

Issues facing parents who have mental health problems

Discussion paper

Outside the Box



About this discussion paper

This paper describes the issues that many parents who have mental health problems have said affect them and their children.

It has suggestions for ways services can be better at supporting people with mental health problems in their role as parents.

It also has questions that we hope you will use to start discussions with the people and organisations you know and work alongside.

Background

The paper has been produced by Outside the Box. It builds on work we did with Stepping Stones, which is a member-led voluntary organisation in West Dunbartonshire which delivers services to people with mental health problems.

We began this work in late 2009. Stepping Stones wanted to plan what sort of support they could offer to members who are parents. A review of the pattern of use of Stepping Stones the previous year showed that at least a quarter of members are parents. The board and workers at Stepping Stones were confident that this is an underestimate, as people who do not live with their children are less likely to mention that they are parents at the initial contact. Other members are taking on parenting roles for other children - for example, when a grandparent or aunt or close friend is doing a lot to look after children in their wider family.

None of the support Stepping Stones provided was specially aimed at supporting members in their role as parents, and the organisation wanted to check with members what they would find helpful.

West Dunbartonshire Council and the Community Health Partnership in West Dunbartonshire were also interested in this issue, as other services can also develop the support they give to parents living in West Dunbartonshire who have mental health needs.

When we asked around, we found that the experience of Stepping Stones and of services in West Dunbartonshire were similar to that elsewhere. The views and ideas from members of Stepping Stones could be helpful to other people who are tackling the same issues. So we decided to write this discussion paper to encourage people to plan for and develop services that can work well for parents with mental health problems and their children across Scotland and the rest of the UK.

The work with Stepping Stones and this wider discussion paper are part of the Working Towards project, which supports the development of user-led services and is part-funded by a grant from the Big Lottery Fund to Outside the Box.

What we did

A worker from Outside the Box met with members of Stepping Stones who are parents and talked about the issues that affect them and the types of responses they would find helpful.

We got in touch with other local projects that have provided services specifically designed for people with mental health problems who are parents, and asked about the experiences and views of the people using these services.

We also looked at the research carried out in Scotland and other parts of the UK and the contributions of people who helped develop policy and good practice statements. We found that the same issues face parents who have mental health problems across the UK, and they have similar ideas about the sorts of support they would find helpful.

We fed back to Stepping Stones in summer 2010. Stepping Stones have since used the feedback from members and other information here as part of developing the services they deliver.

Summary of what we found

Over a third of people with mental health problems in the UK are parents. But generally, mental health services do not take account of their role as parents.

Most parents and their children cope well, but would benefit from some extra support and information. But generally, support for parents with mental health problems has not been seen by local authorities, NHS, or national policies as a priority.

In many areas mental health services and services to support families do not link up effectively.

The budget arrangements can prevent services giving parents effective support.

Poverty and social isolation are the main issues facing parents who have mental health problems and their children.

A small proportion of people who have serious mental health problems need extra support, for example to keep in touch with their children during a hospital admission.

Most children in families where a parent has mental health problems thrive. But they do face more difficulties than other children, such as being bullied and having fewer friends and opportunities.

Parents often get good support from family and friends as well as from services.

It helps when there is good information about mental health problems that everyone, including children, can understand.

There are many practical things that services can do to improve the support that parents with mental health problems and their children get.

The way policies and services in an area are planned and commissioned can also make a difference.

What happens next

The next stage is to circulate the paper to people across Scotland and the UK, including the local groups that helped us with this project.

We want to raise awareness of the issues that affect people who are parents when they need support for their mental health needs, and of the consequences for them and for their children when that support is not readily available.

We want to encourage people in other places to talk to parents in their areas about the types of support they would find helpful.

We want to encourage people who plan and commission services to work with user-led groups and look at the potential contribution of user-led services as part of the range of responses.

We hope to work with local groups to develop more services that suit the circumstances of parents who have mental health problems and their children.

Discussion points

What are the main issues facing parents who have mental health problems in your area?

What would parents like local services to do to help them? Are there specific things mentioned in this discussion paper or from your own ideas that services could do?

