

# Children of parents with mental illness

NSW Health is committed to improving the responses of mental health services to the children of people affected by mental health problems and disorders. Children and young people who have a parent affected by mental health problems may face several difficulties. The ability of the parent to nurture and care for their children may vary over time. Parental mental illness may create high levels of stress for a family, which may result in conflict and low levels of expressed affection between children and parents. In addition, the children and young people may need to act as carers to their parent or younger siblings.

## Aims

- Support the development and implementation of a range of programs that assist children and young people with a parent affected by mental illness. This includes developing coping strategies to help them in times of adversity and supportive networks that may reduce the risk of developing mental health problems or disorders.
- Assist children and young people to:
  - reduce stressors and isolation
  - develop coping skills and support networks
  - access opportunities for respite from the family environment
  - obtain information and education.
- Raise awareness among service providers and the community.

## Why we are doing this

Children who have parents (or siblings) affected by mental health problems or disorders are at an increased risk of developing psychosocial and mental health problems themselves. While some of this risk may be related to genetic factors, inadequate and dysfunctional parenting from an ill parent can impact upon the:

- formation of healthy attachment between an infant and parent
- development of emotional and behavioural problems in toddlers
- ability to make a successful transition to school due to separation anxiety poor school readiness and pro-social behaviours
- risk of developing conduct disorder, depression and anxiety, in adolescence.

While the exact numbers of children and young people who have parents affected by mental health problems or disorders is not currently available for Australia, it is estimated that:

- 29% to 35% of female clients of mental health services have dependent children under the age of 18 years.<sup>1</sup>
- Postnatal depression affects 10 to 15% of mothers and may lead to chronic mental health problems.<sup>2</sup>

- 25% to 50% of children and young people who have parents affected by mental health problems or disorders will experience a psychological disorder during their childhood compared to 10% to 20% in the general population.<sup>2</sup>
- These children have a 10% to 14% chance of being diagnosed with a psychotic illness at some point in their lives compared with 1% to 2% for the general population.<sup>3,4</sup>

There is now sufficient evidence that, with the implementation of prevention programs appropriate to the child's needs, it is possible for families affected by mental health problems and disorders to remain intact and functional. This requires proper assessment of the affected parent's parenting skills and dependable input from other caring adults.

### What has been achieved

A total of \$2.24m has been allocated to mental health services to assist the children of people affected by mental health problems and disorders. Of this amount, \$660,000 has been provided since 1996/97 as recurrent annual funding.

#### Systems for identification, recognition and response

Interventions for children of parents with mental health problems and disorders require not only the prompt recognition and treatment of the disorder in the individual but also the mobilisation of effective family support and intervention. Such initiatives have shown positive effects for the outcome of the parent with the illness and the family.<sup>5</sup>

Initiatives are underway to improve identifying and meeting the needs of these children and their families. In some Areas, family liaison positions are working with adult mental health services and other services to provide education and consultation programs. The aim is to enhance the ability of adult mental health workers and others to provide family-focused care to clients with dependent children.

#### Programs underway:

- Implementing assessment protocols for postnatal depression and other maternal mental health problems in several Area Health Services.
- Supporting nurse home visiting and parenting programs with mental health consultation and liaison.
- Developing systems in adult mental health to identify parents with dependent children and providing training to assist health workers to provide family-focused care.

### Effective interventions

Psycho-educational interventions have beneficial effects for children whose parents have a mental illness.<sup>6</sup> Surveys conducted by South Western Sydney (1996), Northern Sydney (1997) and Central Coast (1998) Area Health Services have highlighted that providing support and appropriate information on parental mental health problems during difficult times helps to protect children and adolescents from the adverse effects of parental mental illness. Therefore, children need to be offered programs to support them and help them understand their parent's illness. The type of support provided must be flexible and available in the community.

#### In South Western Sydney:

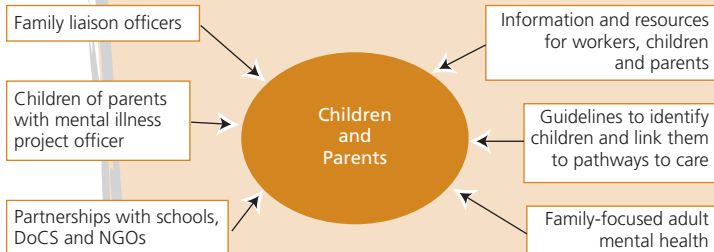
- Peer support programs for adolescents provide information, an opportunity to discuss difficulties with others and strategies for developing coping skills.
- Young carer camps have provided opportunities for children and young people to participate in age-appropriate activities, access trained counsellors and take respite from their usual responsibilities.

