



Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime

# Parental Mental Health and the Impact on Children

Report – January 2024

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## Introduction

At Barnardos, we believe that all children deserve the best start in life. Our services aim to transform the lives of vulnerable children because childhood lasts a lifetime.

One of the most important ways of providing children experiencing disadvantage the best opportunity for positive wellbeing and development is to make sure they live in a safe, consistent and secure environment with loving adults who can parent positively. Parents invariably want to do their best for their children. We see that every day first hand across our services, with parents making sacrifices for their children and doing as much as they can to give them every opportunity possible, trying to parent as best they can in as positive a manner as possible.

Unfortunately, there are some issues that can make that more difficult. This briefing is focused on one of those issues, parental mental health and wellbeing. The impact it can have on parenting and therefore on the lives, wellbeing and development of children.

Over recent years there has been considerable attention on child and adolescent mental health and the lack of support available to them. However, there has been a lot less focus on parental mental health. This is despite the fact, we know from research, and from first-hand experience within our services, that children living in households with parental mental health issues can face significant disadvantage in terms of their mental wellbeing and overall development.

This briefing explores the need for greater attention on this issue. If children are to thrive, it is vital they grow up in a positive and loving environment with parents responsive to their needs. When this is impaired due to parental mental health issues, support must be available to mitigate and reduce the potential harm and negative impacts on children.

The briefing will set out levels of prevalence of parental mental health and wellbeing issues within Ireland, before outlining the impact it has on parents and their parenting, taken from the direct views and experiences of families who have been through the issue and the staff supporting them. It will then focus on the impact this has on children.

The report outlines that many families are not in a position to deal with parental mental health issues on their own. In particular, those facing additional adversities and disadvantages, which may have been the cause of or compound mental health issues. These issues include substance misuse, domestic violence, poverty and deprivation and unsuitable and insecure accommodation.

Finally, we highlight the support and recommendations parents told us they would like to see put in place in the future. The quicker families can access the support they need, the less likely parental mental health issues will negatively affect children, ultimately improving their opportunities to positively develop and grow and generally experience better quality childhoods.

## Methodology

In developing this report, we initially carried out desk-based research of existing evidence available around parental mental health, parenting and children within an Irish context.

We commissioned Amárach to carry out a nationally representative survey with 315 parents/guardians with children aged under 18 in their care to get an understanding of the prevalence of poor parental mental health and wellbeing. The survey was carried out in November 2023.

We carried out 15 detailed one to one interviews with parents facing mental health issues supported in Barnardos services. Reflecting on their experiences prior to receiving support from Barnardos, parents spoke about the realities of parental mental health, the impact it had on their parenting and the knock on impact on children. The interviews were all conducted in August and September 2023.

Finally, we surveyed and spoke to staff across our services to get their views on parental mental health and wellbeing issues facing the families we support.

## Parental mental health and wellbeing

### Overview

Parental mental health and mental wellbeing is a wide-ranging issue. The focus of this report is primarily on the impact it has on parenting and the subsequent impact on children, their wellbeing, development and general quality of childhood.

As result, we considered it important that the report does not focus exclusively on parents who have been diagnosed with a mental health illness. As we set out in more detail below, through the results of the Amárach survey and interviews carried out directly with parents, the aim is to cover full spectrum of mental health issues that parents feel negatively impacts on their parenting and the lives of their children.

In many instances this may be a diagnosable mental illness. However, for others it might not be something that would meet such a threshold. Ultimately, our hope is to capture as many parents as possible struggling with mental health related issues, and the impact it has on their children, so that we can establish solutions around the necessary supports needed to enable those children and their families to thrive.

### Prevalence of poor parental mental health

Globally, research suggests up to one quarter of the child population lives with at least one parent with a mental health problem and anywhere between 12-45% of adults receiving mental health treatment are parents<sup>1</sup>. Recent research estimates that approximately 18% of parents suffer from mental illness, 4% of parents suffer from serious mental illness<sup>2</sup>, and that up to one in five young people live in families with a parent who has a mental illness<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Reupert, A., & Maybery, D. (2016). 'What do we know about families where parents have a mental illness? A systematic review.' *Child & Youth Services*, 37(2). doi:10.1080/0145935X.2016. 1104037

<sup>2</sup> [Stambaugh et al. 2017 The Long-Term Impact of Parental Mental Health on Children's Distress Trajectories in Adulthood](#)

<sup>3</sup> Reupert, A.E. et al. (2013) 'Children whose parents have a mental illness: prevalence, need and treatment.' *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 199(3), 7-9. <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja11.11200>

In Ireland, it is estimated that 20% of adults suffer from a mental health illness<sup>4</sup>. Research found that almost a quarter of all families (23%) have at least one parent who has, or had, a mental health illness<sup>5</sup>. Further approximations reveal that roughly 280,000 children in Ireland are dependent on parent(s) who have a mental illness<sup>6,7</sup>.