Are there any good examples of services working well for parents who have mental health problems – things you want to see continuing and extended or copied?

For services and for strategic planning groups: are there things you can do to build good links between mental health services and services designed to support families?

Would it help if there was more encouragement in national policies and priorities? Is there anything particular that you would like to see here? If so, you can tell your MSP and/or MP.

“Over one third of all adults with mental health problems are parents. We are not a small group. Why do services forget that many people with mental health problems have children?” Dad

“We know what can help us and our children. Why does no-one ask us?” Mum

Levels of need and support

Levels of need - main points

Over one third of all adults in the UK with mental health problems are parents.

In Scotland, this means there are around 240,000 adults who are parents and who have, or will have, a mental health problem at some point.

Two million children in the UK are estimated to live in households where at least one parent has a mental health problem.

Most people with mental health problems are effective parents to their children.

This is what we found in the research and good practice guidance about the situation of people with mental health problems who are parents or are taking on a significant parenting role.

- Less than one quarter of the parents who have mental health problems are in work.
- There are additional pressures on lone parents.
- The people who are taking on a parenting role and experience mental health problems include grandparents who are providing a significant level of care for their grandchildren. This includes people in situations that are already very stressful, such as parents of people who have a drug and/or alcohol addiction and are not able to look after their own children.
- Most parents who have a disability - mental health problems and/or other disabilities - find they get little support from services for their role as parents.
- There can be particular difficulties for the relatively small number of families where there is a parent who needs spells of care in hospital, especially if this is on a compulsory basis.
- Some people who have mental health problems are no longer living with their children. Sometimes this is because of relationship break up, and sometimes the person's mental ill-health was a factor in the family living apart. Problems such

as low income add to the difficulties these parents face in maintaining contact with their children. For some people the distress of not having contact with their children is very great and is a significant factor in their poor mental health.

- There are factors that make it more or less likely that someone will have mental health problems. They also make a difference in the impact if someone does become unwell. Being able to cope well with the difficult things that happen in life is called resilience.
- Parents' resilience is helped by family (particularly children) understanding about their mental health problems, having satisfying employment, good physical health, and access to professional, community and personal support.
- Children's resilience is helped by a secure and reliable family base in which relationships promote self-esteem, a sense of being able to achieve and do things well, and a sense of control.

This is what we found about the few services that were designed for parents who have mental health problems.

- The most frequent group of people receiving the service was mothers of young children aged under 2, or occasionally aged under 5. The service was linked to the health visitor service and was aimed at, or had started with, women who had or were at risk of depression or other types of mental health problems following the birth of their baby.
- Some services had started in this way, but then got merged into wider services such as Sure Start which are aimed at supporting parents and young children where there were additional needs or risks for a range of reasons. These services may not have a lot of expertise around supporting adults who have mental health problems.
- A few services had supported families with school-age children where a parent had a mental health problem. These had started with short-term funding, such as a grant from the Big Lottery Fund, and had stopped when that funding stopped as the service was not considered a priority for funding from the local authority and/or NHS.
- There is very little support for parents who are not living with their children and who want to maintain or increase contact with them.

- Some people have found more general services aimed at helping parents and families to be very useful. Features that make a difference are not being judgemental about parents, encouraging people's skills and confidence, peer support from other parents, and help with practical aspects of bringing up children - such as after school clubs and holiday clubs.

The policy papers have identified other gaps.

- Many adult mental health services do not take much account of people's roles as parents, for example not routinely asking about children when gathering information at the start of care or as part of care plans.
- Services that are based in child care services tend to focus on situations where the parent's health is perceived as a possible risk to the children. When the focus is on the children, the parents may get little if any support for their mental health needs.
- The services tend to concentrate on problems rather than strengths in the parents, the children and the wider family.
- In many areas there can be support for children of parents who have mental health problems through Young Carers' projects, but no or little support for their parents or for the family as a whole.
- Often the adults' mental health services and the mental health services for children and young people in a local area do not link up.
- The services that are available rarely include other people such as grandparents who are taking on a day-to-day parenting role. So there is even less support available for them, even though the practical difficulties the adults and children in these families are facing are similar.

