

The fragile relationship between families and children's social care: How can we strengthen our umbrellas?

A lay summary of a commentary piece exploring the evidence around the views and experiences of parents with mental health problems and social care professionals about support.

Authors: Parisa Quaynor¹, Carley Hall¹, Katy Cleece², and Katalin Ujhelyi Gomez³

¹Public Advisor with lived experience, Early Break; ²Social Work Research Lead, Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust; ³NIHR ARC NWC Research Associate, University of Liverpool



Key points:

What we need: Mutually trusting relationships between families and professionals; a strengths-based, holistic, and, if possible, preventative approach to support.

The problem: Not enough money, rigid processes, difficult to access services that all work separately.

The result: Parents do not want to engage. Negative outcomes for parents, children, and professionals.

The solution: More money to local authorities, so that they can support social services to deliver needed care.

Introduction

Pregnancy can onset or worsen mental health issues including drug and alcohol addiction. This can harm children through possible mistreatment and lack of proper care. Removing children by social services, however, creates further trauma for mothers, worsening their mental health problems and can contribute to a cycle of repeated removal and trauma.

[Bacon and colleagues carried out a study in 2023](#), in which they looked at and summarised the evidence around the views and experiences of parents with mental health problems and social care professionals about support. This paper is the lay summary of the work that examined the quality of the evidence review by Bacon and colleagues and explained how this relates to real life practice.

What methods were used to carry out the review?

Bacon and colleagues used online search tools to find reviews related to the topic from the year 2000 onwards. They included international studies written in English. The research team members independently read 10% of the papers and selected which ones to include. They then identified the most common topics and grouped them into main ideas. They used an assessment tool to grade the quality of the studies.

What were the findings?

The researchers found over 11,000 papers initially. They removed repeated and unrelated papers, ending up with 41 studies. These included stories from a total of 337 parents and 1370 professionals, mostly from the UK, US, and Australia. There were problems with the quality of some of these studies. For example, although the study participants were vulnerable, it wasn't clear how they were protected in the research. Also, researchers who did the original studies did not always report it clearly how they examined and made sense of the information they collected.

The reviewers created four main themes that reflected the views of the participants from the included studies. These themes are summarised in the table below.

Themes	Key points
Theme 1: <i>A downward spiral of service intervention.</i>	Parents need support from services, but they feel judged and stigmatised. Interventions (e.g. distressing home visits) create fear and worsens parents' mental health. As a result, parents do not want to engage, which is seen as non-compliance.
Theme 2: <i>Working with parents, not against them.</i>	When professionals work with parents' strengths, instead of focusing on the negatives, they achieve more positive results. When professionals show empathy and understanding toward the parent and their experiences, their relationships are better, and they are able to build trust.
Theme 3: <i>Support wanted versus support provided.</i>	The support professionals give doesn't match the support parents want. Parents want holistic support that includes help with their mental health, finances, and parenting. They also would like their families and friends to be involved in their support.
Theme 4: <i>Constrained by service rigidity.</i>	Professionals would like to provide the support parents need. However, they are limited by service resources including time, staffing, money, and service rules. Because of these barriers, professionals are unable to provide a more preventative approach. Additionally, such working conditions cause professionals to burnout and leave the profession, which increases the problems in social care.

How well was the review conducted?

The commentary team (Cleece et al, in press) examined how well the review was done using a checklist of quality questions. They found that 8 out of the 11 requirements were met. Despite some limitations (for example, it was not clear whether the researchers were able to find and include all the relevant studies), the evidence summary exposed important challenges in terms of supporting parents with mental health problems.

What do the findings mean?

For practice: "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass. It's about learning how to dance in the rain." (Vivian Greene). To help families 'dance with the rain', we need to strengthen their umbrella. To do this, it is important:

- To form trusting relationships between parents and child protection services by tackling stigma.
- To empower parents by working together with them. This can help parents engage and make informed decisions.
- To include people with lived experience in engaging parents. This can help reduce stigma and increase relationship building. Good relationships will encourage honesty.
- Get involved earlier with families. This can be more effective at reducing harm and preventing crisis.
- For professionals to understand parents' past experiences. Parents who have had traumatic experiences feel shame that reduces their ability to make positive changes.
- To allow a safe and non-judgemental space and build on parents' strengths. This will improve the experiences of the child, the parent, and the professional.
- To work together with the whole family to make sure that every person's voice is heard, like the pieces of a whole jigsaw.
- To involve other professionals to make sure that all issues are addressed.

For policy:

- Local authorities in the UK lack the funds to cover the financial support families need. They also do not have enough funds to invest in child protection services to help staff do their job efficiently.
- There is need for support from central government to enable local authorities to deliver the care that is required.

For future research:

- Future research should collect more stories from parents and especially from fathers.
- It is also important to explore how people with different backgrounds (e.g. culture, financial situation) and with a combination of characteristics (e.g. ethnicity and disability) experience the support they receive.

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