

# **A Guide to Bipolar Disorder in Children & Adolescents**

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## *Introduction*

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Dear Reader,

This guide is the product of a master's level course on emotional disorders in childhood that was taken during the fall semester of 2008 at the University of Pittsburgh. This course is part of the School-Based Behavioral Health concentration within the Applied Developmental Psychology Program at the University.

Several works on Bipolar Disorder in children and adolescents, including this guide, were created throughout the fall 2008 semester. These include a handout for professionals, a podcast for families, and a podcast for youth. A podcast is a short online audio broadcast, similar to something you would hear on the radio. The first podcast provides information for families about the types and symptoms of the disorder, as well as its treatments. The second podcast offers information and suggestions for children who have a brother or sister with the disorder. Scripts of these podcasts were also created, both of which can be found in this guide. Links to the podcasts can be found on the University of Pittsburgh's School-Based Behavioral Health website ([www.sbbh.pitt.edu](http://www.sbbh.pitt.edu)).

For your convenience, difficult terms have been **bolded** throughout this guide and included in the "Glossary" section with definitions. The "Helpful Tips" section should provide you with good suggestions for what to do and what not to do if you know someone with Bipolar Disorder. The "Additional Resources" section is a great place to start if you are seeking some additional sources of information on the disorder. The resources listed in this section cover a wide range of topics and are directed at a wide range of people including children who have the disorder, siblings of kids with Bipolar Disorder, parents of these children, and professionals.

Thank you for reading through this guide. Hopefully, the information and suggestions provided here will give you some newfound knowledge, guidance, and hope about Bipolar Disorder.

## *Glossary*

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This glossary provides definitions to some key terms related to Bipolar Disorder.

**Bipolar Disorder** – “A mood disorder characterized by an overly high mood, called mania, which alternates with depression. Also called manic depression.”  
(CopeCareDeal, 2008)

**Cyclothymia** – A more mild form of Bipolar Disorder characterized by less severe mood swings (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

**Depression** – “A feeling of being sad, hopeless, or apathetic that lasts for at least a couple of weeks.” (CopeCareDeal, 2008)

**Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)** – “Use of electrical currents to treat severe depression or other mental health disorders that aren’t responsive to other treatments.”  
(CopeCareDeal, 2008)

**Family history** – The medical history of a person’s immediate family. In the case of Bipolar Disorder, a medical history of mood disorders would be relevant.

**Mania** – “An overly high or irritable mood that lasts for at least a week or leads to dangerous behavior. Symptoms include grandiose ideas, decreased need for sleep, racing thoughts, risk taking, and increased talking or activity. These symptoms cause marked impairment in functioning or relationships.”  
(CopeCareDeal, 2008)

**Mixed episode** – An episode of mood that contains features of both mania and depression.

**Mood disorder** – An emotional disorder characterized by disturbances in mood that affect daily life.

**Psychotherapy** – “Treatment for mental and emotional disorders using specific psychological techniques such as ‘talk therapy.’ The goals of psychotherapy are relief of symptoms and changes in behavior.” (CopeCareDeal, 2008)

**Puberty** – A stage of life when mental and physical changes occur due to maturation.

**Treatment plan** – An outline/schedule of all recommended treatments to be followed.

All of us go through changes in our mood or behavior, at some point or another. **Puberty**, for instance, is a time when teenagers are very emotional and moodier than usual. But what if extreme shifts in mood occur in excess or outside of normal stages in life, such as puberty? It's possible that the cause may be **Bipolar Disorder**. Bipolar Disorder affects a person's mind and body, as well as how they think and feel about themselves and others. A person may have this disorder for a long time and it can affect their everyday life (CopeCareDeal, 2008). Bipolar Disorder can occur in young children and teenagers, not just adults.

You may be asking yourself, how many people actually have Bipolar Disorder? On average, anywhere from 4 to 16 people out of every 1,000 have Bipolar Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). At this time there is not a good estimate out there of how common Bipolar Disorder is in children. It is thought that as puberty progresses, the number of young people that develop the disorder increases (Lewis, 2002). Having a **family history** of **mood disorders** increases the chance that a child will get Bipolar Disorder (CopeCareDeal, 2008). The highest chance for developing Bipolar Disorder is if the child has an identical twin with the disorder or if both of their parents have it. A child who has a sibling or fraternal twin with the disorder or one parent with the disorder has a lower, but still significant, chance of getting it (Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, 2002).

