

# FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 19

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## THE CHILD WITH A LONG-TERM ILLNESS

The child with a serious medical illness is at greater risk for developing emotional problems. Unlike a child with a temporary sickness such as the flu, the child with a chronic illness must cope with knowing that the disease is here to stay and may even get worse. Almost all these children initially refuse to believe they are ill, and later feel guilt and anger.

The young child, unable to understand why the sickness has occurred, may assume it is a punishment for being "bad." He or she may become angry with parents and doctors for not being able to cure the illness. The youngster may react strongly against pampering, teasing, or other attention. Uncomfortable treatments, and restrictions in diet and activity may make the child bitter and withdrawn. To help your child deal with and understand the disease you need to give them honest, accurate, and age appropriate information.

A teenager with a long-term illness may feel pulled in opposite directions. On the one hand, he or she must take care of the physical problem, requiring dependence on parents and doctors. On the other hand, the adolescent wants to become independent and join his or her friends in various activities. When a teenager with a long-term illness tries to decrease or stop taking the prescribed medication without consulting with the physician, this often shows a normal adolescent desire to take charge of one's own body.

Chronic illness may cause school problems, including avoidance or refusal to attend school. This can increase the child's loneliness and feeling of being different from other youngsters. It is important for parents to help a child maintain as normal a routine as possible. They should respond not only to the child's illness, but to the child's strengths. Child and adolescent psychiatrists know that if isolated or overprotected, the

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child may not learn to socialize or may have difficulty separating from parents when it is time to be involved in school or other activities outside the home. It is often helpful for the child to be in contact with others who have successfully adjusted to living with a chronic illness.

In their prolonged periods of hospitalization and/or rest at home, children may develop excellence in a hobby or a special talent such as art, model airplanes, or a foreign language. They may also try to learn as much about their illness as possible. Such activities are emotionally healthy and should be encouraged.

Children with long-term illnesses are often treated by a team of medical specialists. This team often includes a child and adolescent psychiatrist, who can help the child and family overcome problems and develop emotionally healthy ways of living with the disease and its effects.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

#8 Children and Grief

#7 Children Who Won't Go to School

#30 Children and AIDS

See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).

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The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 7,000 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

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