

Helping the Youngest Victims of Bipolar Disorder

(A Parent Interview)

Some parents of children with bipolar disorder report that their child seemed to be born with the disorder. It can be quite difficult to get help for very young children dealing with bipolar disorder. The children often endure years of unchecked mood swings that can potentially do lasting damage before an accurate diagnosis can be made. Parents of these children wrestle with some very difficult treatment decisions because there is little information available for guidance in treating the preschool population. Yet many know the alternative of leaving the illness unchecked is worse. Following is an interview with Nathan's mother. We hope that others with very young children showing symptoms of bipolar disorder will benefit from her experience.

1. When did you first realize that Nathan was struggling with something more than normal childhood development?

From the time Nathan was born, we realized that he was just a little different than our other 2 children in that he didn't seem to have much personality and didn't require much sleep. By the time he was about 15 months old, we started seeing aggressive behavior and realized that it was becoming a problem.

2. How did Nathan's first years compare to those of your other children?

As I said above, he was just different. He rarely cried and didn't require more than about 4 hours of sleep at a time. He became very aggressive shortly after his 1st birthday. In addition, when he hurt himself during his toddling stages, he just wouldn't allow himself to cry. He fought back tears as young as 1 year old.

3. What was Nathan's most difficult symptom?

Nathan's most difficult symptom was by far the aggression. He tried desperately to hurt other people and had absolutely no remorse for it. He attended a day care and was asked to leave when he was about 15 months old because he had "severely" bitten other children. We then tried another day care and he was asked to leave on the second day for the same reason. I had to quit my job to stay home with him.

4. How did the early emergence of symptoms complicate the process of getting help for your child?

We waited until Nathan was about 2 1/2 to seek help, because he had walked out of our house in the middle of the night. We waited this long simply because it was unheard of that a two year old would be diagnosed with anything more than terrible twos. I was able to easily get in to see a counselor for myself and my husband, but this was not the case for Nathan. We found one counselor who would see him and then she had to pull strings to get a psychiatrist to see him after realizing that he could really hurt himself. No one would even humor the idea that a 2 year old could be diagnosed with a behavioral disorder.

5. Was Nathan able to communicate to you his emotional distress?

Nathan was not able to communicate anything. I think this is what makes early onset bipolar disorder a little more difficult to deal with than a child that is diagnosed at a later age. He would growl and shake when he was upset which was about 80% of the time. I don't think he really knew how he felt other than that he wanted to lash out at someone.

6. Prior to Nathan's difficulties were you familiar with bipolar disorder and the impact it can have on children?

I have a 9 year old niece that was diagnosed with bipolar disorder when she was about 7 so I have seen some of the symptoms. She didn't have nearly the aggressive behavior that Nathan has, but they did share other

symptoms such as obsessive compulsive tendencies and some separation anxiety.

7. How did your family cope with Nathan's diagnosis?

My husband and I were very strong and remain so. We knew that this was manageable and we weren't going to let it get us down. Our other two children have been absolutely remarkable in helping us raise Nathan. They understand what things get him agitated and they help to distract him or redirect his aggression. I am very glad that there is close to a 4 year age gap between Nathan and the next sibling. It certainly helps that they are old enough to understand. However, it is still upsetting to them when Nathan lashes out at them.

8. How has treatment helped Nathan?

Believe it or not, there was a noticeable difference in Nathan's behavior after the first dose of medication. His preschool teacher noticed it instantly, as did we. He still has small episodes, especially when he's tired or off a normal schedule, but overall, the medication has calmed him and enabled him to play like a normal kid. He is so much happier and easy to get along with. I do think that it is important for parents to realize that medication alone will not solve your child's problems.

9. Now that Nathan is treated and stable what are your hopes for his future?

My hopes for Nathan's future are that he is able to continue to have relationships with other kids just like any normal child. At this point, I'm not so concerned with his learning school work as I am with his ability to fit in and play. I always want him to feel normal and not ever feel that he's different from the other kids. Feeling different than others can be a devastating to a child's ego and self esteem for the rest of their life.

10. What advice would you give to other parents of very young children who may be dealing with an early onset of bipolar disorder?

My advice would be never to try to "self diagnose" a child. I would encourage any parent that thinks things just aren't "right" with their child to seek help. It can't hurt anything to get a professional opinion. If you find out it's just a phase...good for you. If not, then learn as much as you can about what your child's disorder is and do everything in your power to create an environment for them that will help them fit it and cope with their disorder. A final thing I'd like to add is that we have found and are still finding that it takes a big commitment on the part of the parent to learn about the disorder and be willing to alter your life to fit the need of your child. It may mean no late nights out and no weekend getaways for parents for a long time. You have to put your child first. Remember that they can't help how they are and that you are the one constant in their life that needs to always be available and understanding of them while they are learning to deal with their disorder. Sacrifices will have to be made and that's just the way it is. It isn't any different than having a child with a physical handicap. Their life will just be a little different. Also, be an advocate for your child. Never hide your child's disorder from teachers or babysitters. It will give them somewhat of an explanation of the child's behavior and will most likely help them be more understanding and tolerant of certain issues. When all else fails, laugh at your situation!!!

Thank you to Nathan's mom for sharing her experience with us.