While research has attempted to indicate the prevalence, most of the literature accounts for parents who have engaged with mental health services or have received a formal diagnosis of a mental health illness. Therefore, most research figures may not fully represent the spectrum of mental health issues that all parents experience and certainly not estimate how many felt it had a direct impact on their parenting and the lives of their children<sup>8,9</sup>.

Therefore, we commissioned Amárach to carry out a survey on our behalf to look beyond parents who had a diagnosable/diagnosed mental health illness. We wanted to understand the prevalence of parents who felt that negative mental health and wellbeing affected their parenting and the lives of their children.

### Survey Results

Amárach surveyed 315 parents with children under the age of 18 around mental health and wellbeing.

One in five (20%) parents said they currently had poor mental health<sup>10</sup>. Almost half said their mental health was ok (46%) and one third (34%) said it was good. Two-thirds (67%) of parents said that they would have at times in the past had worse mental health than they do at present. Overall, two thirds of parents said that at some point they had poor mental health and wellbeing.

The survey asked parents about how often they felt anxious, burned out, depressed and overwhelmed. As the table below shows a substantial proportion of parents felt one of them most or some of the time. Almost one in four parents (23%) said they felt anxious all of the time, with almost one in five (19%) saying they felt overwhelmed all of the time.

How often do you feel:	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
Overwhelmed	19%	65%	16%
Anxious	23%	62%	16%
Depressed	9%	56%	35%
Burned out/exhausted	31%	56%	13%

<sup>4</sup> Amounting to the third highest incidence rate across 36 European countries. Mulligan, C. *et al.* (2021). 'The Family Talk Programme in Ireland: A Qualitative Analysis of the Experiences of Families with Parental Mental Illness.' *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12. doi:10.3389/fpsy.2021.783189

<sup>5</sup> [PRIMERA-Research-Briefing-Report.pdf \(cmhcr.eu\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> Central Statistics Office (2016) *Census of Population 2016 – Profile 4 Households and Families*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp4hf/cp4hf/fmls/> (Accessed 9<sup>th</sup> October 2023).

<sup>7</sup> The *Health at a Glance* Report in 2018 may account for a broader scope of illnesses, recording 18.5% of the Irish population as having a mental health illness.

<sup>8</sup> For example, while possible to identify a father who has schizophrenia or depression, it is difficult to capture the effect on his partner's mental health, who may be reluctant to access help for a range of reasons. Our largely siloed mental health services make it tricky to uncover "invisible families"

<sup>9</sup> Furlong, M. *et al.* (2021). 'Family Talk versus usual services in improving child and family psychosocial functioning in families with parental mental illness (PRIMERA – Promoting Research and Innovation in Mental health services for families and children): study protocol for a randomised controlled trial.' *Trials*, 22(243). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-021-05199-4>

<sup>10</sup> We asked parents on a scale of 1-10 how they would rate their health with 0 being very poor and 10 being very good. 0-3 was taken to be poor mental health.

Parents were then asked about specific issues and if they had negatively affected their mental health. Over three-quarters of parents (78%) said that one of the issues below had affected them. Almost one in ten (9%) said they had a diagnosed mental health condition and two in five (39%) said depressions and anxiety affected their mental health.

<b>Has your mental health been affected by the following issue</b>	
Depression/anxiety/panic attacks	39%
Diagnosed mental health condition	9%
Bereavement/grief	32%
Family break up/separation	17%
Other condition/circumstance	33%
None of the above	22%

## Parental Mental Health and Additional Adversities

It is important that parental mental health is not viewed in isolation to other parental adversities, challenges and disadvantages. Nearly every parent that we spoke to in our interviews were dealing with considerable complexities and facing numerous additional challenges and adversities simultaneously to their parental mental health issues. These additional adversities were often the cause of or certainly compounded their mental health and mental wellbeing. The corollary was equally true, parents said that their mental health worsened their additional issues.

Research has shown that in addition to parenting behaviours, parents' mental health could lead to other sources of stressful family dysfunction, such as increased inter-parental conflict or parental abuse of drugs/alcohol, that may add to children's distress<sup>11</sup>.

For many parents we spoke to, and parents that Barnardos generally supports, the combination of their mental health issues alongside the additional adversities meant that they had an even greater need for support in order to minimise any negative impacts on their children. As one parent said, *'there's just too much to deal with on my own'*. Without support, parents spoke of the intersecting adversities increasing feelings of being overwhelmed and reducing motivation, as issues appear to be never ending.