"Resilience is not extraordinary but is present in all human beings. Professionals who assess only for problems within families may overlook existing strengths and coping capacities. Most parents with mental health problems parent their children effectively, and most children suffer few, if any, adverse effects from their parents' problems."

Social Care Institute for Excellence research briefing

“There was a service but the staff just kept asking about what problems my children were having. They meant well, but my lack of confidence just got worse.” Mum

“Our commissioners said that the support to families was not a priority so the service ended when the pilot finding ended.” Project

“We were told to be careful that we focussed on the parents’ mental health issues and not to get involved in childcare – because that comes from a different local authority budget.” Project

“The pilot showed there was a need for support around parents’ mental health problems. But the service then got transferred to the Under 5s services. The feedback from the parents who are still in touch with us for other support is that no-one asks about their mental health needs now.” Project

Issues that face parents with mental health problems and their children

Issues facing parents

Money problems.

Having few friends and family - being socially isolated.

Housing problems.

Being involved in children's education.

Employment and employability.

Situations where parents may not be able to care for children.

Impact when someone loses contact with their children.

Worry about their children and the impact of a parent's mental health problems on them.

There is a lot of overlap in the points raised by parents who became unwell after they were parents and those people who have lived with mental health problems for many years and have since had a family or taken on a parenting role with their partner's children or children in their extended family. They cover factors that contribute to people who are parents having mental health problems in the first place, and to life being more difficult once you are in that situation.

Money problems

Poverty is one of the biggest - some people say the biggest - problem facing most families where a parent has a mental health problem.

- People who have mental health problems are more likely to have financial problems. Sources of this are being more likely to be on benefits, running up debts when the person is unwell, and money problems contributing or adding to people having mental health problems.
- People who are parents have additional costs.

- They can feel under more pressure when they cannot provide the things their children want.
- It can be harder to get access to money advice when you have small children and cannot get to services during office hours.
- Financial pressures are even greater when someone who is not the children's natural parent is doing the day-to-day parenting, as they may not be entitled to or receiving the same welfare benefits.
- The pressures on many families are increasing as a consequence of the current economic recession. The expected consequences include an increase in the incidence of people experiencing mental health problems and in the levels of debt and financial pressures on families. The families where a parent has mental health problems are even more vulnerable.

Having few friends and family - being socially isolated

Parents who have mental health problems are more likely than other people to be socially isolated.

- There are lots of possible factors here, including a breakdown in valued relationships or bereavement, stigma faced by people who have mental health problems, and moving home to another area.
- An added problem is the consequences of having little spare money for social activities or transport to use the facilities that are available for families in that local community.
- Another consequence of the recession is that extended families and friends are more likely to be under pressure themselves. So even when someone has these supports people may have less available money to help with activities such as outings for the children or time to spend with the parents and/or children.
- Loneliness is a problem for many parents and is more frequent for lone parents and for those with mental health problems and/or other health problems.

- Parents may find it hard to use the opportunities that are available to adults who have mental health problems - including peer support and easier access to employability support and reduced cost leisure facilities - because these are organised on the basis that the people using them will not have children with them or need childcare.
- It also means that there are few other people to give advice and support on being a parent, or practical help with child care and taking children out.
- Parents with teenagers have said that there are fewer supports for them at this stage than when their children are younger.
- Children of parents who have mental health problems or other health difficulties generally have fewer friends and are less able to take part in things like after-school activities. So the pattern of social isolation may continue for them.

“More understanding from the general public would help.” Member of Stepping Stones

Housing problems

- The housing problems that parents raise are often linked to money problems.
- Living in a small house with several children or teenagers can add to the pressures parents have and to their mental health problems.
- Other difficulties include living in areas where people have few friends, and where transport limits what that family can do.

Being involved in children’s education

Parents who have a mental health problem are among those who are likely to face additional difficulties around being part of their children’s education.

