

HOW BIPOLAR CHILDREN REACT TO SCHOOL, HOMEWORK AND CARELESS REMARKS MADE BY TEACHERS

School is a topic that makes us shudder. Those of you who have non bipolar children will feel as frustrated as I do. My older child, now in matric has never, ever given one moments problem about going to school, was always ready to go, dressed and eager. Even now, she doesn't like to miss school. Then surprise surprise, little bp daughter arrives and absolutely hates school and would do anything she can to get out of it. It's a difficult, frustrating road and sometimes it would be so much easier to just give in but an education is imperative and it's how we handle it that will make it easier.

I have some real life stories that you will probably relate to, again, it is wonderful to know that you are not alone out there dealing with your child. We need to educate our teachers and caregivers to deal with our children in an appropriate manner, not to antagonise them but to educate themselves and become knowledgeable on the subject of early onset bipolar disorder.

ARUM LILY- mom to 13 year old daughter BMD 1

*My day starts off in the morning by lightly tapping on Little Lily's door and gently saying wake up, time to wake up..... I do this every five minutes, until I get screamed at "I AM AWAKE!!!"- then I get the rundown on how brutal I am in waking her up in the morning and "JE**S CH***T, what do you want from me?*

Then without fail, I get the news that we have a stomach ache, then we have a bad headache and so very nauseous. But Lily baby, you can't miss school any more this year, you have had so many days off, you are going to fail. "I DON'T CARE" why should I go to school anyway, it just sucks, and I don't learn anything there because school just sucks, and the teachers all hate me. One of these days I am going to run away and no one will find me, because seriously what is the point of going to school, the teachers don't teach us anything, they are just useless and they don't care about us.

That's her reaction to school.

On the other hand- the school will not make any allowances for the fact that my daughter suffers from bipolar 1 disorder and is unable to process information like other kids do. When she is given a deadline, she shuts down completely. When she knows she has tests to write we go into rage episodes of self-loathing and hatred because she is stupid and no amount of learning or trying to learn is going to help her to pass. As the parent, I have to teach her gently, convince her that she can do it, and create stories around her work to make it interesting and to help her remember. As the parent, I am allowing her to do homework in different phases and not all at once, giving her breaks in between. I don't expect this to be done at school. But if you let me know what she has to do, it will be done, and it will be done well. Sometimes I do not know of homework, because the subject has so overwhelmed the child that she will rather push it to the backburner and forget it exists.

What does not help, despite having spoken to teachers, and explained ad nauseum, provided written information and elicited promises of working with mom, is the fact that they actually DO NOT CARE....how sad, for the bipolar child, the mom, the dad, and all round, just sad.

When I hear that a teacher has used my child as an example in class, in front of the other students, as the failure of the year, and said that "she is sick and tired of my child and staying off school" I want to

burst a blood vessel. When I hear that a teacher has asked my child when she will be leaving the school because they can't wait, I want to blow a gasket. Do they even understand what this information is translated to in my child's head????

This confirms the bipolar child's personal thought of self-

I AM USELESS, I AM A FAILURE, NO ONE COULD POSSIBLY LOVE ME, I MAY AS WELL DIE, OR I AM GOING TO BE A FAILURE ANYWAY SO WHY EVEN TRY.

*A very careless remark by a school teacher who does not understand the workings of the bipolar brain, **is lethal to our children.***

Yet, it could be eased so simply- just keep in contact with the parent. Maybe, just maybe we have all made arrangements for our children to go to your school because we have been led to believe you give a damn. Well, please show that damn. It's worth it- it could save a child's life, and a parent's sanity. The spinoff is in fact that maybe the teacher him/herself could have a more pleasant day.

Well, in a nutshell, my child hates school, in a bigger nutshell, I hate school too. If there was an easier way for my child to get an education and some encouragement that she is not useless and a failure, trust me, I would be doing that rather. It is as hard for the parent as it is for the child.

WILL ANYONE EVER LISTEN THOUGH???

*Now- we know that the bipolar child is not the easiest, especially in teenage years, and all the nonsense that goes along with being a teenager (times ten), but yes, IT CAN be made easier. Give my child encouragement, some praise for when she does try, and a safe place to be when she is overwhelmed. You will then be dealing with a pleasant and happy child that will want more than anything to please you. And let me know what she is doing wrong, when she misbehaves. Instead of humiliating her in class. **I can help, I want to help. Allow me to.***

COMMUNICATION AND UNDERSTANDING IS THE KEY HERE. MY CHILD HAS AN INCURABLE, DEBILITATING DISORDER. PAY ATTENTION TO THAT.

