

HELPING A CHILD  
COPE WITH A SICK

# MOM OR DAD

BY SALLY DILLON

**A**nd you are just a very difficult teacher!" retorted Donnie\* when his music teacher scolded him for not paying attention. Until recently, Donnie had been a normal, active third grader who apparently enjoyed school and was usually very cooperative and friendly in class. But lately, he had become openly belligerent toward his teachers.

Steve had also been a well-adjusted child who made mostly A's and B's. But now, he seemed miles away when the teacher talked to him. While the other children worked on their papers, he sat staring into space, slowly drawing little circles on his paper. Threats that he would miss recess did not seem to faze him, and sending him to the principal's office made no difference, either. He just sat quietly

on the couch, staring at the wall.

Matthew too enjoyed school, but recently had had many absences. When he was in school, he complained of many aches and pains, frequently asking if he could call his parents and go home.

What is wrong with these children? They are all responding to a serious illness of one of their parents. How should teachers react when their stu-

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\* Some names have been changed, as requested.

dents behave like this?

First, recognize that the child's actions may be a response to a problem, rather than the problem itself. Often when there is an illness in the family, parents are so overwhelmed that they may forget to tell the school—and the child—what is happening.

*Do your homework.* Once you hear that there is a problem at home, try to obtain some basic information. It may be that you will have to gently explain some things to the child after obtaining parental approval. Most children are very resilient, and if they are given correct information, will feel reassured.

Give the child an opportunity to talk or share. Ask gently what is happening at home. Sometimes children will welcome an opportunity to talk, while at other times they will not want to discuss it at all. However, it is important to let them know you understand that they are under extra stress at home. Ask if they feel that this may be affecting their school work. Inquire whether there is anything you can do to help. Just knowing that someone understands will often help children to open up, and to cope more successfully.

#### **Educate the Child and the Class**

Andy's mother had recently been diagnosed with systemic lupus and was very ill. One day the teacher announced, "Andy's mother is very sick and has been diagnosed with lupus, which is an immune disease something like AIDS, only different. Would you like to tell the class about it, Andy?" Andy just shook his head, and then buried his face in his arms and would not talk to anyone. The teacher didn't know enough about lupus to share information with the

class, and so said, "Uh, maybe we can talk about this another time."

Suddenly, the children in the class were afraid to sit with Andy, or to drink after him at the drinking fountain, and they quit choosing him for their teams. Andy became more and more withdrawn, as he worried not only about his mother, but also about his sudden loss of friends at school.

When he came to the point of emotional breakdown and the teachers discussed his problem, they realized that because of what had been said in the class, the children thought his mother had AIDS and were afraid they would get it from him.

If you share information with the class, make sure it is accurate. Avoid statements that will hurt the child's

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social relationships.

#### **Protect the Child's Privacy**

It would be better to ask the child before class whether he or she is willing to talk about the parent's illness in class, rather than to embarrass the child in front of his or her friends. Be sure to protect the privacy of the child and his or her family by not discussing the parent's illness in front of other children unless the child feels comfortable about this.

Steve was sitting in the principal's office after another morning of being unable to concentrate or get any of his work done. The school secretary had just heard about his mother's diagnosis. When Steve's teacher came into the office, the secretary said, "Well, it looks like we're losing another mother. First, Billy's mother died of cancer earlier this year, and now Steve's

mother looks bad, too.”

When Steve overheard this, he was very worried that his mom was going to die. She was not terminally ill at the time, but did have serious health problems. Being able to talk about his fears and being given accurate information, and NOT overhearing school employees discussing it, would have helped him tremendously.

er’s socks and shoes in the mornings and coped with many of the same problems he did.

The discussion also allowed the children to share coping skills. For example, Bobbi had surgery and chemotherapy, and later had to take prednisone. When she complained to Michael about hating to take the pills, Michael said, “I know. My mom takes

to be able to share information.

Kimberly felt very anxious because her mother was having outpatient laparoscopic surgery. Her dad was away, so she had to take care of her mom the afternoon after surgery. She was not sure what to expect. Don told her, “My mom had that kind of surgery twice last fall. Basically, she will just want to sleep when she comes

home. You need to make sure that she drinks a lot of water, and takes whatever medicine her doctor gave her for it. When she needs to go to the bathroom, hold her arm and walk with her, like you would at a wedding, because sometimes the left-over medicine from the surgery could make her a little bit wobbly. Also, with that kind of surgery, a heating pad behind your mom’s back will help.”

Being able to share information about caring for an ill or disabled parent increases the child’s self-esteem and validates his or her experience.