- Some parents find it hard to cope with meetings at school when they are unwell or have low confidence.
- It can be especially difficult when the person’s mental health problems go back to their own childhood, when the experience at school or the response of the school to family or other difficulties was not helpful.

- It is also harder when the child has health problems.
- Some of the issues that face children whose parents have mental health problems - such as bullying - need to be taken up with the school. So this can be a very high priority topic for parents.
- Parents would like to be able to work with the school – for example, to tell the school if they are unwell and their children may need a bit of extra support – but are often reluctant to do this.
- There are policies from the Scottish Government which are implemented by each local authority and school to encourage and support parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling. But parents who have mental health problems and are already having less contact with other parents are less likely to know about these or have the confidence to use the arrangements that could be available for them.

“Teachers should have more awareness and knowledge of mental health problems.” Members of Stepping Stones

“We need to be able to have confidence in teachers if we are having a bad day and need to tell the school.” Members of Stepping Stones

Employment and employability

People with mental health problems are more likely to have difficulties getting work and maintaining employment. There are added difficulties when people have children.

- Employability schemes may not take account of people who need to also have suitable child care arrangements when identifying placements or potential jobs.
- The cost of child care adds to the pressures of low paid work.
- There may be difficulties at work for people - especially lone parents - who have a job, including work that is stressful, uncertainty about keeping your job, and long working hours.

Situations where parents may not be able to care for children

Many parents who have more serious mental health problems worry about whether they will be able to look after their children when they are unwell and especially if they need hospital care.

- Parents worry about whether they are managing to look after their children - for example, when they find it hard to engage with other people or to concentrate. This can itself add to low self confidence and to people's experience of mental health problems.
- The uncertainty around whether support will be there when needed can add to the pressures.
- Parents are aware of the risks of their children being taken into care or of losing custody or access when their partner or a relative is looking after the children.
- For some people this is based on their own experience. For other people, the concerns are based on other people's experiences. Concerns may be based on the gaps in support and practices that were in place some years ago and practices may be different today, but they are very real concerns.
- Factors here include the extent to which the parent is able to cope with parenting tasks, the circumstances of the children (age, their coping skills etc).
- It is also influenced a lot by the perceptions of other people, especially health care and social work staff.
- Having a supportive family and network of friends gives a parent and children more options around some additional help at home over a difficult period. Examples include someone staying with the family or taking the children to stay on occasion as ways to reduce pressures and so reduce the likelihood of a crisis developing.
- Families and friends can also help when there is a crisis. Examples could be taking children to stay with them if the parent needs to go into hospital, and helping the children and their mum or dad maintain contact and get back together quickly and safely.

- When there is a relationship break up, one person's experience of mental health problems may be a factor in determining who gets custody of the children and the arrangements for the other parent getting access to the children.

Impact when someone loses contact with the children

For some people, the loss they experience when their parenting role effectively ends or reduces is the source of a lot of distress and grief.

- Examples include someone losing contact when a relationship ends, when their former partner moves away and takes the children with them.
- Another example is when a child's natural parent/s are able to take on more of the parenting again and the grandparent is no longer needed in the direct parenting role.
- This can add to the mental health difficulties that someone is already having.
- It can also be the starting point of someone's mental health problems.
- Some of these situations are complex and the people involved may need support over several years.

Worry about their children and the impact of a parent's mental health problems on them

Most parents who have mental health problems do a good job as parents and most children in these families thrive. But this group of children are more likely than other people to experience some difficulties.

- Factors such as poverty and problems around housing also affect the children in a family.
- Children whose parents have a mental health problems or another disability are more likely than others to be bullied inside and outside school.
- There is a higher risk that children will themselves have mental health problems when they are adults.
- The children in families where a parent has a mental health problem tend to have fewer friends than other children, so their social networks are smaller now and are likely to be reduced and more vulnerable in the future.

- There may be times when the children have to take on more responsibilities in the family, or when the parent is not as able to engage with their children.