Parents were aware that the combination of factors meant that they focus less on their children, as they were dealing with multiple issues, who could then experience less attention, and less parental support for their individual needs. While their challenges were often substantial, unfortunately the support available around parents with multiple adversities and pressures was often limited. They generally were not in a position in which they could fully lean on friends and family.

Below we briefly outline the main additional adversities that parents we spoke to faced and were interlinked with their mental health problems. It is important to note that these are only some of the issues identified and that for many of the parents numerous of these issues exist simultaneously.

### Entrenched poverty and deprivation

Many parents spoke about their financial instability and their struggles to provide essentials for their children on a day to day basis. The stress and anxiety this caused took a significant toll on their

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<sup>11</sup> Williams Deadric T., Cheadle Jacob E. 2016. "Economic Hardship, Parents' Depression, and Relationship Distress among Couples With Young Children." *Society and Mental Health* 6(2):73-89.

mental wellbeing. It took a huge amount of energy to focus on, and unfortunately, took away focus from their children. It left them with less capacity to think about how their stresses and anxiety were impacting their children, and if they did think about that it would just make them feel worse.

#### Inter-parental conflict

Over half of the parents we interviewed were separated from previous partners and were either co-parenting or parenting alone. They spoke about how tensions within the home with partners increased mental health issues and that they found it difficult to reconcile issues with partners, due to those same issues. In some cases, the inter-parental conflict had reached levels that caused parents to separate, with resulting problems around custody of the children. This again caused huge strain on parental mental health.

#### Domestic violence

A number of parents we spoke to had experience of domestic violence and abuse. This was often complex in nature and had become entirely interlinked with their mental health issues. Those who had managed to leave their abusive partner spoke of how it was next to impossible to do anything with their mental health while constantly living in fear for themselves and their children.

#### Unsuitable housing

Numerous parents said that they had considerable concerns about their housing situation. Many had experienced homelessness and living in emergency accommodation and were still living in precarious housing. Many were living in unsuitable housing, in cramped conditions for their children. They were constantly worried about their housing, and its impact on their children, which was preoccupying their minds.

*'How can I sort out my mental health when I don't have a proper home.'*

#### Substance use

Some parents mentioned that their mental health was intertwined with their substance use. Sometimes the latter being a way of trying to cope with their mental health issue. Only by addressing both simultaneously could they address each other successfully and place their children in better positions.

## Impact on Parenting

### - Overview and existing research and evidence

Research demonstrates that the potential impact of poor mental health on parenting, and therefore children, is significant. As one academic summarises:

*“Parents are a child’s first teachers and primary caregivers. Their mental health profoundly influences the home environment, which, in turn, has a direct impact on a child’s emotional and psychological development.”<sup>12</sup>*

Mental health has long been documented in research as one of many factors that can influence parenting<sup>13</sup>. There are myriad ways in which poor mental health can affect how parents behave and relate to their child. For example, evidence shows how fathers with depression spend less time with their infants, while anxious parents are less likely to grant their children autonomy and show lower levels of sensitivity<sup>14</sup>.

Research suggests that parents who are struggling with mental health issues often adopt a less positive parenting style, which can ultimately impact their child’s behaviour, self-esteem, executive function, behaviour and even academic attainment<sup>15</sup>. Evidence shows that an inability to adopt a positive parenting style and attach healthily to one’s child, through sensitive warm caregiving, encouragement and consistency, can mean that the child’s developmental outcomes will suffer<sup>16</sup>.

Parents who are able to experience positive mental health, or manage their mental health issues, are typically better able to model positive behaviours for their children, including stress-management and coping mechanisms. They are more likely to provide a stable and nurturing environment for their children. Not only are children introduced to secure attachment styles, key to their emotional development, the relationship between parents may be under less pressure, and therefore has less of an impact on parenting style and family functioning<sup>17</sup>.

In order to complement existing research and highlight specific issues for parents in Ireland we decided to ask parents directly what impact they felt their mental health issues had on their parenting. Below, we set out the findings from the Amárach survey and interviews with parents with experience of mental health issues as well as from discussions with staff working with parents and families dealing with the issue.

### Survey results

Parents who completed the Amárach survey who said they had poor mental health were asked about how they felt their mental health and wellbeing affected their parenting. Over one in ten

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<sup>12</sup> Cherry, L. (2023) ‘Nurturing Parental Mental Health: How Schools can Make a Difference.’ *Trauma Informed Consultancy Services Blog*, 4 October. Available at: [https://www.ticservicesltd.com/2023/10/04/nurturing-parental-mental-health-how-schools-can-make-a-difference/#:~:text=The%20Parent%2DChild%20Mental%20Health,development%20\(WHO%2C%202021\).](https://www.ticservicesltd.com/2023/10/04/nurturing-parental-mental-health-how-schools-can-make-a-difference/#:~:text=The%20Parent%2DChild%20Mental%20Health,development%20(WHO%2C%202021).)

