

# Prejudicial Treatment of Children and Families with Bipolar Disorder

by Tracy Anglada

Have you read the papers or watched the news lately? If so, then you've heard the latest buzz, namely that the diagnosis of bipolar disorder has greatly increased in the childhood population. This increase was not news to parents and advocacy groups who have fought long and hard to finally get a correct diagnosis and treatment for their children over this past decade. According to the Center for Disease Control, parent reporting of serious emotional and behavioral difficulties has remained at a constant 5% in the under 18 population for the past five years. Since parent report is one of the first indicators that doctors examine, it does not appear that the recent increase in diagnosis is related to a shocking rise in the illness itself, rather a rise in recognition of the illness. A pitiful lack of recognition of the illness in children in previous decades has caused what appears to be a shocking increase of 40 fold. This increase has become the banner statistic for the media to declare over diagnosis and misdiagnosis without regard for all the facts. The current rates put bipolar disorder in children at approximately 1% of the population which is not a shocking statistic and indicates that the rates will increase yet more as children continue to be identified and properly treated. Childhood rates would be expected to reach over half of the conservative adult rate of 4% since more than half of onset occurs prior to age 20. Considering this, the headlines could have just as easily read, "Bipolar Disorder in Children Still Gravely Under Treated!"

So why is there a huge backlash against the diagnosis? Why hasn't there been a large scale congratulations regarding the progress made by doctors and researchers in identifying the illness in the childhood population? Surely if it had been cancer the headlines would have been different! The current climate is one that is bred by prejudice. Parents are at the heart of the organizations who have been advocating for more research, clearer diagnostic standards, brain scans and medication safety testing. Parents have the most vested interests in outcome. Yet, when the debate starts to rage, parents are accused of looking for a quick fix, not wanting to deal with their children and seeking out the diagnosis as if it were a status symbol. Casual newspaper readers now feel justified in critiquing every child and family with this diagnosis. These accusations are no less demeaning than saying that a depressed adult is defective in moral character or that poor parenting causes autism. In this debate, it is the parents left hurting and the children left suffering. While medical advancements and refinements in the diagnosis are welcome, the attack from many media sources is harmful and encourages stigma. This current treatment of the topic has robbed parents of the one thing they need the most on this journey: support!

For those who want to make a difference for children who may have bipolar disorder or who may have a different yet severe psychiatric illness, then support their parents, support research and support advocacy organizations. In this way you can point parents in the right direction while helping them understand the complexities of the bipolar diagnosis. You can help ease the burden and erase the stigma associated with bipolar disorder and other psychiatric illnesses in children. By learning the real facts surrounding issues versus the sensational headlines and by refusing to participate in the prejudicial and uneducated condemnation of this diagnosis, you can help make a difference.