

# WE NEED TO

**FIVE O'CLOCK ON** a Monday during autumn term is not the easiest time to command the attention of zoned-out schoolchildren, but Deni Francis, an actor turned drama practitioner, specialises in engaging the glassy-eyed and lesson-weary. At a family centre in North London, she has already organised a game of Can I Come In? – a variation on musical chairs – that has everyone running around, squealing and laughing.

Now she's moving on to tonight's theme: change. 'What sort of big and little changes is everyone dealing with?' she wants to know. A raft of hands shoots into the air and Deni begins to scribble the responses on a whiteboard: changing class at school, changing house, changing your phone, changing socks.

From the side of the room, 12-year-old James Lee\*, who has been surveying the scene but saying little, decides to speak out. 'In February I had to go into care because my dad was ill with a breakdown. I'm back home now, but that was a big change.' For a moment, James's words hang in the air. Deni suggests that that must have been a difficult adjustment. The other children say nothing, but nod with understanding. Then James relaxes and the conversation moves on.

This gathering may, at first glance, look like any other after school club – but there is one crucial difference. Every one of the 20-odd children here knows something of the mood swings, erratic behaviour, anxiety, guilt and upheaval that go along with having a parent who is mentally unwell. Many also know the



**Kidstime regulars Maria (left) and Uzma with their mother Azima, who suffers from depression**

stigma and social isolation attached to mental illness, but in this room they realise they are not alone.

The session these children are attending is called Kidstime, an award-winning workshop for those coping with mental illness within their families. Pioneered 15 years ago, the Kidstime approach has been shown to dispel myths and diminish distress among those it helps in 12 centres around the country (in Plymouth, Somerset, the Wirral, Bedfordshire and Portsmouth, as well as seven in London). The work

of the Kidstime Foundation is ground-breaking, but so far it has only been able to reach a fraction of the two million children in the UK – one in six five-to-18-year-olds – who have a parent suffering from mental illness. Now, however, the charity is launching Who Cares?, an online and in-school programme that promises to make life a little easier, and the future brighter, for many thousands more young people carrying what is often viewed as a 'hidden burden' within their own homes.

The driving force behind

Kidstime is Dr Alan Cooklin, a family psychiatrist who long ago realised while treating his adult patients that the needs of their children were being overlooked. 'The mental health services would come in like the SAS, carrying off parents and sectioning them. But nobody explained anything to their children,' he recalls. 'It was almost as if people were scared of them – scared of how to make them understand what was happening and how they might react. So rather than explain, both families and professionals tended not to tell them anything.'

With colleagues, Dr Cooklin set up a programme called What Shall We Tell the Children?, which was first targeted at adults but quickly adapted to include children as well. In workshops, he described what was going wrong in the brain when someone became depressed or developed a mental health condition such as schizophrenia or psychosis. Using jargon-free terms and simple diagrams, he illustrated how humans control their thoughts with imaginary filters, 'but when those filters break down, sometimes the brain gets flooded and people get muddled and confused and say muddled and confused things'. Then, because he wanted the sessions to be fun, he linked up with Deni, whose background includes youth theatre work, and gradually the Kidstime model – which encompasses games, role-play, pizza and a chance for both children and parents to talk – evolved. 'Lots of people said it was the best thing for them – better than treatment,' Dr Cooklin says. 'And it is not treatment. No one is here as a patient – that is very important.'

