

WHAT DID WE DO?

Funded by an Innovation Grant from the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, Hôtel-Dieu Grace Healthcare (HDGH) partnered with the Windsor-Essex Children's Aid Society (WECAS) and the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit (WECHU) to work with our community to develop early intervention strategies for children and youth who have a parent living with mental illness. To do this:

1. We examined more than 100 different research articles, evaluation reports, practice guidelines, and policies
2. We critically appraised 52 different programs and services for children, youth, parents, families, and service providers.
3. We engaged 58 members of our community, including parents, youth, and service providers in workshops to explore needs, strengths, barriers, and future directions for practice.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Our research review uncovered several promising models for early intervention and targeted preventions programs for high-risk children and youth. Family-centered, strengths-based approaches were recommended to meet these families' complex needs³.

Although current practices lack rigorous evaluation data⁴, common ingredients, such as reducing risks, building knowledge, improving children's competencies (e.g., coping, communication skills, self-regulation), developing support systems, and positive family relationships are indicated⁵.

Through our workshops, we identified the main support needs of children and youth, parents, families, and service providers.

Main Needs for Children and Youth with a Parent with Mental Illness

Children and youth need accurate information, education, and support in understanding their parent's mental illness. Experts suggest that increasing mental health knowledge is a key resiliency factor as it provides language to communicate about experiences, is connected to coping behaviour and strategies for help-seeking, and reduces misconceptions⁶.

Children and youth also need their own source of support and advocacy, through peers, other supportive adults, and mental health professionals. In particular, peer support programs can be provided in a family-centered manner in which social support and information can be offered to children and family members⁷.

Main Needs for Parents with Mental Illness

Parenting with a mental illness can create barriers to receiving support and increase family isolation. Families need practical assistance in the form of transportation and childcare to attend to appointments, housekeeping support, money management, and respite to take care of themselves. The absence of such supports can lead to negative effects for the family as a whole, and jeopardize both the parent's health and well-being and child safety⁸.

Some parents may also require information about child development, how their mental illness impacts their children, and identifying mental health needs of children.

WHY IS THIS PROJECT IMPORTANT?

In Canada, over 12% of children under 12 live with a parent who has one or more mental disorder¹.

Parental mental illness in childhood represents one of the highest risk factors for future psychiatric disorders. In fact, children of parents with serious mental illness have a 1-in-2 risk of developing any mental illness themselves².

Early identification, assessment of need and provision of evidence-based programs and services are important for supporting families living with parental mental illness and for reducing risk factors associated with living with a parent with mental illness.

RESEARCH & EVALUATION SNAPSHOT

Collaborating to Develop an Early Intervention
for Children of Parents with a Mental Illness

FALL 2019

Main Needs for Families

Families affected by parental mental illness need ongoing and regular services to better understand, cope with, and communicate about parental mental illness so that crises, family disruptions, and custody issues are avoided. Family relationship building is an important aspect of family recovery⁹. This can be achieved through group programs and services for families, including access to supported play groups, recreational activities, and connecting with other similar families.

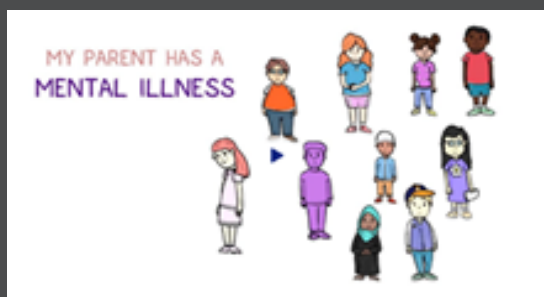
Main Needs for Community Service Providers

Although the impact of parental mental illness is well recognized among service providers, the formal mechanisms and processes associated with identification are needed. Broad skill and knowledge building is necessary across all social service organizations to help support increasing awareness and identification of families where parental mental illness exists.

HOW CAN WE USE THESE FINDINGS?

The community support for families affected by parental mental illness should consider several practice recommendations¹⁰:

1. Identify client's children and initiate relationships with family members.
2. Assess and work to address parent, child, and family's basic needs.
3. Provide extensive information and education to support each family member.
4. Provide opportunities for peer and family relationship building and support.
5. Ensure adequate resource allocation toward a family-centered approach, including the provision of time, expertise, and common procedures as required for effective interagency collaboration, information sharing, and linkages/referrals.
6. Work to eliminate barriers and silos between the adult and child mental health sectors.



An engaging video providing information to children and youth who have a parent with a mental illness was developed as a part of this project. The “white-board-style video” targets at youth ages 8 -13 and was developed in partnership with parents, youth and service providers to meet the information needs identified in the workshops. The video aims to increase knowledge and awareness of parental mental illness, challenge misconceptions and reduce self-blame, and promote coping and help-seeking behaviour.

For more information about the project or to view/use the video, please visit www.hdgh.org/research

ABOUT THE HDGH RESEARCH AND EVALUATION TEAM

The Department of Research and Evaluation Services at Hôtel-Dieu Grace Healthcare (HDGH) promotes excellence in everything we do by integrating research, evaluation and evidence into practice. We do this by supporting our employees, physicians and researchers in conducting research, program evaluation and knowledge transfer and education.

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