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Maternal Mental Health and Poverty: The Impact on Children's Educational Outcomes

Briefing Paper



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This paper provides a summary of the sixth Report of the Children and Youth Programme (CYP) which adopts a rights-based approach to examining the impact of maternal mental health on children's educational outcomes in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Using the General Measures of Implementation as an elementary tool for good policy (CYP, 2011) together with the principles of best interests and voice of the child, the objectives of the Report are to:

1. explore the relationship between poverty and mental health, particularly maternal mental health;
2. consider the dual impact of poverty and mental health on children and young people's educational experience;
3. identify existing community and school based provisions for affected children and young people in Ireland and Northern Ireland;
4. identify exemplars of interventions, nationally and internationally, that support access to, and enjoyment of, education for affected children and young people;
5. make recommendations for policy development and implementation.

Parents, particularly mothers, with poor mental health have particular needs to enable them to support and care for their children. The research evidence suggests that these children are an under-represented group: their needs are little understood and are only beginning to be afforded serious consideration in the legal, policy and practice context. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) identifies children's rights to enjoy access to education, as well as, the responsibility of the State party to provide familial, administrative and service support to ensure this can happen.



Key Conclusions

Drawing on evidence, the following key messages have been identified.

1. There is a need for better prevalence data on the number of children who have a parent with a mental health problem.

This Report has highlighted the difficulty in accurately gauging the extent of parental mental health issues in Ireland and Northern Ireland and the absence of a comprehensive data source in both jurisdictions has been noted. As a result, the adult and his/her role as a parent is neither adequately recognised nor fully addressed in policy and service provision, with implications for the outcomes for children. The collation of a comprehensive data set would provide a more detailed representation of the numbers of individuals with a mental health problem, but also their characteristics, including parental status, socio-economic status, the nature and duration of their condition. More effective and earlier identification of parents' problems would provide a better understanding of how children's needs and welfare are affected and assist in reducing the potential risk of harm.

2. There is a need for further child-centred research to better understand the relationship between maternal mental health, poverty and children's educational outcomes.

The mental health of mothers has been identified internationally as meriting particular consideration and the impact of a mother's poor mental health on children's social, emotional and educational well-being is identified in policy and research. Poor maternal mental health often occurs in combination with multiple other factors, with poverty a critical contributor to poorer outcomes for mother and child. Further research from a child-centred perspective would illuminate some of the complexities of this relationship and provide insight to inform policy and practice.

3. Joint protocols between health and education can improve educational outcomes for children and young people.

Research has highlighted the limited nature of integrated support for children of parents with poor mental health and a general lack of collaboration between children's social care services and adult mental health services. The evidence has suggested that joint protocols and stronger collaboration would effectively utilise specialist expertise, including education, to better inform assessment and planning. Examples of innovative practice demonstrate how a collaborative approach in mental health services can routinely involve schools in the wider care plan when a client is identified as a parent, ensuring that the child's needs are identified and addressed in the school setting.

4. Staff training and appropriate educational interventions within schools are crucial to enable children to enjoy access to a full educational experience.

Educational staff should be trained and supported to identify a possible parental mental health problem and to understand the impact of this on the educational, social and emotional development of children and young people. Improved understanding of the issues for families experiencing parental (maternal) mental health problems could facilitate appropriate interventions and support in the form of care, protection and participation at school. Such an approach can help safeguard a continuity of education, empower children to achieve their full potential and enhance their long-term life chances.

5. Targeted interventions for families experiencing mental health problems should be slotted into existing parental programmes.

The research evidence suggests that parental support programmes have a positive impact on children and their families. Although not all directly address the issues of maternal (parental) mental health, there is scope for these programmes to incorporate targeted support in the form of self-help and coping skills, as well as, options for seeking additional support and help. In addition, the successful adaptation of some international targeted programmes has provided a useful template from which further community-based and school-based interventions could be developed for children and young people in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Next steps

This Report has explored the particular relationship between maternal mental health, poverty and children's educational outcomes. It has highlighted the complex nature of this relationship specifically and within the broader framework of poor parental mental health, identifying limitations in data collection and integrated service provision. The impact of poor maternal mental health on children's educational outcomes has also been noted, and the value of community-based and school-based support programmes has been considered in terms of children's access to, and participation in, a full educational experience. Based on the research evidence it has been possible to establish five key conclusions, which provide a basis for policymakers to make better informed decisions surrounding support for young people whose parents suffer from mental health problems.