As a parent, teacher, sibling, or friend of a young person with Bipolar Disorder, you may notice changes in their behavior and mood. Sometimes they may look sad and seem to lose interest in things, and other times they may get easily irritated and talk a lot. These are all symptoms of Bipolar Disorder in kids and teens.

There are different types of Bipolar Disorder. Which type a person has depends on how strong or weak the symptoms are and how often mood changes occur.

**Cyclothymia**, for example, is a type of Bipolar Disorder that triggers less severe mood

swings (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, 2002).

There are two different sides to the disorder – **depression** and **mania**. When a professional like a doctor tries to diagnose this disorder in a person, one of the first things they look for is that a manic or **mixed episode** has happened. A young person who is going through an episode of mania may get easily irritated, talk a lot, get distracted, or sleep less (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). One thing to note, though, is that a doctor uses the same set of symptoms when diagnosing both children and adults with Bipolar Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, 2002). So, it could be hard to decide if a child has Bipolar Disorder because children don't always fit the adult symptoms perfectly. A young person in a state of mania would probably look more irritable than an adult would (National Institute of Mental Health, 2008).

Now let's take a look at the other side of Bipolar Disorder – depression. When going through a depressive episode, a young person may get easily agitated, seem sad, lose interest in things, or go through changes in their eating habits. Just like with the manic symptoms, children and teens may experience depressive symptoms slightly differently. For instance, they might have more physical problems and be more irritable rather than sad (National Institute of Mental Health, 2008).

The symptoms of mania and depression can be confusing. One reason for this is because teens and children with Bipolar Disorder often have another disorder at the same time. Some common examples of these disorders are ADHD, Conduct Disorder, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse disorders (National Institute of Mental Health, 2008; The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands Adolescent Mental Health Initiative, 2007). The symptoms of these disorders can overlap with those of Bipolar Disorder, causing confusion for the child and their family.

Having Bipolar Disorder does not mean that you cannot live a normal life because treatment is possible. Kids and teens with the disorder may need some extra help along with treatment. If you are the friend or family member of a child with

Bipolar Disorder, the task at hand is to make sure they go to school, and are able to concentrate and stay focused as best as possible while they're there (Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, 2002). Accomplishing this is usually the hardest thing to do with a child who has the disorder.

As far as treatments go, the most common form is medication (National Institute of Mental Health, 2008). Lithium is a medication that has been well researched in young people and has been shown to be effective. **Electroconvulsive therapy** is another treatment option, but is not nearly as common and is usually only used when other treatments have not worked (Lewis, 2002). Other helpful forms of treatment include **psychotherapy**, support groups, and a healthy lifestyle in general (CopeCareDeal, 2008). No matter what the **treatment plan** is for a child, it is important that their friends and family help them to stick with it (Johnson & Leahy, 2004). A normal and happy life is definitely possible for children and teenagers with Bipolar Disorder, especially with the love and help of their families, friends, and teachers.

The material presented in this podcast came from several sources. These sources were:

- The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition, text revision by the American Psychiatric Association, 2000
- Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: A Comprehensive Textbook, third edition by Melvin Lewis, 2002
- Treating and Preventing Adolescent Mental Health Disorders by The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands Adolescent Mental Health Initiative, 2007
- Psychological Treatment of Bipolar Disorder by Johnson and Leahy, 2004
- The "About Pediatric Bipolar Disorder" website by the Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, 2002
- The "Bipolar Disorder" website by the CopeCareDeal organization, 2008
- The "Child and Adolescent Bipolar Disorder" website by the National Institute of Mental Health, 2008

Over the next few minutes, we are going to talk about what it's like to have a family member with **Bipolar Disorder**. If you are the brother or sister of someone with this disorder, then this information is especially important for you. You probably have tons of questions about what your family is going through. Listening to this information will give you some good ideas for how to deal with this, and help you understand a little more about Bipolar Disorder.

First, I would like to share with you a poem called "My Own Waves" that was written by a boy named Travis who has Bipolar Disorder. Travis wrote this when he was 11 years old. His poem is about what he thinks it's like to have Bipolar Disorder. As you listen to this, remember that your brother or sister could be going through the same things Travis is talking about.

