



The Sydney
children's
Hospitals Network

care, advocacy, research, education

Support for children and families



heart
centre for children
the children's hospital at Westmead

Extra support for families when they need it most

“It’s a big experience that you go through, so it’s significant to be able to talk about it and have someone to help you put the pieces together.”

– Father of a child with CHD



A child’s diagnosis and treatment for a heart condition can be challenging for the whole family. Being scared, overwhelmed and uncertain are common feelings.

These feelings can place strain on families. At the Heart Centre for Children, we are committed to supporting children and families throughout all stages of their medical and emotional care. Together, we work as a team to provide the best possible support, based on research evidence and feedback from families.

Support for families

Psychologists at the Heart Centre for Children provide emotional care for babies, children, young people and families affected by all types of heart disease.



Ways we can assist

There are many different ways our psychologists can assist families. These include:

- Helping your baby or child to cope with any difficulties they may be having in relation to their heart condition, treatment or hospital stay, as well as other aspects such as difficulty sleeping, feeding, or feeling worried at home or school.
- Providing parents with an opportunity to talk about their experiences, including any worries or concerns they may have, or any challenges they may be facing.
- Supporting parents who receive their baby's diagnosis during pregnancy, including help to prepare emotionally for the birth and postnatal care of their baby.
- Supporting families who are considering genetic testing to better understand whether their child may have a genetic heart condition.
- Helping children and families to cope after the diagnosis of a heart rhythm condition, including adjusting to changes in exercise and lifestyle.
- Supporting siblings to better understand their brother or sister's heart condition and to cope with the changes in routine that may occur during hospital stays.
- Assisting grandparents and other family members to feel 'in the loop' and to manage any difficulties they may have during challenging times.
- Providing care for bereaved parents, siblings and other family members.

What psychology is not

Some families may feel unsure about what a psychologist does or how they can help. To make things a little clearer, we have included some common misunderstandings about psychology:

“Isn't psychology just for crazy or weak people?”

Many families who contact our psychology service have never thought about seeing a psychologist before.

Stress is a natural and understandable response to a child's diagnosis and treatment, and feeling this way does not mean you are 'crazy' or 'weak'. A psychologist can help you or your family find ways of coping with the stress and uncertainty of childhood heart disease, especially when times are challenging.

“Is psychology all about positive thoughts?”

The challenges that families experience following their child's diagnosis are real. One of the things families find most helpful about seeing a psychologist is being able to talk about all of their thoughts and feelings.

This includes the good and the bad. Having space to talk about these things, without feeling like you need to put on a brave face or worry about burdening the other person, can be a big relief.

“A psychologist can’t fix my child’s heart, so how can it help to talk about it?”

There may be times when you feel the only thing that can help is making your child better. It is natural and understandable for this to be your focus, particularly if your child is very unwell.

While our psychologists can’t take your child’s heart condition away, they can support you and your family in finding ways to cope with the challenges ahead. Many families find it can help to talk about their experiences, even when it doesn’t change the situation they are faced with.

“Is psychology just for Mums? Should Dads be able to cope on their own?”

Dads can often miss out on accessing support for a number of reasons. Some dads may find it difficult to ask for support or feel they should be able to cope on their own. Others may find it hard to find the time to access support.

Our research at the Heart Centre for Children shows that dads appreciate being included in the support process and find it helpful to talk about their experiences. For some dads, this may be the first time they have been asked how they are doing.



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This is a free service available to all children and families affected by childhood heart disease in NSW.

To contact us or make an appointment, phone the Psychology Service at the Heart Centre for Children: **(02) 9845 0088**

Please leave a message and we will return your call as soon as possible.