

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Understanding the Problem : **Complex Needs**

Sometimes the problems your child has are not easy to label or describe. They may have multiple problems, including personal and behavioural issues. Services may tell you that your child doesn't fit into their client group.

There may be no easy answers, or pathways towards sorting out the problems. It may take a lot of trial and error. Limited services or resources may exist to help you in your situation.

This can be very hard on parents, especially if your child's situation is getting worse and no one seems able to help.

In this helpsheet, we try to help you understand what you may be dealing with and where you may go to for help.

What are Complex Problems?

Your child may have issues that you 'can't put your finger on'. For example, it may seem more to you than simply a "drug problem" or an "intellectual disability". There may be personality issues, serious behavioural problems, or problems related to brain damage that you are dealing with as well.

You may have been trying to get help for them for many years, starting from when they were a difficult baby or child. There may have been no help, or the help you got may have been of little use or not enough. Sometimes the problems have come up later in development, but there still seem to be no services which are able to help.

It may seem that no-one can really help you understand what is going on.

There are others out there like you. Many parents and family members have tried so hard on their own for many years to deal with their child's difficulties. Often, they have reached many dead ends when it comes to professional help. It can be very distressing for families to watch a child, for example, end up in the criminal system when they have not received the help they needed earlier.

Hopefully some of the information in this help sheet will make things a little clearer and identify some new avenues to try for help.

Complex Problems

The Victorian Department of Human Services¹ describes people with complex problems as having:

- problems which cut across different service areas

- needs which are not met or managed by existing services
- challenging behaviours that place themselves or others at risk
- require a long-term response from a range of services

Other community services define a person with 'complex problems' as having more than one difficulty to deal with and being more 'at risk'. Problems may include, for example: drug use, mental health problems, homelessness, criminal behaviour, sexuality issues, physical or intellectual disability, behavioural problems, child abuse.

Common Problems

A young person may be dealing with any, or a combination of, the following issues. Sometimes, the "complex" part for parents lies in simply not knowing that these are the issues that are affecting the young person.

Drug Use

If you are not aware that your young person is using drugs, their behaviour may seem strange or unpredictable. It is hard to identify that someone is using drugs based only on their behaviour, but talking to professionals or other parents may shed light on what your child may be doing.

Once drug use is confirmed, your young person will be able to access Drug Treatment Services. Whether they are willing to receive help and are motivated enough to make changes, is another matter.

They may fall through the gaps if they are highly substance affected and their behaviour is difficult to manage. Psychiatric services may say that a young person is not suitable for their service if they see the young person's problem as drug use. They are required to respond, however, if the person is a risk to himself/herself or another person.

Police may be more willing to attend and assist in some circumstances.



Related Help Sheet

- Understanding Drug Use

Mental Health Problems

If you are not aware of different types of mental health problems, a young person's behaviour may seem strange and irrational to you. You may see their looks change, or their mannerisms or the way they talk. They may seem more paranoid, or suspicious of people. Early psychosis can be especially hard to identify and things may get quite bad before you realise that the young person needs help.

Once they have received a Psychiatric Assessment, however, a diagnosis may be made and treatment will be recommended. Once again, it may be up to the young person to agree to take medication or to accept other help.

A young person may fall through the gaps if their mental health problems are not serious enough at this time, or if it is seen that their difficulties relate more to drug use. Drug use should not, however, prevent them receiving support for a psychiatric condition. See: Dual Diagnosis – below

Many families have had trouble getting suitable support when their child has been suicidal. The Psychiatric Services Crisis and Assessment Teams should be able to respond or to refer you to more suitable assistance. They are based at your local hospital. Ring them immediately if you are concerned that your child is threatening suicide.

To find out about mental health services near you, phone **1300 767 299** or **03 9616 7571** or go to www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/index.htm

Personality Disorders (PD)

Personality disorders are a type of mental illness that often make a person particularly difficult to deal with. Personality disorders involve ongoing behaviour patterns, which affect the way a person operates, and their relationships.

