



# The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds

*Shining light on mental health through education.*

## Bipolar Disorder: Ways to Support Your Child at Home

Has your child or teen been diagnosed with bipolar disorder? In addition to professional treatment, there are ways to support them at home. See our tips below to better understand your child's behaviors and help them manage.

**Bipolar disorder** is a more serious mood condition, but rare in children. Children and teens with bipolar disorder may have unusual shifts in mood, energy, and activity levels, ranging from emotional lows (depression) to emotional highs (mania).

**Talk About It.** Talking openly lessens stigma and increases understanding.

- Define depression and mania. These aren't words that all children know.
- Younger kids tend to be very self-involved in how they see the world. They may think having bipolar disorder is their fault. Help them understand it is a disease – it is no one's fault and nothing to be ashamed of.
- Teens tend to think what's happening in the moment will always be the way things are. They may think their bipolar disorder will never feel better. Help them understand that it is treatable and does in fact get better.
- Try to focus on symptoms of the disorder that are causing any challenging behavior in your child. This helps to separate the disorder from the child.
- Brothers and sisters may worry if a sibling has bipolar disorder. Talk with the whole family about the disorder and changes they may see in their sibling. Answering questions will help to ease their worries.
- Make it family routine to talk about all kinds of feelings – even feelings like thoughts of suicide. By making it part of a routine, your child is more likely to come to you when they are struggling with something.
- If you or a family member has struggled with bipolar disorder and had a positive experience with treatment, this can be a helpful thing to share, if your child asks. Remember to keep the focus on your child and what they are going through. Knowing about someone real who has also struggled may be helpful to some kids.

**Make Sleep a Priority.** Getting enough sleep is very important for recovery from bipolar disorder. If your child has poor sleep patterns, it could also be a symptom of their disorder – so be patient and give things time to even out. You can help by encouraging regular bedtimes and waking times.

**Support Positive Self-Esteem.** Lack of self-esteem is a common symptom of depression, and the way some people react to a child's manic symptoms can cause feelings of disapproval. Children who struggle with bipolar disorder will benefit from encouragement. Use praise freely but sincerely.

**Involve the School.** Many parents worry that sharing their child's diagnosis with the school will stigmatize their child. But schools can provide resources and accommodations. It is important to stress that kids with bipolar disorder are *not* dangerous, since the disorder is still sometimes misunderstood. Brainstorming with teachers and other school officials can keep your child engaged in school during an episode of depression. Accommodations as simple as permission to lay down in the nurse's office or meet with a school counselor can be really helpful.

**Encourage Socialization.** Children with bipolar disorder may feel isolated from others or may find that some kids avoid them because of their mood changes. But social interactions are important for recovery. For younger kids, try to arrange short play dates. For older kids, encourage them to join a club or other activity they enjoy. You can also research, together, a support group for youth in your area.

**Talk About Medication.** Bipolar disorder is often treated with a combination of medications and therapy. Ask your child if they have questions about any medications to be taken and learn about them together. Talk about possible side effects, too. This will help them understand what to expect and may help them better explain their bipolar disorder and treatment to friends.

**Thanks for all you do to support a young person in your life. It really makes a difference.**

*For more resources on bipolar disorder and other topics, visit us online: [mghclaycenter.org](http://mghclaycenter.org)*