For James, tonight is his ►

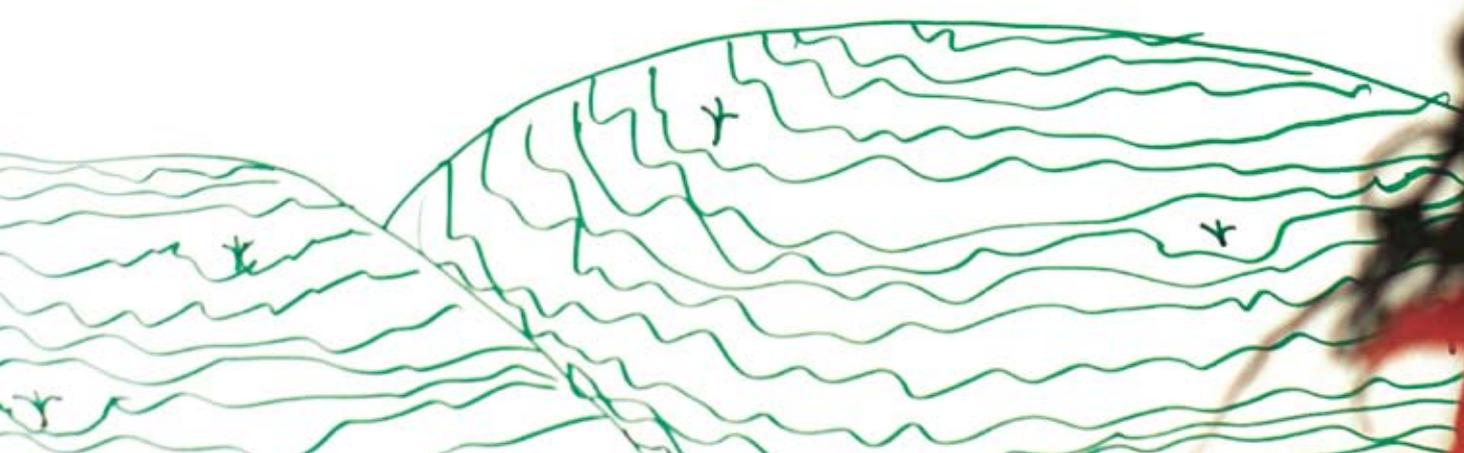
\*SOME NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED. AJ HEATH PHOTOGRAPHY

# TALK ABOUT MUM'S MENTAL ILLNESS

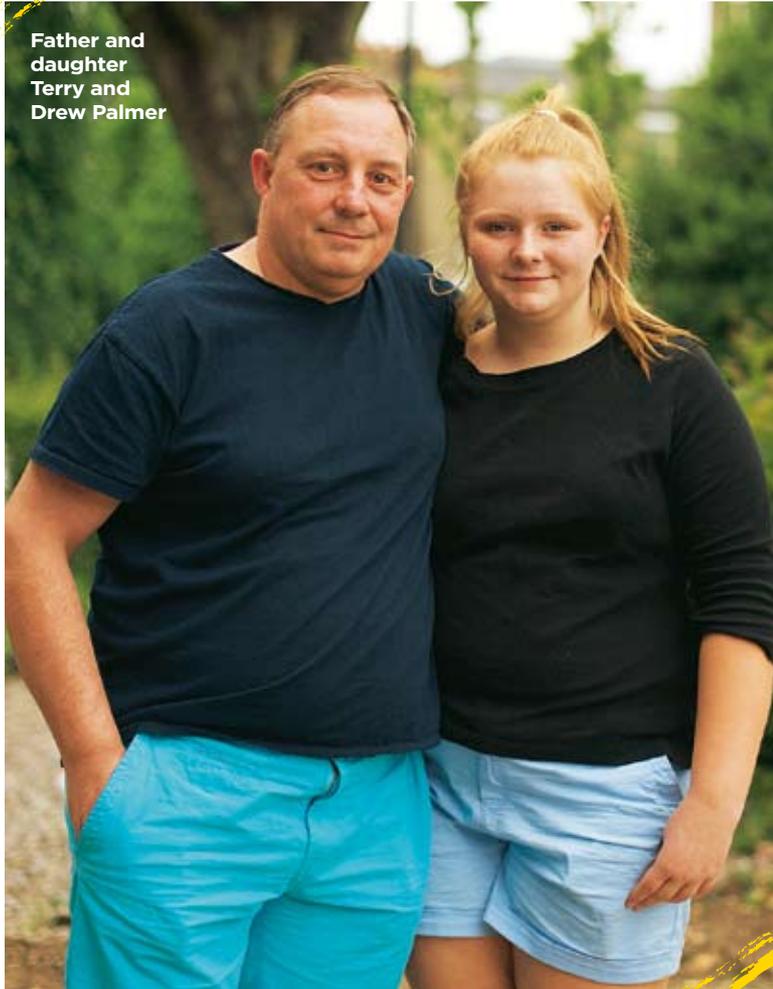


Mental health awareness may be on the rise, but for the children caught up in family illness, support can be sadly lacking. *Catherine O'Brien* meets the professionals breaking boundaries with open conversation and drama – and the families they are helping

PHOTOGRAPHS *David Poole*



Father and daughter  
Terry and  
Drew Palmer



◀ introduction to Kidstime and, like most first timers, he arrives with his eyes cast down and his arms folded protectively across his chest. With him is his mother Shona, 38, and sisters Florence, 13, and Lola, five. Terry Palmer, 50, a Kidstime regular who attends with his 12-year-old daughter Drew, gives them a welcome nod as they take their seats in the circle of chairs set out around the room. 'Every child who comes in here looks shy like that initially,' Terry says. 'But it doesn't take long for the barriers to come down.'