For more information go to website: personalitydisorders.mentalhelp.net

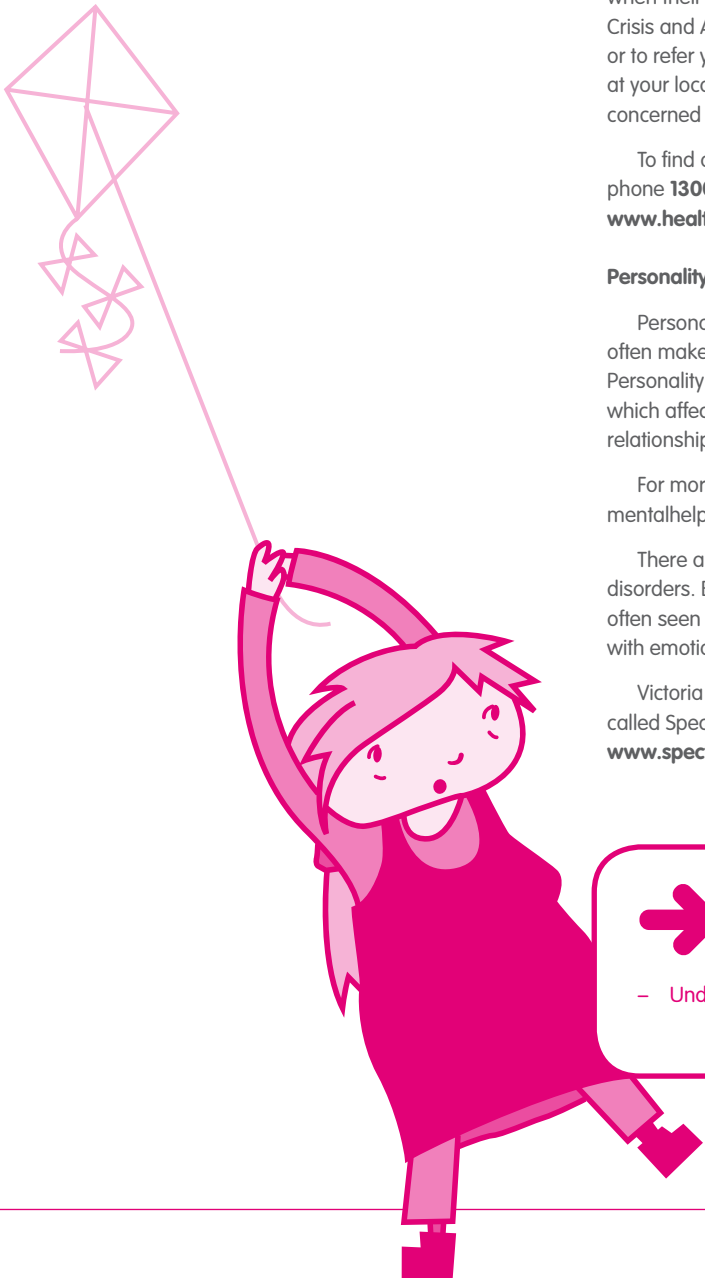
There are a number of different types of personality disorders. Borderline Personality Disorder is one type that is often seen in professional practice. It often involves problems with emotions, feelings, moods, thinking and relationships.

Victoria has a Borderline Personality Disorder service called Spectrum, ph: **03 9871 3900**; website: www.spectrum-bpd.com



Related Help Sheet

- Understanding Mental Health Problems



Intellectual Disability

Children with an intellectual disability may have delayed development or may have significant difficulty learning. The Victorian Department of Human Services' Disability Services cater for people with an Intellectual Disability and their families. Your young person may fall through the gap if their difficulty is not serious enough to be classified as an Intellectual Disability, or warrant having a case-manager or other assistance.

To find a service near you, phone: **1800 641 038**

Congenital Brain Damage or Acquired Brain Injury

Congenital brain damage is present at birth. Depending on the nature of the condition, the person may have a physical disability, intellectual disability, personality or behavioural difficulty or all of these.