#### Partnerships

Collaboration between the agencies that come into contact with children and their families is creating a community response to address the problems that such families may face.

- Parents with dependant children will be identified via the *Mental Health Outcomes and Assessment Tools* (MH-OAT) initiative. This includes risk of harm for children protocols to assist adult mental health services to recognise and report concerns.
- A training program on mental health issues affecting families was provided to the Family Support Services Association (FSSA) of NSW. The *Living on the Edge* project ran 15 two-day workshops, delivered to 16 Family Support Services across NSW in 1999–2000. Evaluation indicated that family support workers found the training to be of value and that this initiative has led to further training on specific issues and better links between family support workers and mental health services across NSW.
- The Centre for Mental Health has collaborated with the NSW Department of Community Services to develop parenting information booklets.

- Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol services in NSW have an agreement for delivering care to people with co-existing mental health and substance use disorders to minimise the associated harm for individuals and their families. Current initiatives include collaboration to provide a home-based intensive parenting program for parents attending methadone programs.



### Support for children and young people

The *NSW Caring for Carers Mental Health Program* has allocated funding to nine Government and non-government organisations to support a range of young carer initiatives. One of these initiatives, the Narrabri and District Community Aid Service, is a pilot project to identify and meet the needs of young carers in the Narrabri Shire.

## Future directions

### Strategic structures at the State level

- Provide direction and support for the implementation of effective mental health responses through:
  - providing leadership (including strategies, frameworks and statewide committees)
  - developing resources (materials, information sessions and networks) to assist with implementation of services
  - participating in the National Advisory Committee for *Children of Parents Affected by a Mental Illness Project*, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care.

### Resources for Area Health Services

Develop an **orientation and facilitation kit** for mental health staff for local use. The kit will provide a standardised package of information and resources for, health and other workers, parents and carers and children and young people.

It will also include details on programs and services available for these families across NSW.

**Strengthening interagency procedures and pathways to care** between adult mental health services, child and adolescent mental health and the NSW Department of Education and Training and the NSW Department of Community Services.

### Non-government organisations

- Enhance partnerships between child and adolescent mental health services and Carers NSW and their *Young Carers Assistance Program* to increase the options for support, respite care, recreational opportunities and mental health intervention.
- Develop relationships with specific communities, such as Arabic speaking and Aboriginal communities, to plan interventions.
- Provide funding to the Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill (ARAFMI) and Southern Area Health Service for a project focusing on carers of people affected by mental illness and local service providers (for example, general practitioners) in the Queanbeyan and Cooma districts, to provide personal and emotional support and produce an accredited training package.

### Children's services

- Establish links with the *Families First Initiative* to promote pathways to care and improve links between services for families that are vulnerable or have complex needs and are also caring for young children. This includes improving access to home visiting programs and child care support.
- Enhance links between mental health and other programs and services available to parents who are affected by a mental health problem and their children, including Supported Playgroups and Family Counselling Services.

### Adult mental health services

- Family-friendly visiting areas, with toys and suitable furniture for children, have been provided in some mental health inpatient units. This will be encouraged in other mental health inpatient units.
- Training has been developed, and will continue to be provided to adult services, on family assessment and intervention, including the development of family support plans.

- Resources and information packages will be provided that contain fact sheets for workers, parents, children and young people about the effects of mental illness and where to obtain help.

### Evaluation and monitoring

- The Statewide Network, for workers engaged in projects for *Children of Parents Affected by a Mental Illness*, will continue to disseminate evidence-based programs, provide peer review and support, share information and resources and promote statewide strategic directions.
- Several specific programs will be evaluated, such as the:
  - parenting program co-facilitated by Burnside and the mental health parenting coordinator in South Western Sydney Area Health Service
  - adolescent peer support programs implemented as a joint project between the Children of Parents with Mental Illness (COPMI) Project Officers and Youth Health Service
  - holiday camps coordinated by the Young Carers Association and COPMI project workers, that provide holiday opportunities for children and young people with parents affected by mental illness.

### References

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This publication is one of a series of brochures on promotion, prevention and early intervention initiatives in NSW. The other titles in the series are available on the NSW Health website [www.nsw.health.gov.au](http://www.nsw.health.gov.au):

- Improving mental health and wellbeing in NSW
- Integrated Perinatal and infant Care (IPC)
- NSW Parenting Program for Mental Health
- NSW School-Link initiative
- NSW Early Psychosis Program
- Suicide prevention in NSW