<sup>13</sup> Thomson, R. et al. (2014) ‘Predictors of Positive and Negative Parenting Behaviours: Evidence from the ALSPAC Cohort.’ *BMC Pediatrics*, 14. doi: 10.1186/1471-2431-14-247

<sup>14</sup> Reupert et al., 2013

<sup>15</sup> Roberts, J.P. (2022). *Parenting in a Pandemic: A Two-Part Study Exploring the Impact of COVID-Stress, Technoference and Paternal Mental Health on Parenting & Child Development*. Ph.D. Thesis. University of Surrey. Available at: <https://openresearch.surrey.ac.uk/esploro/outputs/doctoral/99679065802346/filesAndLinks?index=0>

<sup>16</sup> Roberts, 2022

<sup>17</sup> Cherry, 2023



(12%) said it had a significant impact on their parenting, over half (54%) said it had a moderate impact, one-third (32%) said little to no impact.

Over one-third of parents (36%) experiencing poor mental health said it led to emotional difficulties around parenting, such as being less empathetic with their children. One in six (18%) said it led to lack of energy and motivation to perform daily tasks and parenting duties. One quarter (26%) said it led to a lack of patience and attention to their children. One in six (15%) parents said they felt their mental health issues resulted in their standard of parenting being less than what they would expect of themselves.

<b>Impact on parenting among parents experiencing mental health issues</b>	
Emotional difficulties such as being less empathetic with children	36%
Lack of energy to perform daily tasks and parenting duties	18%
Lack of patience and attention	26%
Less time to share in social activities	12%
Standard of parenting being less than what they would expect of themselves	15%

### *Views of parents and staff*

It is important to set out from the start that the parents we spoke to during our interviews and the parents we work with who experience mental health issues all want to do the best for their children. They are willing, and appreciate the need, to make sacrifices for their children and put in as much effort as possible to give them the best start in life.

They all demonstrated considerable parenting strengths and commitment to their children on a daily basis. In fact, many of the parents used the fact they had children as a strength to combat their mental health issues. Knowing that their children need them, can help ensure they do not allow themselves to get too down or let their mental health issues overwhelm them.

*‘Only reason I don’t get so down about it is because I need to be there for her kids’*

However, despite this, the parents we spoke to acknowledged that in the past their mental health issues affected their ability to parent as effectively and as positively as they would like. The amount to which it impaired their parenting, before receiving support from Barnardos, varied considerably from parent to parent. They appreciated that it could affect their parenting in very different ways at different times. Below we outline some of the main findings that emerged from our interviews.

### *Struggles with everyday parenting tasks*

*‘I didn’t have the energy to think let alone help a child at times’*

*‘Basic tasks could become overwhelming’*

Parents repeatedly described that their mental health struggles reduced their energy levels, making them routinely more tired and fatigued. Often this reached an extent that they found it difficult to carry out routine parenting tasks, such as getting the kids up in the morning, cooking them meals or driving them to appointments. As can be seen above, almost one in five (18%) parents who completed the Amárach survey said they had a lack of energy to perform daily tasks and parenting duties.

*'Tiredness takes over - therefore I don't have the energy to make sure I cook a good meal or spend quality time with my children'*

*'Felt too tired to help get children ready for school'*

*'Not capable of being there when he needs me to drive him places'*

*'Just feeling too tired to take care of the children'*

Many parents we interviewed said that the level of tiredness could be almost overwhelming, jobs that they should easily carry out with their children could become extremely difficult. For some, the increased tiredness, before coming into contact with Barnardos, was due to their energy being consumed by their mental health issues, leaving them less capacity to carry out the daily necessities of being a parent.

*'There's less left for the children.'*

*'Anxiety is high, hard to get up in morning and function'*

*'Some days my anxiety is high and I am irritable and tired and cannot function properly'*

*'It was difficult because I was stressed so everything seemed more difficult, I couldn't sleep, was always tired, let the kids have too much game time or fast dinners like pizza.'*

*'When I feel depressed and worthless it's difficult to cope with everyday tasks around kids'*

This lack of energy could extend to more than just daily essential tasks. Numerous parents spoke of it depleting their stamina to do fun things with their children and spend quality time with them, something we outline in more detail below.

*'No energy to participate in play or take them on outings'*

*'I found my depression caused bouts of lethargy preventing me from given quality time to my young children'*

#### *Lack of motivation and negativity*

Alongside increased tiredness and lack of energy, parents spoke about a general lack of motivation that resulted from their poor mental health.