Brain injury which occurs during birth or at a later time is called 'acquired brain injury'. It may happen, for example, through heavy or long-term drug use (for example Korsakoff's Syndrome for long-term alcoholics), or due to an impact to the brain during an accident. Where the brain is damaged will make a difference to the effects on the person's ability to function and behaviour. Again, this may lead to physical, intellectual, personality or behavioural difficulties.

There are services available to assess and to respond to these situations. ARBIAS are based in Fitzroy, Victoria and provide services for people who suspect they have acquired brain injury, and their carers. This service provides assessment and recommends strategies, and they may provide further assistance or refer on to other services.

ARBIAS, ph: **03 9417 7071** or website **www.arbias.org.au**

Common co-occurring problems

Dual Diagnosis – Drug Use and Mental Health Problems

People can use drugs to deal with mental health problems, or they may develop mental health problems after using drugs. When these two problems happen together, it is called a Dual Diagnosis. Having both conditions can make it harder to treat each condition on its own.

There are now Dual-Diagnosis Teams available to Drug Treatment and Psychiatric Services. They offer help to people with both these difficulties and to prevent them from falling through the gaps. Treatment usually involves help for both conditions in a coordinated way.

Contact an Alcohol and other Drug Service, or Psychiatric Service, as above.

Dual Diagnosis – Intellectual Disability and Mental Health Problems

Dual Diagnosis is also a term used when someone has both mental health problems and an intellectual disability. This can also be complex, as it may not be clear when the person does not understand something, or when they are not thinking straight due to mental illness. It can be challenging to manage behaviours.

Psychiatric Services may say they don't cater for people with Intellectual Disabilities, however there are codes of behaviour between the two services.

Contact Disability Services or Psychiatric Services – details above.

Intellectual Disability with significant Behaviour Problems

This combination may be a hard situation to deal with. Disability Services have Behaviour Intervention Strategies Teams (BIST) available to assist people to cope with these situations.

Some families find they need more intensive support to deal with the very difficult behaviours they are managing. Alternative accommodation may be a good option.

Contact Disability Services – details above.



Tips from this Section

- Many families are dealing with young people who have complex problems, and it is often difficult to find suitable help.
- Sometimes, what makes a problem “complex” for parents, is not knowing that a behaviour or issue is occurring, e.g. drug use or mental health issues.
- When a young person has both a drug problem and a mental health problem it is called a Dual Diagnosis. Sometimes it can be difficult to find help for people who are experiencing both drug and mental health issues.
- When problems are of a mild nature, it is often more difficult to get help, as the problem doesn't fit neatly into a service system.
- When a family has done all it can, it may be time to focus on looking after themselves and setting clear and firm boundaries around the young person's behaviour.



Related Help Sheets

- Understanding Drug Use
- Understanding Mental Illness
- Setting Boundaries
- Improving Communication
- Dealing with Violence
- When your life is on hold

Other information

When problems are mild and not extreme

When problems are extreme or serious, it can sometimes be easier to identify what the problem is and to get help. Sometimes when problems are milder, people fall through the gaps. They don't quite fit into mainstream services and yet they don't fit into the services for those with more serious problems. Even though problems may be mild, they may bring with them significant challenges in coping in everyday life. Families are often left to carry the load.

There are other helpsheets in this series that suggest strategies to cope with a young person's difficult behaviours. They may help with ways to handle behaviours at home, regardless of the level of support from services.

Other behavioural or personality problems

Your young person may not match any of the official diagnoses described above, and yet they may have significant behavioural difficulties. For example, they may:

- behave in unpredictable ways
- be very impulsive (act without thinking)
- be constantly demanding of you or aggressive
- have very poor emotion-regulation (for example, trouble managing anxiety or anger)
- have poor reasoning/logical abilities.

Families may need to try to gain support from a range of services until they get the help they need. Sometimes, families may come to realise that they can't do any more for the young person at this stage. They may need to focus on looking after themselves. At home, clear and firm boundaries need to be set in place around the young person's behaviour.