Terry, a former electronics engineer, first brought Drew to Kidstime two years ago, as he and his family (he also has three grown-up children) struggled to cope with the ill health of his wife Amanda, 50. 'For the past ten years, she has had a heart and lung condition that has led to depression, self-harm and binge drinking,' Terry explains. 'We have had suicide attempts and she has been sectioned. Drew has never known a home life without that turmoil.'

At the age of nine, Drew's teachers reported that she was

becoming withdrawn and falling behind at school. 'It's hard for any kid to come out and say, "My mum or dad has gone off the rails," so instead Drew was pushing herself into a corner and could no longer relate to her peers,' says Terry. 'But coming here has enabled her to see that others are in similar situations and, although we have problems, we are working through them. That has given her confidence and now she is blossoming.'

Among the friends Drew has made at Kidstime is Aaliyah Chandler, 11, who two years ago, along with her elder sisters Lorder, 18, and Stella, 17, rescued her mother Gill

“  
*It's not therapy,  
but many people  
who come say  
that what we do  
is therapeutic*  
”



**'I REALISED WHY MUM  
WAS DIFFERENT AND  
THAT I HAD NOTHING TO  
BE ASHAMED OF'**

**Chineye Njuoku, 26, attended  
Kidstime from the ages of**

**13 to 17. She is now a trustee and 'experience  
counsellor' with the charity and is pioneering a  
TeenTalk programme for adolescents.**

'My mum had postnatal depression when I was born and is also bipolar, so I've always known mental illness. When I was two years old, I was sent to Nigeria with my elder sister Sabrina and we stayed there, living with my father's family for the following seven years. My mother remained in the UK and we would talk on the phone, but I remember her sounding strange and relatives would talk about her having "a madness".

'We were reunited when I returned to the UK at the age of nine. I had imagined that we would hug and kiss, but she was withdrawn and I now

understand that she was numbed by her medication. She still wasn't well enough to look after us so I was sent to an aunt's. At school I did well academically, but I couldn't relate to other students. A teacher took me under her wing and, gradually, I told her what was going on and she encouraged me to make friends.

'By my early teens, our parents had divorced but Mum was well enough for Sabrina and I to live with her. It didn't all go smoothly. She would have relapses and we would be sent to stay with relatives and went into foster care for a period.

'I first became involved in Kidstime through social services. Alan [Dr Cooklin] was the first person to describe my mum's illness clearly to me. I realised why she was different and that I had nothing to be ashamed of. I also met other children with the same problems and that made me feel that we weren't abnormal.

'At home, I had to behave like an adult; most of the time we couldn't run around or make a lot

of noise and we had to always make sure Mum was OK. Kidstime was the one place I could be a child - I could play, have fun and laugh for a couple of hours and I really needed that.

'In my mid-teens I went through some bullying problems that led to rebellion. I stopped taking my education seriously and bunked off school. I had been in the top set, but went down to foundation level. My English teacher picked up on it, talked to me and made me realise that I did care about being successful. I knuckled down and went to university, where I graduated in biomedical science before doing a master's in psychological therapies. I now work in mental health.

'Mum's health is still up and down, but we are doing OK. Two things have got me to where I am: Kidstime and my teachers. That's why I am so keen to see Who Cares? in schools. With the right information and support, teachers have the power to make a difference to children like me.'

after finding her unconscious at their Islington home. Gill, 45, who has type 1 diabetes, had slipped into a coma. Thanks to her quick-thinking daughters, Gill reached hospital in time to ensure she could have life-saving treatment, but she emerged with a brain injury that has led to memory lapses and depression.

Gill and Aaliyah attend Kidstime together. 'It's been difficult for Aaliyah because I am not always like the mum I used to be and she is having to grow up faster than she should,' says Gill.

'Mum can't drive any more and she forgets things, so I try to help with the cooking and washing-up at home,' adds Aaliyah. 'I've got a mentor at school who I can talk to, but at Kidstime we talk to other people like us and have some fun as well.'