*'I could lie in bed all day. Some days I don't want to go out. Even if it's a nice day. Bad on the kids.'*

*'It made me feel low in myself with very little motivation'*

*'Your mood is low and you don't feel motivated to do things'*

*'Mood would be low feeling drained not wanting to go out and about'*

Parents appreciated that this made them less likely to spend quality time with their children and do new things with them. Additionally, the lack of motivation, could make them preoccupied by negativity and obstacles, reducing their ability to see any positives or solutions to problems. Some parents felt that it got to a point where there was a *'sense of hopelessness'*. They knew this fed down to their children. As set out in more detail below, this was something parents were grateful to Barnardos staff for working with them on to address.

*'I had no energy, no motivation, no desire to look to the future. It takes over your mind, like a nasty weed growing and smothering all good thoughts'*

*'I get anxious and nervous and see things negatively'*

*'I couldn't see solutions only obstacles. I wasn't being the parent I wanted to be.'*

*'Mental health issues made me feel like I didn't want to be a mum anymore, I slept all day because I wanted to escape reality.'*

*'You don't feel like going out you don't feel like there will be a point of trying anymore'*

Barnardos staff shared the sentiments expressed by parents. They stated that some parents who dealt with mental health issues for long periods could become 'stuck in a rut' and find it difficult to address their motivation and change their negative attitudes.

*'Burnout, lack of willingness to try new things and continuing with old habits and behaviours despite knowing that it's not the right thing to do. Parents find it very difficult to change and then accept that this is the new normal when it shouldn't be or doesn't have to be.'* (Barnardos project worker)

#### *Difficulties making decisions*

*'Decision making. Am I doing the right thing for my family. Lack of confidence in my ability to parent, self-criticism, self-blame if children are experiencing difficulties.'*

*'Making easy decisions became hard.'*

Parents stated that in the past they struggled making basic decisions for their children and their families at times due to their mental health difficulties. Some parents said it had an impact on their confidence around decision making and doing the right thing with their children.

*'Depression and anxiety affected my thought processes and decision making, sometimes to the detriment of my children.'*

*'My mind was so foggy with anxiety I couldn't make decisions for my children'*

Having to make even very basic day to day decisions could lead to stress and anxiety. Therefore, some parents said at times they avoided making those decisions, despite knowing the impact that might have on their children.

*'The stress can impact all decisions. It can all feel overwhelming at times. You start to worry about the impact of each decision on their future lives.'*

*'I cannot look at things as objectively, I'm parenting my children directly and indirectly by my not so positive behaviours'*

Staff regularly saw mental health issues impacting on parents' ability to make consistent decisions.

*'They have a decreased capacity to make decisions and solve problems in a relaxed manner.'*  
(Barnardos project worker)

#### *Establishing and enforcing routines*

Nearly every parent we spoke to talked about the difficulty they found setting and enforcing routines because of their poor mental health, despite knowing its importance in positive parenting. In many cases it was one of the primary reasons for seeking support from Barnardos.

*'I suppose when you're in that mind state, a lot going on for yourself. And then you have the kids on top. Building routines was hard. Being there for them can be difficult.'*

*'I find it hard to set restrictions on my children when it's needed. I'm always afraid of being too harsh on them and damaging them.'*

*'Struggled with setting normal daily routines'*

For some it was a case of being too tired to try to stick to routines. Others spoke about their desire to avoid conflict with their children around routines, fearful that trying to enforce them would lead to arguments. In some cases, this might have meant letting children have longer on electronic devices or other seemingly minor oversights but could escalate over time.

*'I didn't have the energy to set boundaries or enforce routines.'*

*'I don't always have the patience to cope with their outbursts, and give in when I know this will only make it more difficult'*

*'Anything for a quiet life. Even though you know you are doing the wrong thing.'*

*'Could care less attitude" anything for a quiet life i.e. leave them on electronic devices'*

Staff felt that the inability of some parents to cope with daily parenting tasks and enforce routines due to their mental health issues could lead to problems providing consistent environments for children. Over time it prevented some parents from enforcing positive behaviour.

*'Difficulty setting and maintaining safe and appropriate boundaries/managing child's behaviours.'*  
*(Barnardos project worker)*

*'Their parents are often living in survival mode lacking the ability to put in routine and structure for their children.'* *(Barnardos project worker)*

#### *Reduced patience and tolerance*

*'I struggle with anxiety which I find makes me low on patience with my children. Anxiety leaves me feeling very tired physically and mentally which in turn affects my mood and again my tolerance for my children's perfectly normal behaviours. I find myself snapping at them.'*

Every parent we spoke to in our interviews said that their issues around mental health wellbeing affected their patience with their children. It made them more irritable more quickly, gave them a shorter temper and generally reduced their tolerance levels for certain behaviour. Over one quarter of parents surveyed by Amárach (26%) said it led to less patience in their parenting.

