

At the Edge of Care: Support and interventions for parents with mental health needs and children identified as at risk of abuse: A systematic review and thematic synthesis of parent and practitioner experiences

Project report

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Project background

This project was funded by the UKRI Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network as part of its workstream on the theme of interventions for violence, abuse and mental health.

The project ran for a total of 8 months



Project team:

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- Dr Billie Lever Taylor, Clinical Psychologist at King's College London and the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

Project summary

Many people who have contact with mental health services are parents. Parental mental health difficulties can have a wide-reaching impact on families, especially as young children depend on their caregivers for their welfare. Research suggests that parents with mental health diagnoses are more likely to have children's social services involvement and to lose custody of their children. Often, a range of services will have contact with parents with mental health needs where there are child protection concerns. However, practitioners say they struggle to engage with these families and parents tend to say they have poor experiences of support.

We carried out a systematic review to better understand parent and practitioner experiences of support for families with mental health needs and children's social services involvement. We systematically searched for qualitative research published on this topic. We worked with a group of mothers with lived experience of these issues to help us analyse and interpret the results.

Based on 41 papers/reports, we found that families with mental health needs and children's social services involvement were often parenting amidst trauma and adversity. However, service involvement could trigger a 'downward spiral' of stressful processes over which parents felt they had little control. Instead of improving their situations, support sometimes added to families' difficulties, worsening parents' mental health and making them feel marginalised, criticised, and re-traumatised. Parents did however report some positive ways practitioners worked with them too, such as prioritising practical support, taking time to build relationships and being open. However, practitioners felt they were limited in their ability to offer good care because services were fragmented, under-funded, crisis-driven and inflexible. Difficulties mentioned most often by parents, like financial issues, tended not to be a focus of available interventions. We conclude that the key issues identified must be targeted to help improve support.

Key messages

Top 3 key messages from the project



Children's social services involvement places families with mental health needs under intense pressure, sometimes creating a 'downward spiral' of interventions which can worsen parents' mental health and ability to cope with the parenting role.

This does not mean that parents do not want or need support - instead, there is a disparity between the types of support parents want (financial, practical, flexible) and the support typically offered to them by services; long-term, trauma-informed, transparent, and collaborative support is crucial but rarely possible.



Organisational factors including a lack of resources, the crisis-driven nature of care, rigid and fragmented service structures, and high caseloads limit the quality of support practitioners can offer.

The Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network

We will be sure to keep our members updated on any outputs linked to this project in the future. To keep updated you can sign up to our mailing list and receive our monthly newsletter. You can also follow us on our socials . All links can be found at the bottom of this page.

About the VAMHN

We are a network of individuals and organisations aiming to reduce the prevalence of mental health problems by addressing associated violence and abuse, particularly domestic and sexual violence. We bring together and support research by experts from a range of disciplines, sectors, and backgrounds - some with personal experience, others with expertise from the work that they do, and survivor researchers with both.

The activities of the network are organised into 3 themes:

Measurement	Measuring the extent and impact of domestic and sexual violence in relation to mental health. Our first year activities focused on the theme of measurement
Understanding	Understanding the pathways that lead to domestic and sexual violence and their relationship to mental health problems
Intervention	Planning interventions and services to prevent, reduce and address domestic and sexual violence in people with mental health problems or at risk of developing mental health problems

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