals may be different than yours or than those of your parents or caregivers. The EASA team can support everyone in the family in learning ways to listen and communicate to reduce conflict. Reducing stress and conflict will support everyone's well-being in addition to supporting your sibling's recovery.

What does a relapse of symptoms mean?

Sometimes individuals who have recovered from symptoms of psychosis may experience symptoms again. It can be a learning experience to determine what helps to improve symptoms and what makes symptoms worse. It may take some time to understand what works best for your sibling and what they need on their path to recovery.

What happens when my sibling goes to the hospital?

Sometimes individuals experiencing psychosis need to go to the hospital to get help with their symptoms. While they are there, they will have a team of people helping them figure out the best treatment for their symptoms. Hospital stays may last a few days, a week, or several weeks. Depending on the situation, your parents, your sibling's EASA team members, and you may be able to visit your sibling while they are staying in the hospital.

What is EASA?

EASA is a team of people who specialize in helping individuals with psychosis. They work together to support your sibling in getting the care they need to address their symptoms and pursue their goals for the future that they want to have. The EASA team may include:

- A doctor or medical provider who specializes in understanding how the brain works and talks to individuals about medications and other interventions that can help with symptoms.
- A peer support specialist is an individual with lived experience of mental health or substance use challenges who helps individuals understand the treatment process, participate in activities in the community, connect with other EASA participants, and learn new skills.
- A nurse supports individuals in the areas of nutrition, sleep, addressing medication side effects, and providing education about healthy lifestyle choices.
- A therapist or social worker talks with individuals about their needs, feelings, values, and goals.
- An occupational therapist helps individuals in the areas of sensory and cognitive development and independent living skills.
- A supported employment and education specialist supports individuals with needs and goals related to school, career, and work.
- A case manager helps individuals access housing, social services, medical, school, and/or other resources and supports.

Resources and Tools Designed for Children

Someone In My Family Has A Mental Illness (2000)

<https://famillemaladiementale.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/someone-in-my-family-has-a-mental-illness-workbook.pdf>

GREAT resource in workbook/coloring book style format for younger children (ages 7 – 14).

*Copyrighted material, however, EASA C4E got permission from Executive Director of Family Services of the North Shore to share the resource with our teams and families – 11/18/25.

A Sibling's Guide to Psychosis: Information, Ideas and Resources (2005)

<https://ontario.cmha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ASiblingsGuideToPsychosis.pdf>

EXCELLENT information for adolescents, teens and young adults

What to Do If a Brother or Sister Develops Psychosis

https://easacommunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/if_sibling_develops_psychosis-1.pdf

EASA generated one-page 'cheat sheet' for adolescents, teens and young adults

How to Help A Friend (NAMI)

<https://www.nami.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/BTS-How-to-Help-a-Friend.pdf>

Intended for teens who want to help a friend showing signs of a mental illness, but adaptable for siblings.

Additional Resources and References

What Siblings Need

https://easacommunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/what_siblings_need.pdf

EASA generated one-page summary of things to keep in mind as a parent

How Children Are Affected When Their Siblings Have Psychosis. Psychology Today: Tanya Frank, 2023

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-i-wish-i-had-known/202307/effects-on-our-children-when-their-siblings-have-psychosis>

Talking to Your Child About a Sibling's Mental Illness. Susan Swick. The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds

<https://www.mghclaycenter.org/parenting-concerns/talking-children-siblings-mental-illness/>

Navigating Siblinghood When Life Throws Curveballs. Amy U, 2025

<https://rappahannockareacsb.org/navigating-siblinghood-when-life-throws-curveballs/>

When Your Brother or Sister Has Psychosis: Information for Young People HereToHelpBC

<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/when-your-brother-or-sister-has-psychosis.pdf>

Talking to Kids About Mental Illnesses. American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. July 2017

https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Talking-To-Kids-About-Mental-Illnesses-084.aspx

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Amareja et al, Clin Psychopharmacol Neurosci. 2014 Aug 12;12 (2) 111- 123

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<https://academic.oup.com/schizophreniabulletin/article/30/2/445/1857258>

Talking with Children About Parental Mental Health Difficulties. Emerging Minds

<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/in-focus-talking-with-children-about-parental-mental-health-difficulties/#notice>

When a Parent has Mental illness, How to Support Kids. Joanne Barker, 2022

<https://answers.childrenshospital.org/parent-mental-illness/>

How to Explain a Parent's Mental Health to Children. Hayley Snelling, December, 2025. Mission Connection

<https://missionconnectionhealthcare.com/mental-health/family-guide/explaining-to-children/>

Coping when someone in your family has Psychosis. Early Psychosis Intervention Program. Fraser South EPI Program, 2003. White Rock, BC.

<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/when-your-brother-or-sister-has-psychosis.pdf>

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