I want to know more about bipolar disorder in children. My son, who is 7, takes four medications for it. I've tried to learn about it, but I still don't understand.

— A mother in Atlanta

When Cindy Singer's out-of-control daughter was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age 6, the Denver mother went on a journey to learn all she could to help her child. The path, many times, was dark.

"I went on a mission to educate myself, to give myself some sort of control over this monster that was invading my child's mind, body and soul," she says.

The mother's journey — through violent tantrums and her child's suicide threats — began with no "how-to manual" for parents, Singer says. Her new book, *If Your Child Is Bipolar* (Perspective Publishing, 2003), co-written with Sheryl Gurrentz, is full of what she learned over the years as she helped her daughter, now a teenager.

Parents have a lot to learn to be effective players on their child's treatment team, the authors report. After all, they've got to dole out any medications as needed and watch for side effects, coordinate appointments, track behavior, and provide meals and bedtime routines.

Living with an unstable bipolar loved one isn't easy, nor is understanding the mental illness. Bipolar disorder, formerly known as manic depression, is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain.

Researchers continue to explore the mysteries of the illness and how medication works as part of a multifaceted treatment plan to smooth out quirky brain chemistry.

Unlike adults with the disorder, kids have rapid mood swings within the course of a day and at times react to "no" with rage for 30 minutes or more, says Demitri Papalos, M.D., co-author with his wife of *The Bipolar Child* (Broadway, 2002).

The aggression and daily ups and downs don't match the adult patterns of bipolar disorder, weeks of extreme highs and lows, Papalos says.

The disorder impairs how a child functions in school, with peers, and at home.

The illness is treatable but a diagnosis can be tricky: Bipolar disorder and AD/HD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity-disorder) symptoms observed in children overlap but have different causes and call for different treatments, psychiatrists have found.

For example, one 8-year-old girl could not pay attention long enough to write her name and begin an assignment. Misdiagnosed as AD/HD and given a stimulant, her father says, her brain raced out of control.

She went into a kicking, screaming rage. Now she is being assessed for bipolar disorder. A key part of the medical assessment: The child's family history shows depression, bipolar disorder and other mood disorders on both sides of her family, as well as alcoholism.

Tips for more information:

- A mother from Miami Shores, Fla., whose daughter was diagnosed at age 15, is among several parents who recommend *The Bipolar Child* and the Web site for the Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, www.cabf.org. The foundation is led by parents, and can be a source of information as well as much-needed emotional support.
- The National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Md., conducts and supports research on early onset bipolar disorder. For more information, call toll-free (866) 615-6464. The Web site is www.nimh.nih.gov.
- Don't walk the journey alone. Support groups make all the difference, parents find. One resource to find a group and other information is the National Association for the Mentally Ill. The information center's toll-free number is (800) 950-6264. The Web site is www.nami.org. A family support group found through the association was a lifesaver, one Dallas reader says.

A parent managing medications plays a pivotal role. In *If Your Child Is Bipolar*, the authors suggest:

- Keep detailed notes on your child in a mood or medication log. Write down doses, changes in behavior and mood, and any side effects.
- Know what the pills look like and expected side effects.
- Be in close contact with the health-care provider when your child starts any new medication.
- Do not suddenly stop any medications on your own, which can worsen the course of the illness.