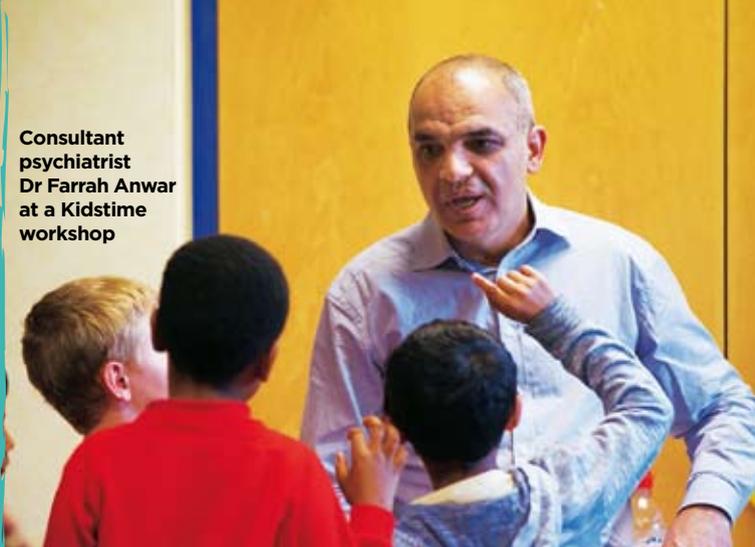
Fun is a key ingredient here. Everyone – children, parents and professionals – takes part in the games, which act as an icebreaker, and also a leveller. 'There's no counsellor-client hierarchy here,' explains Dr Cooklin. 'One of the most common fears of children whose parents are mentally ill is that their condition is "catching". So we emphasise that Kidstime is supportive, but no one is here because there is something "wrong" with them.'

'It's not therapy, but many people who come here say what we do is therapeutic,' adds Deni.

Games are followed by a discussion, with topics, such as tonight's 'change', that sound deceptively simple, but swiftly begin to address complex issues. Shortly after James raises his father's breakdown, Uzma Pervez, 14, briefly alludes to the current strain on her family. Her younger sister Sadia, 13, is being treated for anorexia and her mother Azima – who is with her tonight along with another sister, Maria, ten – suffers from depression.

'It's nerve-racking sometimes because people don't always understand and it's hard to explain

**Consultant psychiatrist Dr Farrah Anwar at a Kidstime workshop**



## KIDSTIME IN THE CLASSROOM

Although there are hundreds of groups supporting young carers across the UK, few address the particular needs of children whose parents are mentally ill.

And yet, according to Dr Alan Cooklin, studies show that 70 per cent of the estimated two million children affected by mental illness in the family suffer from loss of education and poorer life chances. They are also more likely to suffer from social isolation, anxiety, guilt, an excessive sense of responsibility and depression themselves as a result of having to help look after their parents.

'Children of parents with mental illness rarely receive proper recognition for the care they provide, and they may even be blamed for causing the illness,' Dr Cooklin says. Mental illness can also lead to a parent withdrawing from their children, who will then respond by trying even harder to achieve emotional closeness, which, says Dr Cooklin, 'creates a vicious spiral, seriously disrupting the children's development'.

The Kidstime approach breaks that circle by creating an open and safe forum for discussing mental illness, so that children don't

interpret their parent's behaviour as a personal rejection. 'They learn from each other and begin to see the problem in the round,' Dr Cooklin explains. 'And similarly parents often learn how to cope with family relationships without feeling that they are also being scrutinised by social services and health professionals.'

The Who Cares? project, developed by Kidstime, has taken the ethos of the workshops and packaged them for use in schools. Its written materials, informative films, drama sequences and activities have been divided into three specific kits: the first for teachers, the second for secondary school pupils in general, and the third for those who have a parent or relative suffering from a mental illness.

'One in six children in every classroom has a parent suffering from mental illness, so schools are where the children we want to help are sure to be found,' says Dr Cooklin. 'Schools provide a haven from difficulties at home, but they can also be a source of stigma and bullying, so we're hoping that they embrace Who Cares? and the Kidstime approach.'

**From left: Kidstime founder Dr Alan Cooklin, nurse Jessica Streeting, drama practitioner Deni Francis and family therapist Dr Peter Bishop**



“  
*Every child who comes here looks shy initially but the barriers soon come down*  
”

something that they don't really want to talk about,' Uzma says.

'Uzma takes on a lot of responsibility – she is intelligent and caring and I am very proud of her,' Azima adds.

