

Patients. Parents. People.

Towards integrated supports and services for families experiencing mental health difficulties

Executive summary

In recent years pressures on parents have increased, with austerity budgets cutting child support payments and increasing costs. Barnardos has more than 40 services across the country and staff are reporting that poor mental health among parents is increasing in prevalence. Barnardos staff are also finding that when a parent experiences a mental health difficulty and they are not adequately supported or are receiving inappropriate treatment, their children can be affected.

These reports prompted Barnardos to examine the issue of mental health specifically in relation to parents to try and identify ways in which approaches and supports can be improved. In the majority of cases Barnardos encounters, parents are experiencing feelings of anxiety, stress and hopelessness. There is a proven link between poverty and poor mental health and often the parent's life circumstances are at the root of these feelings and exacerbating them. Staff also found that very few parents have adequate support for their mental health difficulty.

It is not possible to generalise the effects of parental mental health difficulties on families as it can depend on the severity and duration of the difficulty. In addition, other factors are frequently present such as poverty, addiction, overcrowding in housing, bereavement and domestic violence, all of which can have a huge impact on family life.

It is important to note research has indicated that parental mental health difficulties alone present little risk of significant harm to children¹. But the absence of supports for both parents and children can compromise the child's ability to cope. This can result in children's social and emotional development and their educational attainment being adversely affected. The impact can include inconsistency in parenting capacity, resulting in poor routines and sometimes patchy school attendance, lack of boundaries and children presenting with poor hygiene and / or hungry.

Other risks are that the child's self esteem is affected as they feel confused, isolated and unsure of what is happening to their parent and how it will affect their household. Children can internalise all their concerns and feelings and become socially withdrawn as they seek to hide their fears or begin to act out their frustration through engaging in damaging behaviour.

Often parents will put their children first, even if they are feeling under severe strain. They may also have a concern that asking for help could lead to questions being raised about their parenting capacity. So regardless of the cause, parents experiencing mental health difficulties must be supported in a sympathetic manner which takes into consideration these additional stresses they are carrying.

It is important to recognise the entrenched societal prejudice and discrimination against mental health² and seek to challenge poor attitudes that can act as a barrier for parents to

¹ Hansson, U, et al (2013) Maternal Mental Health and Poverty: The Impact on Children's Educational Outcomes, The Child and Youth Programme Reports, UNESCO- NUI & University of Ulster

² See Change (2012) Irish Attitudes Towards Mental Health Problems, www.seechange.ie



access support. It is also important to listen to parents who have experienced mental health difficulties and hear their recommendations to ensure the supports and services in place meet the needs of those facing challenges.

Barnardos is a strong advocate for supporting families who are facing challenges in a holistic manner, where the needs of each family member are identified and supported. This report outlines how such an approach is not apparent in the current structures and systems, which too often treat adult mental health problems in isolation, without recognising patients as parents and tailoring treatment accordingly. Subsequently, services and responses to the family's needs are not coordinated. The dominance of the medical model in mental health treatment coupled with an isolated (and isolating) approach, makes the pursuit of a holistic familial approach even more difficult to achieve.

In fact, a key problem highlighted in this report is the over-reliance on medication as the treatment for parents experiencing mental health difficulties. Too often this is a short-cut solution that does not address the root cause of the emotional distress. The side effects of the medication can result in severe problems of their own, which can affect their parenting. Practitioners and parents must be supported to work together to find alternative solutions that will work in the long term. It would be extremely beneficial if the Government's mental health policy A Vision for Change was properly resourced and rolled out so that community mental health teams were fully staffed and available across the country.

Overall, Barnardos is calling for the present family, health and child support systems and structures to break away from their historically isolated perspective and instead see parents and their children in the context of their family. Such an approach demands more integrated interagency working, as any one family may be working with multiple agencies managed by separate structures at any one time. As well as recognising everyone lives multi-layered lives that cut across many sectors, coordination between the agencies should result in lower intensity intervention for parents and their children. The adoption of a family model approach to identifying needs and supporting recovery would lead to more effective joint working for professionals across all disciplines³ and would also better support both parents with poor mental health and their children.

Key recommendations:

Challenge mental health prejudice and discrimination: While some efforts are already being undertaken, more needs to be done to challenge public perceptions and promote the message that mental health difficulties can affect anyone and people can and do recover, given the right supports. In particular, parents must know they can access support without judgement on their parenting capacity.

Adopt a family model approach: Promote policies and improve practice across adult and children's systems that consider the needs of the whole family instead of seeing their service users in isolation. This would be a shift from the current siloed system, towards more holistic user focused services. Far greater intra and interagency co-ordination between inpatient mental health services and primary care services and between community mental health teams and primary care services are desperately needed. Likewise improved information sharing involving community based services is required. Practical changes to improving service delivery across adult mental health and children's services interface can include co-ordinating workforce development training, having common questions about family life in

³ Dr Falkov, A, (2012) The Family Model Handbook, Pavilion Publishing and Media, UK



screening and assessment templates, and considering whole family needs in care plans and identifying crossover with different agencies needed to implement the plan.

Talk to children: Children living with a parent experiencing mental health difficulties need to be informed and reassured in an age appropriate manner about what is happening to their parent and what to expect. All professionals working with the parent must understand the importance of talking to the children and be skilled accordingly. Likewise parents should be given the appropriate support so they can talk to their children about what they are experiencing and reassure them in an age appropriate manner.

Expedite the roll out of community based services: The ongoing delays in recruitment and service provision for fully staffed, multi-disciplinary community services as outlined in A Vision for Change are unacceptable. Their widespread availability will help challenge the dominance of the medical model and act as a preventative factor stemming some problems from escalating.

Consult with parents affected by poor mental health: Identify parents' preferred community based services that would make a positive difference to their lives and to their children. These services could include peer support groups (for parents and children), counselling services and family support services. The widespread availability of such practical supports would ease pressure on parents and reassure them they are not alone and can seek support without fear their parenting ability is being judged.