Andrea Herrington, principal of Shenandoah Valley Adventist Elementary School in New Market, Virginia, had two students whose mother had been chronically ill for several years. She encouraged Don and Michael to write a book called *What to Do With a Sick Mother*. It was a humorous manuscript describing, in a very matter-of-fact way, the different types of equipment often used in home care, and included information on how to survive in the kitchen without Mom, how to keep up with laundry, and why not to put your gum wrappers in the red contaminated waste disposal containers.

Ms. Herrington helped Don and Michael with editing, and their book has been submitted for publication.

### **Offer Support for the Child and a Sense of Community**

When a parent is ill or newly disabled, the child often feels as if he or she is the only person in the world who has to deal with a problem like this. When Michael’s mother was ill, he felt overwhelmed and frightened. His teacher asked other members of Michael’s class if they had an ill or disabled parent or someone they were taking care of at home. As they shared their stories, Michael discovered that he was not alone.

The discussion revealed that Lori helped care for her grandfather, who had cancer and renal failure and lived in their home. Rachel’s mother was coping with a brain tumor. Jacob’s mother had been paraplegic since before he was born. It made a big difference to Michael to know that other children helped to put on their moth-

## *Be sure to protect the privacy of the child and his or her family.*

prednisone. It gives you a round smiley face, and it makes you hungry all the time, but it makes my mom feel a lot better. Mom says that without the prednisone, she would hurt more, and not be able to walk as well.” After hearing this, Bobbi decided that she didn’t mind the prednisone quite so much. It also made Michael feel good

## **Include Chronically Ill and Disabled Parents in School Events**

Sick parents often do not take part in school events because activities outside the home are too exhausting for them. Invite them to participate anyway, and offer to help meet their needs. This often encourages them to join in more school activities.

Brian's mother came to the school's Thanksgiving program because she wanted to see the play in which Brian had a part. The event was scheduled as a potluck, and the lines were long. Brian's mother walked with a cane, and could not walk far or stand for long periods. The teacher set up a table for her and offered to go through line and get her food. This made it possible for her to participate in the event, and meant a great deal to Brian.

Michael and Rachel were students in Rusty Litten's class. Every year, his class scheduled an outdoor education trip. They were gone for several nights to the Tidewater, Virginia, area. Michael's mother was chronically ill, and could walk only very short distances with a cane, or had to ride in a battery-operated scooter. Rachel's mother had a brain tumor, and had facial paralysis and weakness. Neither woman felt she could participate in the outdoor education trip, or keep up with the class activities. Mr. Litten suggested that the two of them get a motel room together, since neither of them could sleep on gym floors as the rest of the class planned to do. They could participate for half days, doing activities they felt they could handle. After some negotiation and planning, both mothers decided to go. Not only were the children excited that their

mothers could come along, but the mothers became close friends and had a wonderful time together. This provided more support between the two families, a strengthened friendship between Michael and Rachel, and helped everyone feel a little more "normal."

Gail Melkerson, a teacher at Shenandoah Valley Adventist Elementary School, scheduled a class trip to a Civil War museum. Her seventh and eighth graders were going to see some hands-on demonstrations, as well as the museum exhibits. She recruited parents to drive and supervise the group's activities. Don's mother could walk only short distances, but had a battery-operated scooter and could drive a car. After calling to be sure the museum was handicapped accessible, Gail invited Don's mother to be a group leader. She assigned her a group of five eighth graders, including Don. The children helped Don unload the scooter from the trunk, set it up, and hook up the batteries. They

seemed as excited to do that as to see the museum. Don's mother had no trouble keeping up, since her scooter could outrun all of them anyway. They all stayed together and had a great time at the museum. Don was happy that his mother could participate in the activity. She was happy to

— be able to do "normal" school parent activities, and Mrs. Melkerson was grateful for her participation.

Understanding the child who is dealing with family illness or disability involves patience, some research, and recognizing the unique contributions he or she can offer to the class. By putting forth a little extra effort to include the child and his or her parents, you can create a winning situation for everyone. The teacher wins by having the family involved and supportive of classroom activities and of the school. The teacher and students have an opportunity to minister to a family and child in

need. The student feels affirmed and more normal in spite of his or her home difficulties, and the "difficult" student can be helped to cope with the stresses of his or her life in more positive ways. The parents win by sharing in their child's educational experience. Often they become some of the most loyal classroom helpers. Try it! It is worth the effort! ✍

*Sally Dillon is President and Senior Healthcare Consultant of BSJ Associates, Inc., in Timberville, Virginia, and is responsible for consulting, speaking, and writing on Staff Development, Management and Critical Care topics. Mrs. Dillon is a disabled parent who enjoys being involved in her child's school.*