“Families want good quality, practical support in looking after their children and freedom from the fear of losing parental responsibility. Children and young people say they want relevant information about their parent’s illness, someone to talk to about their experiences and a chance to make and see friends.” SCIE Guide 30

“I asked for some information translated into Urdu, so I could help my children understand about their Dad’s illness and help them explain it to the other children at school, because my son was having problems with bullies. But the staff at the hospital said there wasn’t any information for children even in English. I think that’s wrong. All children in Scotland need help with this.” Mum who took part in BME recovery project

Examples of helpful services

When we were gathering together material for this report we heard of examples of services that offer good support to parents who have mental health problems. Some are small services that are focussed on the needs of people who are parents. Other examples related to individual people who were supported as part of a wider project and happened to need support in their role as a parent.

A mental health service gave short-term crisis support to a father who was unable to leave his house due to an anxiety problem. His main concern was that he was missing out on doing things with his children so the support focussed on increasing his confidence to go out so that he could take on a fuller role as a parent.

A woman was in hospital for a long admission. When her children were returning to school after the summer break a local mental health service gave her support to go and buy uniforms as she wanted to be sure that her children were going back to school well dressed. The next summer the service supported her to take her children out to the park and other activities over the school holidays.

One man described the good support he got from a local project for single dads – men who looked after their children most of the time and those with access at weekends or other short periods. The project provided activities that did not cost much and were planned for small children through to teenagers. The children had a good time and the dads got support from each other and the worker. Many of the men had mental health problems, were recovering from an addiction, or had other difficulties in their lives. The project helped people get access to other sources of advice and made the men feel it was ok to say they were having problems.

People told us about schools being flexible in the ways parents with mental health problems get involved in their children's education and of sensitive responses when parents were concerned about their children being bullied.

There are services providing support to parents who are estranged from their children as part of an overall range of care to help that person's mental health needs.

Stepping Stones and other projects that support people with WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plans) and other forms of care planning have included support for the person's role as a parent (or grandparent etc) as part of the plan.

Stepping Stones has introduced Parents' Information Sessions as part of the new Let's Talk Money initiative. This is a partnership between Stepping Stones and the West Dunbartonshire Welfare Rights Unit and has funding from the Department of Work and Pensions.

A local MIND group offered counselling services to parents which took place at their homes or other locations such as the children's centre.

Peer support among members who are parents is part of the peer support within some mental health projects.

There are examples of mental health services having posters and leaflets about community activities for children and families over the support, in case clients or members were interested.

“Offering support at home is great in some respects, but very hard work in others - constant interruptions, boisterous dogs and children etc!”

Project

“We know the demand is huge, and that all any service can do is make a small dent in it, but the successes for the families who do take part make it worthwhile.” Project

“We know that we have made a big difference to some clients’ on-going relationships with their children, and that this matters more to them than the outcomes that commissioners look for.”

Project

“We identified the need from listening to our clients.” Project

“It was the first time it felt that someone was interested in both me and my children.” Mum

“The staff at my kids’ new school are great. They arranged for me to meet the teachers on my own as I can’t cope with the big Parents’ Nights. I didn’t know schools would do that.” Dad

What helps

These are ideas on ways that services can help parents who have mental health problems. They bring together the ideas and suggestions from the people and projects who helped with this discussion paper and the recommendations from the Social Care Institute for Excellence Guides and other good practice advice and research.

Actions for any mental health service

Build in a greater focus on the support people need as a member of a family. Aim to support families' mental health and wellbeing now and for the future.

Make people's roles as parents a central part of care plans and recovery plans. This can mean involving children in their parent's plans when the parent wants this. It also means updating plans as the family's circumstances change - which can be quite frequently to reflect the lives of children and teenagers.

Listen to parents and to children.

Develop services that are flexible, give people continuity - for example with a key worker, and take account of the practical problems that families face.

Services can provide good, understandable information about mental health and wellbeing. Every member of the family should be able to have the information they need to have a good understanding about the parent's mental health problems, ways to support this. They should also have access to back up advice and support.

The arrangements for access to both adults' mental health services and children's services should take account of the combined needs of children, parents and carers.