"I live my life on the beach's waters  
riding waves I have to control.  
My medicine is my surfboard  
my emotions are in my soul.

When the wave is real high  
I am the happiest guy  
I can do anything, even fly

When the wave is low  
my mind goes slow  
nothing is good  
I just don't want to go



Now I can surf  
I use the surfboard  
I use what I learned  
about changing my thoughts

In my life there are no more  
tidal waves  
only me surfing forever  
on medium waters.”

(Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, 2002, Gallery - Literature, ¶ 6)

Travis’ poem tells you what it’s like to go through the different parts of Bipolar Disorder. In this poem, you heard him say that his life is like riding on waves that he has to control. Kids who have Bipolar Disorder, like Travis, don’t always feel just “normal.” They sometimes feel really happy or strong like a superhero, and sometimes they feel really sad, upset, or down. The feelings they go through can change a lot, and make it seem, as Travis said it, like riding on high and low waves. Travis talked about his medicine in his poem and called it his “surfboard.” Some kids take medicine to help them with these feelings. The medicine can help them feel more normal. Travis was talking about his medicine making him feel more normal when he wrote “only me surfing forever on medium waters.” Now that he is taking medicine, he feels like he is on medium waters, instead of on those high and low waves he felt he was on before.

Hopefully this poem gives you a better idea of what your sister or brother feels like as they go through having Bipolar Disorder. You’ve probably seen your sibling acting weird or fighting with your parents, or maybe they’ve even done something to hurt you, and you wondered why. The reason is probably that they are going through one of those high or low moments we talked about. If your brother or sister has been mean to you or hurt or upset you, you shouldn’t think that they don’t love you or that they want to hurt you. Remember that most of the time, the way they act is controlled

by the way the disorder makes them feel. Blaming yourself for what your brother or sister does or says to you is not the answer. What you should try to do, although it can be really hard, is give your love, understanding, and support to your brother or sister. Even though the first thing you might want to do is get mad at them, it's very important that you try to be patient and loving with them.

A good thing to do is to talk to your parents. You need to let them know how you're feeling and what is going on with you. Your mom or dad can probably come up with ways to help you and your brother or sister get along. You also need to talk to your parents if you ever feel like you're being ignored. Sometimes when your mom and dad need to deal with what your sibling is going through, it may seem like they aren't paying attention to you. What's probably going on is just that sometimes it can be hard for your parents to deal with what your sibling goes through and all the normal things a family has to deal with, all at the same time. So, what you should do is talk to them about how you feel and together you can all come up with ideas to help. One thing you and your parents can do to make sure you don't feel ignored, is set aside some one-on-one time that is just for you and them.

Another thing to remember is that it's always better to get your parents' attention in good ways. Just because you may see your sibling getting their attention by saying or doing hurtful things doesn't mean that you should do it too. If you're feeling ignored, and you want to do something to make them put their focus on you, try to think of good things you can do. You could share with them an art or craft you've made or show them a homework assignment or test that you did really well on. Just talking with your mom and dad about what you like to do and what you're interested in is another good way to spend some quality time with them.

Handling what goes on at home when you have a sibling with Bipolar Disorder can be very hard. It can also be hard at school. If you and your brother or sister go to the same school, there are times when you might not know how to react. A lot of times you might feel like you need to watch over them and protect them. Other times you might actually feel embarrassed by them. These are all normal things to feel.

Remember when I said that the way your brother or sister acts is usually controlled by the way the disorder makes them feel? That is why they might act in ways that seem strange to you at school. It is possible that this is embarrassing to you or that your friends make you feel embarrassed. What you should try to do, though, is be as supportive as possible of your sibling and let your friends know why they are acting that way. When kids make fun of other kids who have a disorder, usually it's because they don't know about the disorder or understand it. By knowing about Bipolar Disorder yourself, you can help other kids to understand it as well. By doing this, you could actually be protecting your brother or sister from the hurtful things kids can say sometimes when they don't understand.

One last thing I want you to know is that your brother or sister can get better. There is a lot of help out there for kids with Bipolar Disorder. Sometimes, it is just a matter of taking some medicine. With whatever help your sibling is getting, your sister or brother can feel better, just like Travis talked about in his poem. Just remember that your love and support for your brother or sister can go a long way in helping both of you to be happy.