*'I would get irritable with them and feel overwhelmed'*

*'I have a lot less patience and tolerance for my kids at times'*

*'You don't have the same amount of patience when you're struggling yourself'*

*'Exhausted from anxiety leads to poor rest so I got snappy and impatient'*

*'When I was low I may become short tempered, less patient and angry,'*

Parents said that in the past their reduced or limited patience could lead to them reacting in an overly angry way around children's behaviour, despite knowing it is not the fault of the children.

*'I'm an appropriate mam. But there are days that I can take it out on the kids, when it's not their fault at all.'*

*'Less patience and tolerance for behavioural issues.'*

*'It makes me short fused and I end up chastising for minor disobediences unnecessarily. Confusing for her and causes tension and bad atmosphere in house.'*

Parents appreciated that their lack of patience and increased tempers meant they were often unable to stay calm in ordinary situations, they might overreact, despite knowing children need a calm and consistent space and atmosphere in order to feel safe.

*'Constant stress means it's sometimes difficult to remain a calm parent, something which children need to feel safe.'*

*'It is difficult to model gentle parenting when you are stressed, frustrated and emotionally drained.'*

*'It affects how I respond to situations. It can make me panic when something goes wrong, and my children then panic.'*

#### *Emotional detachment and less attention*

*'Severe depression caused me to become very withdrawn and emotionally unavailable to my children I was not emotionally there for my son.'*

One of the major concerns parents had about their own parenting that resulted from their mental health issue was becoming more detached from their children and becoming less emotionally there for them. It was an issue many said their Barnardos project worker helped them to confront and address. They expressed their struggles to focus and remain present with their children, a result of being too preoccupied with their own anxieties or other issues. More than one third (36%) of parents completing the Amárach survey said they had emotional difficulties with their parenting such as becoming less empathetic with their children.

*'I have found myself to be distant/detached at times'*

*'Underlying stress and anxiety, I feel that I didn't have the emotional tools required to respond enough to my children emotionally'*

*'In times of stress it is difficult to remain present.'*

*'I was just not emotionally present when they needed me'*

*'I feel I neglected my children's emotional needs'*

For some, dealing with their children's emotional issues triggered their own anxieties. As a result, they might avoid interactions with them and become less affectionate and attentive to their needs. One mother described that she changed without realising, she had stopped hugging the kids, without thinking about the impact on her children because she was so focused on her own anxiety.

*'Inability to attend fully or listen to my children, felt like I couldn't be present...often spent time in bed complaining of "headache" to avoid interactions'*

*'Hard to connect with child when feeling low'*

*'Less interest in their lives, what was going on for them'*

*'Less able to support my children through their own difficulties.'*

*'Not giving enough support/attention to children'*

Parents stated that on occasion this could mean they were *'less likely to want to spend time with children'* and generally might take less joy from parenting and their children.

*'I couldn't focus on the presents of enjoying my son.'*

*'Counting the minutes to bed instead of enjoying family time.'*

Staff we spoke to reiterated many of the points that parents made about becoming more emotionally detached.

*'What they do have in common I suppose is a lack of emotional availability and attunement so that they are incapable of meeting the child's emotional needs for nurture and support.'*  
(Barnardos project worker)

*'Increased challenges to recognise and respond to their child's emotional, physical and social needs.'*  
(Barnardos project worker)

#### *Feelings of guilt and failure*

*'I end up responding in ways that then make me feel ashamed and guilty which just intensifies the feelings of anxiety and failure.'*

Parents spoke about feeling ashamed for not being the best parent that they could due to their poor mental health. Many said they felt like a parental failure at times. This sense of failure increased levels of guilt, which reinforced their mental health and other issues, and made them less able to support children through their own difficulties.

*'Feelings of worthlessness and failure.'*

*'I feel like I've let my children down at times.'*

*'Makes you feel like a shit parent.'*

*'Trying to be a good parent was so hard and the guilt of not being able to look after them enough was enormous.'*

*'The mood would affect the household and then I would be consumed with guilt and failing as a parent.'*

Parents said that worrying about failure and becoming preoccupied by guilt could become a vicious circle, *you worry more about that and focus less on the children*. Other parents said their feelings of guilt would make them try to make up for it and over compensate, which just provided an inconsistent message to their children.

*'It makes parenting more difficult because you are tired all the time so you have less interest in doing things with the children. This in turn makes you feel like a bad parent and the guilt creeps in its just a vicious circle.'*

*'I feel guilty then over compensate.'*

Again, staff members echoed what parents stated, they witness parents feeling judged and going through considerable guilt.

