

Serious Childhood Problems - Bi-Polar Disorder in Children

By Mike Witzky and Jym Ramage

One of the most commonly seen disorders in children is Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, also known as ADHD, which has been the subject of our last two articles. Another, much less common, disorder seen in children is known as Bi-Polar Disorder. This is a mood disorder, formerly known as "manic depression." Adults with this disorder exhibit severe mood swings, from excessive, extreme activity to deep, dark depressions, which can last for weeks or months. In children, Bi-Polar symptoms often include extremely frequent mood swings, perhaps many during one day, that often range from extreme risk taking behaviors (jumping off rooftops or out of moving vehicles or challenging the school principal to a fistfight) to intense anger, agitation and irritability. The difference in the symptoms between adults with Bi-Polar disorders and youth with the same disorder, misled mental health professionals for a number of years to believe that Bi-Polar symptoms only happened in adulthood. Over time, we have learned that, not only do Bi-Polar symptoms happen in children, but they are often extremely difficult for families to deal with.

However, all of us, especially children and, of course, teenagers, have many different moods. In fact, in our culture, "Moody" is practically synonymous with teenagers. But, in Bi-Polar disorder, the mood swings are so intense and so frequent, and the behaviors that accompany them so severe, these children and adolescents stand out above all their peers. Many parents of Bi-Polar children report knowing their children were "different" from a very young age, reporting difficulties with sleep, and problems with behavior and peer relationships in pre-school children. Some mothers even relate stories of the child being "restless" or "aggressive" in the womb. Often, for these parents and children, the diagnosis of Bi-Polar Disorder gives a name, as well as hope, to what had previously been a terrible and frustrating experience. Bi-Polar disorders, like ADHD symptoms, are treatable with medications and behavioral therapies. Parents with children who suffer from Bi-Polar disorders must learn to be assertive advocates for their children, while also being loving and firm. Many avenues of help are available to these children and families, but it often takes diligent effort and an investment of much time and energy by parents to produce positive results.

Fortunately, most families are not troubled by symptoms, such as in ADHD or Bi-Polar Disorder. However, those who are can feel hope through advances in new treatments and modalities to help make life more successful for their children. For the rest of us, providing support and understanding to families and children struggling with such issues offers a way to make life easier for those carrying a heavy burden.

If you think your child may have Bi-polar Disorder or if you have questions regarding the condition, please go to the "*Find a Service Provider*" section of the BHG Web site <http://www.bhg.org> to locate a behavioral healthcare agency in your county.

About the authors:

Mr. Mike Witzky is the Executive Director of the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Union County. He can be reached at (937) 642-1212 or by e-mail at: witzkyme@bhg.org. Mr. Jym Ramage is the supervisor of the Multi Systemic Therapy (MST) program, which is an intensive family treatment program offered by Consolidated Care, Inc. in Union County, Ohio.