Children of a parent with a mental illness: perspectives on need

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Abstract

Being a child of a parent who has a mental illness involves considerable risk to the child’s secure attachment and long-term mental health. Parental mental health concerns place children at a significantly greater risk of lower social, psychological and physical health than children in families not affected by mental illness. In this paper, previous research is extended by examining the needs of these children from the perspectives of children, parents and mental health and welfare professionals. The study involved qualitative and quantitative data collection from focus groups with children and parents, and a comparison of quantitative findings with mental health professionals. Similar responses from the children and parents included problems with major episodes (e.g. parent hospitalisation), issues regarding coping and the importance of sibling support. Parents also identified a number of different issues (e.g. external support) compared with children (e.g. the importance of friendships). A final component of the research undertook a quantitative comparison of seven core 'things that might help' children in the circumstance of their parent being hospitalised. The findings showed differences between parents and mental professionals but most significantly with children. The findings overall are discussed in relation to the needs of children whose parent has a mental illness and recommendations are made regarding policy and service provision.

Keywords
attachment, mental illness, children whose parents have a mental illness, connectedness, focus groups, resilience

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