The discussion segment of the evening lasts no more than 20 minutes – certainly not long enough for any in-depth analysis. And yet it plays a vital role in acknowledging the shared experience of mental illness as well as stripping away taboos. 'We never know what is going to come up, but it is about opening doors that children and parents can then decide whether to walk through or not,' says Deni. 'It also makes mental illness something we say out loud, which is often not happening for the children at school and at home.'

At appropriate moments, Dr Cooklin chips in with explanations. 'Saying "your mum has a chemical imbalance in the brain" is not helpful because it's not a concept that a child can picture – in fact it may even increase their anxiety,' he says. But honest, straightforward analogies – such as his brain filter one – help create what he calls 'an x-ray vision' to explain what is going on behind a sad, angry or confused face. 'If children can say, "I know what is going on inside and it is not my fault, so I don't need to take this personally," they are immediately less vulnerable.'

Once the joint discussion time is over, parents and children split up. The parents, who may be coping with personal mental health issues, such as Azima and Gill, or who, like Terry, may be full-time carers, go ▶



**Above right:** senior young carers support worker Rebecca Taylor supervises an art activity

◀ to a separate room where, guided by family therapist Dr Peter Bishop, another Kidstime co-founder; they continue to discuss mutual concerns with each other. The children remain with Deni and Dr Cooklin, who supervise what for many is the highlight of the night – the preparation of drama scenarios ready for showtime.

The benefits of drama as therapy are not new. ‘Role play is a great way to help people connect with each other and understand something about themselves,’ says Deni. But what gives the Kidstime sessions a unique twist is that the children not only script and act out their stories but also film them for a finale to the evening when, over a pizza supper; they watch the fruits of their labours with their parents.

‘I was sceptical at first [the filming

was Dr Cooklin’s idea] – I thought it would be too intrusive,’ admits Deni. ‘But I did a complete U-turn the first time I saw the parents’ appreciation at the end.’

‘The thing about being a parent with a mental illness is that you almost always have a sense of shame that you are not good enough and that you are failing your children,’ explains Dr Cooklin. ‘So having the chance to sit back and watch what they have created is invariably a surprise and a pleasure. The parents feel proud, the children feel valued and everyone claps and laughs – even when the subject matter of the drama is really quite awful.’

The plot for tonight’s drama vignette centres on the theme of playground bullying and the theft of a phone. James, who started the evening with such reticence, is now

feeling brave enough to volunteer for the central role of the bully. There are three short scenes – in the first, he walks up to another boy and menacingly demands that he hands over his phone. In the second, other children coach the victim on how to stand up to the bully, and in the third, the victim goes back to James and demands the phone back. James wins a standing ovation for his bravura performance after breaking down in mock tears. ‘I can cry good,’ he says in rapper-speak, and his grin as he heads home suggests that, for him, Kidstime has already proved the start of a positive new chapter in his as yet short and uncertain life. ■

■ For information about Kidstime workshops and the Who Cares? project go to [kidstimefoundation.org](http://kidstimefoundation.org). To make a donation visit [mydonate.bt.com/charities/thekidstimefoundation](http://mydonate.bt.com/charities/thekidstimefoundation)

“  
*As a parent with mental illness you feel that you are failing your children*  
”



**‘IT WAS GOOD TO MEET OTHERS LIKE ME WHO HAVE TO REMIND THEIR PARENTS TO EAT’**

Angel Masters, 17, began attending Kidstime four

years ago. The graphic design student is now also an ambassador for the charity.

‘People think depression is when you feel low and want to kill yourself. But there is so much more to it than that. My mum has schizoaffective disorder. That means she gets schizophrenia symptoms, such as hallucinations, and mood disorder symptoms, including mania and

depression. She mixes up reality with imagination. She takes antidepressants and sleeping pills but there is often no way of knowing what state she is going to be in.

‘My dad found out about Kidstime when he was looking for ways to help me. I already knew about my mum’s illness, but it was good to know that there are people who, like me, have to remind their parents to shower and eat.

‘People say mental illness is invisible, but you can usually tell by the look on someone’s face or the way they are not keeping up with personal hygiene that they are unwell.

‘Being a carer for my mum is not a bad thing,

but it is a responsibility. I know that sometimes she doesn’t want to talk, she just wants me to sit with her. The annoying thing is that because I have lived with my mum, I can usually tell when other people are down as well. You start to feel guilty if the people around you are not happy, which is illogical, but I can’t help it. That is one of the things we’ve talked about at Kidstime – the burden of having that insight. My school and college mates don’t understand that, but with my friends from Kidstime we can just jump straight into a deep conversation, and that means a lot to me.’