



Growing up with a parent who has mental illness – By Kelly Pope Research reflection June 2016

This month I have started a new role as a child support worker at the Caroline Reid Service at Stepping Stone Trust, which works long term with families where a parents' mental illness makes family life challenging. Most of the time this means catching up with some of the most awesome kids and teenagers ever, eating ice-cream and chatting about life. No doubt it will also mean being a supportive shoulder to lean on when things are tough.

Something that has struck me, three weeks into the job, is how many of the children and teens we get to spend time with are such bubbly, happy, easy going, well-rounded kids. This personal experience has stood out as a bright light against the backdrop of much of the research which takes a deficits approach to children whose parents have mental illness, looking particularly at the issues that can occur in parent-child attachment, the family discord that children can be exposed to, and their own vulnerability to developing mental health issues later in life. Also in this bleak background are low rates of mental health services acknowledging people's roles as parents, and concerning statistics around the disproportional child custody issues faced by parents with mental illness which a current research project in Canterbury aims to explore and address.

As someone who has personally experienced mental illness and can't wait to have a family of my own in the future, I have a vested interest in this topic. Questions which might be of academic or professional interest to some, are of immense personal significance to me, and to the other 16% of New Zealanders who have received a diagnosis of mental illness at some point in their lives. Are kids always negatively impacted by parental mental illness? Are there positives that come from being brought up by parents with unique experiences or outlooks on the world? What things can parents and professionals do to tip the balance towards the positives?

An area of research that begins to answer some of these questions and shines an evidence-based torch into the night, is resilience theory. Resilience theory holds that in spite of barriers, success can persist – kids who face vulnerability to poor social outcomes or their own mental ill health can come through unscathed and indeed thriving. With regards to parental mental illness, resilience really took off as an area of research after inconsistencies in research around children's health outcomes meant it was hard to see from research just what impact parental mental illness was having – there didn't seem to be a consistent negative impact on children.

A summary of the research into children living with a parent with mental illness discusses the way that both individual characteristics such as compassion, knowledge about the illness, and ability to see themselves as their own person outside of their parent's mental illness, as well as external factors such as having a reliable adult in their lives can increase



resilience. The good news from this is that many of these factors are things that people have some control over, whether it means providing child-friendly information to people's kids if you're a mental health professional or helping your children develop their own interests, skills and friend groups if you're a parent who experiences distress. Everyone can help make sure that children have a reliable adult in their lives, and that they know how amazing they are.

Another research article which I've found especially interesting, has been a qualitative study by Nicola Cogan, Sheila Riddell and Gillian Mayes "The Understanding and Experience of Children Affected by Parental Mental Health Problems". While resilience research frames parental mental illness as a negative that children with the right attributes and support can transcend, some of the findings of this qualitative study show that having a parent with mental illness can actually be a good thing in and of itself when it comes to kids' attitudes and acceptance of others.

Compared to the group of children in the study who had parents without mental illness, the group that did used much more sympathetic language when talking about mental health problems like "bad days" "sadness" "illness" and "depression". The comparison group tended to use more stigmatising language like "crazy" and "odd" and had mostly found out about mental illness from media such as television, whereas those with family experience had learnt about mental illness from their parents and older siblings. All the children taking part in the study felt that mental health problems were caused by social or environmental factors, like isolation or childhood trauma. However, kids with family experience were more likely to also have a medical understanding of the illness, and those without family experience were more likely to consider mental illness to arise from weakness or personality deficits.

This research shows that "the power of contact" is relevant to children too when thinking about challenging stigma and discrimination, and that children from families where mental illness is present have a disposition towards being understanding and compassionate as a result of their family experiences.

Some challenges also showed through in the study with some children blaming themselves for their parent's illness, many being worried about experiencing stigma from friends and professionals, and almost all of the children wanting more information. When thinking about how to best support kids in families with mental illness (or our own kids if we have lived experience) addressing some of these concerns children themselves are identifying – reassuring that it's not their fault, developing broader destigmatising campaign, and providing more information – could be the best place to start.



Resources:

Mental Health Foundation facts and stats sheet on mental illness and wellbeing

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/Uploads/MHF-Quick-facts-and-stats-FINAL.pdf>

The Understanding and Experience of Children Affected by Parental Mental Health Problems: A Qualitative Study (Nicola Cogan, Sheila Riddell and Gillian Mayes)

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233344871_The_understandings_and_experiences_of_children_affected_by_parental_mental_health_problems_A_qualitative_study

Children Living with a Parent who has a Mental Illness: A Critical Analysis of the Literature and Research Implications (Elaine Mordoch and Wendy A. Hall)

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/11033864_Children_living_with_a_parent_who_has_a_mental_illness_A_critical_analysis_of_the_literature_and_research_implications

Supporting Parents, Healthy Children - Supporting parents with mental illness and or addiction and their children: A guideline for mental health and addiction services

<http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/supporting-parents-healthy-children>

COPMI – a resource website about supporting parents, children and families

<http://www.copmi.net.au/>