*'There can be guilt and shame about the impact on their children of their own mental health.'*  
(Barnardos project worker)

## Impact on children

*'There is no part of a child's well-being and development that wouldn't be impacted.'* (Barnardos project worker)

*'Child withdrawn, externalising behaviours, lack of self-regulation, delayed development, missing school, not able to participate in social and school activities'* (Barnardos project worker)

### Overview

*'If I'm not ok then they're not ok.'*

The consequences of poor mental health can be detrimental to children's health and wellbeing. According to research, parents' disengagement and detachment from their children and their needs combined with decreased patience and increased harshness, due to parental mental health issues<sup>18</sup> can lead to a whole range of harmful emotions for children such as insecurity and distress<sup>19</sup>, worse mental health and more behavioural problems<sup>20,21</sup>. Research shows that in the immediate term, there is increased impulsivity, aggressiveness, disruptiveness, associated with children with parents experiencing poor mental health<sup>22</sup>. Additionally, children can be forced to assume inappropriate caring duties, and suffer with school disengagement, poor peer interaction, isolation, shame and stigma.<sup>23</sup>

Over time, living in a household in which one of your primary carers has mental health issues, and is unable to address or manage them, can lead to the build-up of toxic stress within children. Research has reinforced that this stress in childhood, and particularly that associated with parental mental health, is often a precursor for poor outcomes in childhood and later adulthood<sup>24</sup>. Over the long term, children of parents with mental illness are at an elevated risk for a range of adverse outcomes such as developing a mental disorder of their own; physical illness; attachment problems; and impaired educational and occupational prospects<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Elgar Frank J., Mills Rosemary S. L., McGrath Patrick J., Waschbusch Daniel A., Brownridge Douglas A. 2007. "Maternal and Paternal Depressive Symptoms and Child Maladjustment: The Mediating Role of Parental Behavior." *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 35(6):943-55;

Wilson Syla, Durbin C. Emily. 2010. "Effects of Paternal Depression on Fathers' Parenting Behaviors: A Meta-Analytic Review." *Clinical Psychology Review* 30(2):167-80.

<sup>19</sup> Cummings E. M., Keller Peggy S., Davies Patrick T. 2005. "Towards a Family Process Model of Maternal and Paternal Depressive Symptoms: Exploring Multiple Relations with Child and Family Functioning." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 46(5):479-89; Noonan Katharine, Burns Richéal, Violato Mara. 2018. "Family Income, Maternal Psychological Distress and Child Socio-emotional Behaviour: Longitudinal Findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study." *SSM - Population Health* 4:280-90.

<sup>20</sup> Meadows Sarah O., McLanahan Sara S., Brooks-Gunn Jeanne. 2007. "Parental Depression and Anxiety and Early Childhood Behavior Problems across Family Types." *Journal of Marriage and Family; Minneapolis* 69(5):1162-77; Schepman Karen, Collishaw Stephan, Gardner Frances, Maughan Barbara, Scott Jacqueline, Pickles Andrew. 2011. "Do Changes in Parent Mental Health Explain Trends in Youth Emotional Problems?" *Social Science & Medicine* 73(2):293-300.

<sup>21</sup> Parental mental health problems may act as a stressor for children during a sensitive period because parents are central to the lives of their children and provide an essential source of social control, self-esteem, and belonging. Wilkinson Renae, Andersson Matthew A. 2019. "Adolescent Socioeconomic Status and Parent-Child Emotional Bonds: Reexamining Gender Differences in Mental Well-Being during Young Adulthood." *Society and Mental Health* 9(1):95-110.

<sup>22</sup> Treanor, M. and Troncoso, P. (2023) 'The Indivisibility of Parental and Child Mental Health and Why Poverty Matters.' *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 73(3), 470-477. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2023.04.012>

<sup>23</sup> Furlong et al., 2021

<sup>24</sup> Angelini Viola, Klijs Bart, Smidt Nynke, Mierau Jochen O. 2016. "Associations between Childhood Parental Mental Health Difficulties and Depressive Symptoms in Late Adulthood: The Influence of Life-Course Socioeconomic, Health and Lifestyle Factors." *PLoS One* 11(12):e0167703

<sup>25</sup> They are significantly more likely to develop psychopathology than children whose parents do not have a mental illness. Hosman, C.M.H., et al. (2009) 'Prevention of emotional problems and psychiatric risks in children of parents with a mental

Our interviews with parents focused considerably on how they felt their mental health issues and their resulting impaired parenting was affecting their children. Below we outline the main issues highlighted by parents with whom we spoke.