Lavender - mom to 6 year old daughter BMD 1

Since my daughter started grade one, we've had a battle each and every day. Day one was exciting, it was new. Day two until now, each morning, I wake her with hot chocolate with a meal replacement in it as she is a bad morning eater and is very slow to get up and ready for school. She's sometimes in my bed and sometimes in her own but the routine is always similar but the mood varies. She procrastinates, doesn't want to get up, makes it painful for all of us. She absolutely refuses to dress herself, so each morning, I dress my 25kg live doll, then we do hair, teeth and take medicine. Sometimes it's easier and other days I'm exhausted before I leave the house.

Those mornings are caused when I've physically got to drag her out of bed and hold her in place to dress her while she fights me to get under the duvet again. Sometimes it can take up to 15 minutes to swallow one and a half tablets - I've resorted on a couple of occasions to giving the meds as I would to the dog - only with more struggle.

Each morning I listen to her asking to stay home because her tummy is sore, her head is sore, her body is in pain, she hates school and can't she please just stay at home.

We have missed a couple of days due to being sick but it's always difficult to decide whether the child is really sick or shamming. And when genuinely sick, it is important to get back to school as soon as possible otherwise a habit sets in and she tries to stay home for any reason. The rule is if she is sick, she stays in bed and is only allowed up to use the bathroom. I have explained that if she misses too much of grade one, she'll have to repeat it and that if she's bored now, it would be awful to have to repeat it and this seems to keep her going.

She is a bright little girl, is in the top reading group, has a good command of the English language and a vast vocabulary. She is funny, dramatic and eager to please and be loved – she loves being creative and hates maths – bonds in particular. Homework where maths is concerned is a trial. I don't use plain numbers, I use items, so Darling, you have five puppies, add one and now how many do you have? Right, now take away two of the puppies and that's your answer. It is imperative that I am creative and make it fun. If she can't manage it in one session, we do it again later and often her reading is done in the car travelling home or to dancing.

Fortunately, she has a lovely young teacher who has known since the beginning of the year that my daughter is bipolar and she has worked with me and we are winning in the classroom. She is a loving, warm person who my little one thinks is too wonderful – she loves her teacher, buys her presents and feels loved at school.

She is seen as a sociable child, but I get a different story from little girl. It is difficult to keep friends when you are bossy and want your way all the time. What happens is she flits from group to group trying to fit in when in fact she's seen as socializing well with all the other children.

In saying all this, I must not delay in speaking to her teacher and the principal about whose class she will be in next year because for us to have another good year, she needs another kind, understanding teacher who will work with us and her bipolar.

Rose – BP mom to son of 7

We should focus on the sensitivity of BP Kids – some time ago my son's teacher said that something my son did was stupid. He did not make much of it at the time, but sometime later that evening he burst into tears and I eventually dragged out of him that Teacher had called him stupid.

This is a very natural way for a BP child to handle a situation like this: he will not act straight away, but play with the thought in his mind and then become very emotional about it. Being through this myself gives me a better understanding. The fact that my son attends a private school also helps as situations like this do not occur regularly. The teachers are sensitive to children who are emotional due to Mental Disabilities.

I can imagine that situations occur more regularly in Public Schools, due to the increased volumes of learners as well as the fact that teachers are not as attuned to the special needs of Mentally Disabled children.

Bougainvillia – mom to daughters of 28 and 18

My 18 year old has lost two years of high schooling. She was taken out of the school situation (in grade 11 in 2011) at the request of her psychiatrist as she was unable to concentrate for too long a period, her anxiety levels were at an absolute peak level. She was convinced that everybody was looking at her and that she was ugly and it was at this point that her self mutilation was at its highest. She would cut her arms so that she could feel the pain to feel alive - so she told me. I was on suicide watch many times because she had already formulated a way to kill herself ;-(she was also being bullied which didn't help and even approaching the school principal etc had no results despite spelling out her condition to him.

I enrolled her in a private school earlier this year with a smaller class but unfortunately she still didn't cope. Her legs were continuously on the go (restless leg syndrome) which in itself is a distraction for others and again she wasn't comfortable being surrounded by kids of her own age. Her self esteem was non existent and once again the self mutilation started which resulted in another hospital admission for ten days.

She would wake up in the mornings with stomach ache or a migraine just about anything to avoid going to school. Sometimes I would get her to the school entrance and sit for at least fifteen minutes talking to her to encourage her to go in the front door and more often than not, I would have to turn around and go back home because she didn't have the confidence to sit in the class. Her marks at the private school were really good in fact much better than they were in the previous school which I thought would be an incentive to try but that wasn't what she wanted to hear and she would often end up in tears if I insisted that she should at least try the morning and if she couldn't cope we would fetch her. Needless to say this also interfered with both my husband and my working life and it seemed like I was always taking time off work to rescue her which didn't go down too well with colleagues and bosses who don't understand BP disorder.