Encourage people to develop coping strategies that work for them and their children.

Aim to build resilience in parents and children and to manage risks in a positive way - which includes doing more to work with schools and other services that support children and parents in different ways.

Services aim to build social inclusion for parents and their children. This could be specific services which focus on this aim or an integral part of existing mental health services and of community activities.

Mental health projects look at how they can support parents who don't have much confidence or are unwell to take part in ordinary community activities.

Community-based mental health projects can develop links with organisations and teams working with parents - including the Social Work Child and Family teams - and encourage them to refer parents who may have mental health difficulties.

Mental health services can include information about local resources that are useful to parents and other people looking after children as part of telling members or service users about community resources.

Community mental health projects can work with parents to look at options for making it easier for families who find it hard to get into the main office to use the services. Ideas that people have suggested or have been used successfully include:

- Support on an outreach basis.
- Child care at the mental health project's main locations or in partnership with a local childcare project.
- Some services happening at places like community facilities in community centres.
- Reminding people about the flexibility that is possible and making it easy for people to ask for an arrangement that suits their family.

Community-based mental health services can develop partnerships with the employability services and other initiatives such as financial inclusion and housing, to ensure that people with mental health problems who are parents have access. This could mean again telling people about the flexibility that is possible within these services, and encouraging parents to ask for services that reflect their circumstances.

Action by community services

Employability services, housing advice and money advice services look at ways to make their services more accessible to people who are parents.

Councils and other organisations providing services for everyone can make arrangements to get information about free or low-cost activities for children and families in a local area to parents who are already socially isolated and are not in contact with the existing children/families networks.

Services that encourage people with mental health problems to take part, such as sports, leisure and arts activities, should check that these arrangements also work when people have children with them.

Actions for children's and families' services

Listen to parents and to children.

Schools can work with other services to build resilience in parents and children and to manage risks in a positive way.

Schools can take action when a child is bullied or having a difficult time, and do it in a way that supports the family and how they are coping.

Children's and families' services can look at ways to work in partnership with mental health services to support parents who have mental health problems.

Action by the local authority and NHS, or where a significant partnership approach will be useful

The wider work to address stigma around mental health takes account of the circumstances of parents and their children as well as of other people who have mental health problems.

Work to develop or adapt information for children and young people about adults' - and especially parents' - mental health and wellbeing. This could complement the work that is already underway in many areas to raise awareness about the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

Review the policies and practice around support for children and families to make sure they support and build resilience and coping skills for both parents and children, and support parents in their mental health and wellbeing. This could include involving mental health organisations providing training and advice for children and families' services and good partnerships between services in the different sectors.

It helps when local authorities are creative in how services are delivered to support parents who have mental health problems. This could include individual budgets and innovative forms of support.

People can learn from what has happened in other areas, such as adapting services or approaches that have worked well.

The local authority and NHS can make sure that the views of parents are included when they seek people's views on plans around mental health services.

"Now that my little boy is at school I would like more play schemes - things for him after school and during the holidays." Member of Stepping Stones

"When I had the first meeting the nurse asked me about my family and my children. But no-one ever mentioned them after that. Once I asked could I have my appointments at another time, so I could pick the wee one up from school. But no, that was no good for the staff at the Centre." Mum

"We would like to meet people from other groups in other areas. We could share problems and experiences. We could also share ideas." Members of Stepping Stones

"My family are the most important thing in my life. The reason I try to keep myself well and keep battling on when I'm not well is so I can be a good mum for my children. But the support workers who come to help me from the mental health service are not allowed to help me with anything to do with my children. The staff at the Children's Centre can't talk to me about my mental health problems. So who is there to help us work together as a family?" Mum

"Generally, try to take a 'Think child, think parent, think family' approach." Social Care Institute for Excellence

Sources

With Inclusion in Mind; Scottish Government, 2007

Social Care Institute for Excellence Research briefing 23: Stress and resilience factors in parents with mental health problems and their children, 2008

Social Care Institute for Excellence Guide 30: Think child, think parent, think family: a guide to parental mental health and child welfare, 2009

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