If a young person is under 16 years

If a child is under 16, at-risk due to their problems and behaviour, and unable to receive the support they need, the Victorian Department of Human Services, Child Protection Services may be able to advocate for you with other services. It can be worth making enquiries. Their job is to assist families where children and young people are at risk.

Department of Human Services' General Enquiry
Ph: **1300 650 172**

How to Get Help

The following information suggests some ways to get help if you are dealing with a young person who has complex problems.

The Importance of Good and Multiple Assessments

When you are unclear about what the problems really are, it is worth encouraging or arranging for your young person to have a suitable professional assessment. More than one assessment may be necessary to get the full picture.

If your child is willing to be assessed, it is a good idea to read or find out a bit more about the problems or issues that you think they are experiencing. Then choose the main issue that is concerning you and arrange for your child to be assessed at an agency that specialises in dealing with this problem.

When you take your child for an assessment, a professional worker will ask you a series of questions about the history of the problems that your child has been experiencing – how long they have had these problems, the frequency of the problems, level of concern about them and strategies that your child and you have used to deal with the problems so far. You and your child may also be asked about your child's early years, experiences of school, ability to form friendships and attachments, your family structure and history and other questions that will help the worker to understand the history and context of the problems that your child is experiencing. Workers need this information to be able to make a proper assessment of your child's problems and to suggest appropriate treatment or strategies for handling the problem.

You may not be in a position to influence your young person to have assessments. Maybe all you can do is to find out more information about the different problems and behaviours your child is experiencing and the best ways you can deal with someone with these problems. Your general practitioner or local community health centre may be able to provide you with some information to begin your search. The internet may have some useful information on it. Some of the agencies mentioned at the end of this helpsheet may be able to provide you with information that you need.

Also some agencies are funded to package care programs (treatment or support programs) to suit people with complex needs. They may have money available to buy services and to tailor them to meet the needs of the individual and family. You may find out about these by contacting the Department of Human Services, General Inquiry Line Ph: **1300 650 172** or read about these services on the department's website: <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/complexclients/update.htm>

Be organised and record what you have done

Sometimes it is not easy to work out exactly what the problems are that your child is experiencing. Sometimes it is a matter of gathering information over time and putting the picture together like a jigsaw.

It can help for you to develop a file so that you don't have to repeat your story over and over again and so that others can read the information you have gathered so far to help with their assessment and recommendations.

The file may include:

- The young person's history from the time they were born
- Any difficulties they have had
- What help was received
- Any diagnosis or treatment
- Professional assessments that have been completed and recommendations
- Current behaviours or issues

Be Assertive with Services

Services are often under pressure and it may be hard to get help for your young person. You may need to develop your assertiveness skills to ensure that your child receives the assessment and assistance they need. You may also have to develop your patience and anger-management skills as you navigate your way through the service system.

It will help if you can show the professionals that you consult what you have tried already and what has been recommended. Be prepared to discuss with them what strategies you have tried already, what has helped and what hasn't helped, so that they do not suggest the same response.

If you are unhappy with the service that you receive, you can ask to speak to a supervisor or manager. There should be avenues to make complaints if necessary.

Get a description of the people and problems that services deal with before you attend an agency, so that you can clearly point out the ways that you think the service should be able to assist you.

If you find a supportive service or person, it can be good to try to maintain a positive relationship with them, as they commit to helping you find the help you need.

Consider legal intervention

Some parents of young people with complex needs find that the young person is unable to manage their finances or medical treatment very well. There are ways that you can take on legal responsibility for aspects of your young person's care, if they are having trouble coping.