Together with her psychiatrist and psychologist we have considered home schooling as an option for the year 2013. We live in faith and hope.

She has now lost two years of schooling and her friends are presently writing matric and preparing for their matric ball so I see another emotional roller coaster coming my way as she is feeling quite left out of the hype and excitement that she could have had if she was still in school. And so the fight continues.

Bluebell - mom to daughter aged 11

Schooling is a nightmare! Firstly she can't wake up in the morning, often falling asleep 3 times after being woken even after eating breakfast. She has been late for school more than 110 days this year already!

She doesn't write her homework down in a book and is constantly in detention for not having brought her books or done homework. She struggles to make friends and currently has only one, who has been brilliant in sticking up for her at school. She tends to be bullied a lot, she's a soft child with an abundance of compassion, which is often to her own detriment. She will cry when she sees a beggar in the street as she feels so sorry for him.

I have spent most of her school years defending her from teachers bullying. This year I have had numerous run ins with teachers that pass unnecessary comments about the child, pick on her, use her

as negative examples to the rest of the class and generally don't care to understand that she does have a condition. The fact that she appears no different from any other child as she may not display in front of them what she is feeling as she will control it to avoid embarrassment at the time, doesn't mean she or I won't suffer the consequences later. I am the one who ultimately deals with the breakdown, anger, depression and not wanting to live as its too hard at the end of the day!

Her Grade 2 teacher was incredibly kind and had a wonderful way with my daughter. She had a friend with 2 bipolar children so knew how to handle the child in a positive manner, which in turn helped me. Wish there were more teachers like her.

Yesterday afternoon and last night she had 2 episodes, which were spurred on by her being in trouble at school and having to spend today's breaks outside the office. The episodes got completely out of hand with her telling me that she had a terrible day at school and her teacher hates her, into my making her life terrible at home and accusing me of not wanting her.

Daylily - Mom to BP son of 12

Since preschool days, school has always been an issue with my son. He never conformed how the teachers expected him to. He is always challenging.

He doesn't participate in galas or sports days and that isn't accepted by the teachers either.

Within 3 weeks of Grade 1 I was asked to take him for an assessment for ADHD. He was subsequently diagnosed and put on Ritalin. With no real effect.

He repeated Grade 2 in the Remedial Unit at the school he was in at the time. This was, in my opinion, the worst schooling year he's ever had, even though he wasn't yet diagnosed Bipolar. I had to deal with a teacher who never gave him any credit, no matter how much he needed it. That year was the same year the child in Gauteng attacked another child with a sabre sword... After an incident at the school a few days after during which my son was boxed in a room and not let out he subsequently threw a chair and lashed out despite me having told them on numerous occasions that he has big issues with personal space and feeling trapped - I was told that my child would be like the one in Gauteng one day. Needless to say I was horrified as he was only 8 at the time and this was from the Head of a Unit that was supposed to be more qualified in dealing with kids who needed extra assistance.

When he was eventually diagnosed in Grade 5, I was asked to give a guarantee that he would never have a rage at school - I removed him as it is an impossible expectation.

He has always had teachers tell him that he won't achieve, he just isn't good enough at anything. Over the years it's taken a huge knock on his confidence.

However since his diagnosis 18 months ago he has been through four other types of schools. He is now in a small home based home-school environment after three months of no school. Even this is proving rocky as he needs to settle back into routine.

On the homework front this is a battlefield. It always ends up in a shouting match and takes hours and hours to complete - instead of the normal 45-90min depending on what needs doing. He finds it almost impossible to sit still in the afternoon and concentrate. My heart breaks for him because I can

see he is tired and unable to cope. It's a very difficult situation to try and balance. I know the homework is important but I can also see that he can't cope with it. I'm hoping as he gets older he is able to find a balance and cope better with the schedule and what is expected of him.

I find schooling to be a very trying exhausting process for all of us. The stress of waiting for the next explosion at school, trying to keep him on track with his schedule, participation in school events and homework all take their toll.

Trumpetbell – mom to ADHD and BP son of 9 and ADHD son of 11

As a mother of two boys 9 and 11, I have battled tremendously with the school and teachers just merely getting them to understand. Both boys suffer from ADHD and my youngest has bipolar added to the mix. This has been extremely challenging as very few teachers understand. I find he has been picked on and humiliated to the extent we had to change schools.

On the average day I battle to get him up, he either has tummy ache, complains his whole body is sore, a headache you name it I hear it. After what feels like drawing water from a stone we are off to school.

When I fetch him from school I find a very agitated child, he will either come straight to me burying his head in my stomach just needing a cuddle, or I have the extreme where he is in a rage and I know that afternoon is going to be hell.