The material presented in this podcast was based on several sources. These sources were:

- If your Adolescent has Depression or Bipolar Disorder: An Essential Resource for Parents by Dwight L. Evans and Linda Wasmer Andrews, 2005
- The "Bipolar Disorder" website by the CopeCareDeal organization, 2008
- The "Gallery - Literature" website by the Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, 2002
- Treating and Preventing Adolescent Mental Health Disorders by The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands Adolescent Mental Health Initiative, 2007
- The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition, text revision by the American Psychiatric Association, 2000
- The "Child and Adolescent Bipolar Disorder" website by the National Institute of Mental Health, 2008

- Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: A Comprehensive Textbook, third edition by Melvin Lewis, 2002
- Psychological Treatment of Bipolar Disorder by Johnson and Leahy, 2004

## *Helpful Tips*

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These lists provide you with suggestions for helping someone with Bipolar Disorder.

### **What To Do:**

- Educate yourself about Bipolar Disorder – a good place to start would be with the “Additional Resources” section in this guide
- Be supportive, understanding, and patient
- Talk to them about how they’re feeling
- Learn what situations or events bring on their mood changes
- Try to maintain a well-structured schedule
- Become a member of a group that can offer guidance and support – this is good for them as well
- Help them follow their **treatment plan** by making sure they take any medicine they’re supposed to and receive any recommended therapies
- Keep in contact with their school and teachers about what they need, as well as to stay updated on how they’re doing in school

## What To Avoid:

- Don't blame yourself
- Don't break promises – breaking promises will only lessen the trusting and supportive relationship you have with them
- Don't give up – with proper treatment things can improve
- Don't expect too much – dealing with and treating this disorder takes time
- Don't take away opportunities for them to be independent – it is a good for them to experience making some choices and being successful
- Don't lecture or criticize them about their behavior – instead, try to help them focus on the positive
- Don't neglect yourself – the importance of taking care of oneself is good to model

## *Additional Resources*

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These are some helpful resources that provide information, support, and related materials.

**Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, 2008 ([www.bpkids.org](http://www.bpkids.org))** – This website has a lot of information on Bipolar Disorder in kids and teens. They provide a great list of books on the subject for kids, teens, and parents as well.

**CopeCareDeal, 2008 ([www.copecaredeal.org](http://www.copecaredeal.org))** – This is a great mental health website for teenagers. They provide some good information on different disorders, including Bipolar, as well as links to free PDF versions of some excellent books for parents and for teens (*see book suggestions below*).

**Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, 2008 ([www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org))** – This is another good website that offers information and support.

**National Institute of Mental Health, 2008 ([www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/child-and-adolescent-bipolar-disorder/summary.shtml](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/child-and-adolescent-bipolar-disorder/summary.shtml))** – This fact sheet provides an in depth look at the symptoms and treatments of Bipolar Disorder in children and adolescents.

**If Your Adolescent Has Depression or Bipolar Disorder: An Essential Resource for Parents by Dwight L. Evans and Linda Wasmer Andrews (2005, Oxford University Press)** – This is an excellent book for parents on what Bipolar Disorder is, how it's treated, and what you can do to help. A free PDF version of this book can be found online at the following address:  
[www.copecaredeal.org/Files/Bipolar-book.pdf](http://www.copecaredeal.org/Files/Bipolar-book.pdf)

**Mind Race: A Firsthand Account of One Teenager's Experience with Bipolar**

**Disorder** by Patrick E. Jamieson with Moira A. Rynn (2006, Oxford University Press) – This is a good book for teens that provides a firsthand view of the disorder. A free PDF version of this book can be found online at the following address: [www.copecaredeal.org/Files/Mind\\_Race\\_Whole\\_Book.pdf](http://www.copecaredeal.org/Files/Mind_Race_Whole_Book.pdf)

**Turbo Max: A Story for Siblings of Bipolar Children** by Tracy Anglada (2008,

**BPChildren**) – This is a story for children that sheds light on a different and helpful perspective, that of the sibling.

**Brandon and the Bipolar Bear: A Story for Children with Bipolar Disorder** by Tracy

**Anglada (2004, Trafford Publishing)** – This is a story directed at children who have Bipolar Disorder.



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