To find out more:

- State Trustees Call Centre
Ph: 9667 6444
www.statetrustees.com.au
- Victorian Civil Administrative Tribunal
Ph: 9667 6450
www.vcat.vic.gov.au
- Office of Public Advocate
Ph: 9603 9500
www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au

Other things you can do

- Be understanding and support your young person if you are able to.
- Recognise the limits to their abilities, for example if they are not able to understand or remember things, or stop themselves behaving impulsively.
- Try to help them to put in place any practical strategies suggested by services.
- Have in place good boundaries with your young person.
- Let them know what you are willing to provide help with and what you are not.
- Decide where and when you will say 'no' to them.
- Find out about other suitable housing options for them if you can no longer manage living with the young person.
- Realise when you can't do any more.
- Recognise that they have some choices too.
- Try to rally support.
- Try to seek assistance and support before things reach crisis point.
- Find others in similar situations or with similar problems.

- Ask services to establish support groups for family members.
- Gain support from professionals and services who are sympathetic.
- Write to your member of parliament, managers of services, ombudsmen, or other official bodies if you are frustrated by a lack of appropriate services for your child or by long waiting lists.

And perhaps most importantly:

- Look after yourself.
- Keep your own health and wellbeing a priority.
- Keep in mind the needs of other family members and important relationships.
- Sometimes sad as it is, you are unable to help your young person as you would like to be able to and they will have to make do as best they can.
- Remember despite their difficulties your adolescent has some choices available to them and they have their own life journey to lead.
- Remember you can't prevent all bad things happening to your young person. A lot of things are not within your control.
- Think about what else you can bring into your life that will help you cope.





Useful Resources

- **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS):** The state of Victoria is divided into health regions. There is a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) located within each of these regions. They provide assessment and treatment services for at risk young people experiencing mental health issues. To find out the contact details for your nearest CAMHS service see: <http://www.youthmentalhealth.org/contact/>
- **Connexions:** a program of Jesuit Social Services provides counselling, outreach and advocacy services for young people who have a dual diagnosis of both mental health and drug and alcohol issues. To arrange an assessment at Connexions telephone: **94158700**.
- **Direct Line:** provides current information on drug and alcohol assessment and treatment services in Victoria and support services for families who have a family member with a substance abuse problem. To contact Direct line phone: **1800 888 236**, which is a 24 hour telephone counselling, information and referral service. Or consult their website at: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/drugs/help.htm>
- **Headway Victoria:** provides information, advice and links to support services for people with an acquired brain injury and their families. Brain injury can be caused by trauma, infection, strokes or drug use episodes or from prolonged alcohol or substance abuse, tumours or degenerative neurological diseases. For information consult their website at: <http://www.headwayvictoria.org.au> or telephone: **9482 2955**.
- **Disability On-line:** a website that provides information for people with a disability, their families and carers: http://www.disability.vic.gov.au/dsonline/dssite.nsf/pages/link_to_us
- **Department of Human Services:** the Department accepts referrals of young people with multiple and complex needs for assessment and the development of a care plan when other services have not been able to meet the needs of the young person. The Department can also arrange funding for appropriate services to implement the care plan once the person is deemed eligible and a priority for service. For the contact details of your local regional co-ordinator of this program at the Department of Human Services consult the following website: <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/complexclients/gateway.htm>
General Enquiry line: **1300 650 172**



Tips from this Section

- Try to get good and multiple assessments conducted.
- Keep telling services what behaviours you are dealing with and asking for help.
- Write a history of what has taken place and what you have tried, to save you having to repeat your story endlessly.
- Be assertive with services. They are often under pressure too.
- Look after yourself.



Related Help Sheets

- How do I stay calm?
- How do I keep living my own life?
- How do I set boundaries?
- How can we communicate better?
- How can I deal with conflict/violence?



→ **Strong Bonds**
Jesuit Social Services
PO Box 1141
Collingwood Victoria 3066

Tel (03) 9415 8700
Email info@strongbonds.jss.org.au
Web www.strongbonds.jss.org.au

→ **Strong Bonds is a project of Jesuit Social Services.**

Jesuit Social Services work cooperatively with others to engage disadvantaged individuals, families and communities and the wider society to promote health and wellbeing and to address social exclusion.

This project is possible thanks to the generosity of the William Buckland Foundation and the Department of Health & Ageing.