Homework is one huge fight, and he ends up with nothing done. I approached the teacher, the standard HOD, the principal, anyone who will listen as I explain the situation, but it felt like my words were falling on deaf ears and merely being humoured. His teacher told me he would constantly want to leave the classroom, trying to escape a situation that he could not deal with. He would hold the pencil in his hand and snap it out of frustration every time the teacher shouted at him, and naturally the teacher took this personally. I explained to the teacher numerous times what was happening and how to deal with it. I even told them that at worst case they must please call me. It got to a point where I was seeing the teacher every week just to find out how things were in the classroom.

To my utter disgust a week before I decided enough was enough and took them out, his teacher was rude and nasty about my son with him standing right behind me listening to every word! To me this is unacceptable. What happened to teachers who did this job because they cared? What teachers do not realise is how they handle a situation with a child with this condition has a snowball effect, my child will become depressed, feel worthless, have manic outbursts.

He participates in group activities with the class wonderfully but when it comes to the work off the board etc. he battled, his position was made no better by the teachers constant remarks that he would fail, the children laughing and teasing. He often wandered the playgrounds looking for his older brother as no other children wanted to play with him. He is one of the gentlest, kindest children I know, but once pushed his manic episodes are violent, aggressive and extreme verbal retaliation is used. He will sit and cry after an episode not understanding why this is happening to him.

The other kids then picked up on this and started picking on him. Older kids would pick on him calling him names and insulting me knowing this would trigger him. I found myself in a situation which I will never forget; I went to collect my boys from school, on arrival they were not there. My niece told me they had been in a fight and were in the office. So assuming boys are boys I went to find them in the office. Only to walk into a hornets nest! My son was antagonised to the point they got him to snap. The older boys thinking this was humorous continued taunting him whilst two other boys filmed this on their phones. After watching the video I was devastated, all the principal could say to me was "but did

you hear his language”, I then proceeded to tell him this is what I warned all the teachers about. I was told my son would receive demerits for swearing which I said was fair enough as he still needs to know there are boundaries and consequences. Much to my disgust nothing was followed through, nothing ever solved. And the teacher who pulled him by his arm like a dog was seen as ‘ok to do’. This is the 4th incident in 1 year!

My point to this is that not only are they picked on and misunderstood by teachers but children pick up on their ‘weakness’ and as a result bully them. And even more frightening is nothing is done about this.

I have given the information regarding bipolar in young children and teens to his teacher to read, and help him better understand and cope. But to no avail, my son became a burden. Both my children were referred to a remedial school. After applying and waiting 4 weeks for the GED to approve the application, it was declined. The lady from the remedial school told me that what my children need is an environment where bullying is controlled for first and the teachers are patient and understanding. This is sadly lacking in most schools. It was suggested if finances allowed, to put them into a private facility. We are lucky enough to be able to do this, but what about the hundreds of other children that desperately need a teacher to give them some patience and understanding?

We have since moved schools, I have two changed children and the younger, who was humiliated constantly told he was failing and never felt good enough, is now a changed child. He wants to go to school, he loves school work now. If I look at his books from a month ago and compare them with what I see now there is a phenomenal change.

Yes we will have our days where he will have episodes but they are so mild compared with what they used to be. He has been empowered by teachers who care – now that just proves our point as parents. We cannot be everywhere, so we rely on the teachers and school system.

As the parent of a bipolar child I know better than anyone else the challenges, strain and hardships suffered. But at the end of the day all we are asking of the teachers and school system is patience and more importantly understanding! This problem is being diagnosed more often in young children today, so making the teachers aware and educating them on this condition is not asking too much, it will benefit them and with their help a significant change can be made.

So as we see from these stories, our children all resist school in some way or another. We need to have open relationships with teachers and principals in regard to Bipolar Disorder in children. Our children need to be in mainstream school, they are not disabled or special needs children but children who are intelligent, funny, moody, entertaining, perfectionists with a fear of failure and terrified of humiliation. They speak their minds and are often chastised for being rude, cheeky, precocious or badly brought up and disciplined when in fact they are dealing with a life long condition and crying out for understanding and support.

Knowledge of the disorder and the best ways to handle and teach children with this disorder is what is important and we hope that with our website up and running and our efforts to raise funds which will enable us to create awareness, do talks at schools and other events, we will be able to spread the information that will help our children to have the education that they deserve.

Our long term goal is to have counsellors on our panel, to have a fund available to assist parents who do not have the financial resources to get the correct diagnosis and medication for their

children and very importantly to set up schools that will cater specifically to educate children with Bipolar Disorder.

That is all from me today. We'd love to hear your comments and views and hope that you are gaining as much support and information from this website as we intended.