### Amárach survey results

Parents completing the Amárach survey who experienced poor mental health were asked to discuss the impact they felt their issues had on their children. Two in five parents (40%) said it had little to no impact, while almost half (48%) said it had a moderate impact and worryingly more than one in ten (12%) said considerable.

Almost half (46%) said it affected their children emotionally and mentally, leading to issues around low mood and increasing anxiety. One-third (33%) of parents said it affected family dynamics, strained family relationships and increased conflict within the home. One in ten (10%) said it led to a lack of understanding and communication between the parent and the child.

### Increased anxiety

Research estimates that anywhere between 35-60% of children who engage with child mental health services have a parent with a mental health illness<sup>26</sup>. Nearly every parent we spoke to in our interviews was concerned that their own mental health issues had negatively affected their children's own mental health, particularly in relation to anxiety. Several parents mentioned wanting to address this as a catalyst for seeking support from Barnardos.

*'I suffer with anxiety and I think it has impacted my son's mental health and made him more anxious'*

*'My distress caused alarm to children'*

*'Anxiety transfers to kids. They become anxious when you do'*

Some parents felt that children were more anxious because of the atmosphere in the house or their parents' inconsistent behaviour. Over time, this made them more prone to anxiety and mental wellbeing issues. Parents said this could be exasperated by children being unsure and confused about what was wrong with their parents.

*'Sometimes it's impossible to not get upset in front of him or show your emotions when you're trying to deal with so much every day.'*

*'Sometimes I feel they take on my worries and feel a lack of control.'*

*'They were obviously upset and didn't fully understand what was wrong with me.'*

Parents appreciated that even though they might have tried to shield their children from their mental health issues they were often likely to notice it, and become anxious as a result of it.

*'My children perceived the stress I feel, asking if I'm ok, they shouldn't have to worry about their mum being ok. No matter how much you try to safeguard your children from stress/worry, they notice.'*

*'Children should not have to worry about their parents stress etc. As they pick up on it and become anxious themselves.'*

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illness in the Netherlands: The scientific basis to a comprehensive approach.' *Advances in Mental Health*, 8(3), 250-263.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5172/jamh.8.3.250>

<sup>26</sup> Furlong et al., 2021



*'They know when I'm not 100%, pick up on my vibes. Ask is there anything they can do to make me feel less sad.'*

*'They are fully aware when you are not coping. They watch constantly and you can see the concern you are causing them.'*

*'If I'm feeling down my children sense and pick up on this.'*

Staff felt that the inconsistent parenting of children in these circumstances, the confusion it causes, and the fact their needs might not be being met could increase children's anxiety and general mental health issues.

*'Children's mental health is often impacted as their needs are not being met and they are living with a parent with mental resulting in confusion, guilt and anger' (Barnardos project worker)*

*'They may feel confused or not understand potential moods or messages from parent. May worry about parent more than others.' (Barnardos project worker)*

#### *Poor routines*

Parents said that due to their reduced energy levels and lack of motivation in the past their children might have poor routines, with children eating less healthy meals, waking up at inconsistent times and the home being less tidy than usual. Without routines, parents said that their children could become more stressed quickly, struggle to engage with others and in school, and behave more erratically.

*'House not get tidied and cleaned or proper meals cooked. End up getting takeaway not healthy.'*

*'They don't always get enough sleep, so they are tired in school. They have too much access to the internet and electronics.'*

*'They don't always get enough sleep, so they are tired in school.'*

*'They adapt the same mood, poor sleep patterns, are generally more challenging'*

*'I worry it might affect their social skills, when we as parents are tired we often allow them to have more screen time etc.'*

Some parents suggested that the lack of routine combined with parent's increased fatigue meant their children do not have as many opportunities to get out of the house, engage in activities and generally socialise.

*'Sometimes unable to organise everyone to go out and they miss out on event or family days out.'*

*'Anxiety has prevented me from taking them places & doing things.'*

#### *Poor atmosphere at home and feeling unsafe*

As pointed out above, research continually demonstrates that having a consistent, safe environment is vital for a child's development. Parents appreciated that their mental health issues could mean children do not live in as loving and generally happy environment as they should. Parents felt that this, combined with their regularly inconsistent moods made their children generally feel less safe and happy.

*'When you are unhappy and overwhelmed and feel useless it is hard to create a warm happy child centred environment.'*

*'My stress causes tension and bad atmosphere in the house.'*

*'Unsure of the response that they would get from you as a parent depending on your mood, always affected their own moods.'*

Staff echoed these sentiments. Staff reported that household environments were made less predictable. In some cases staff said it could get to the extent that children ended up *Feeling unloved. Walking on egg shells.*

*'They lack the capacity to respond to their children's needs in a manner that supports their sense of safety and security'. (Barnardos project worker)*

#### *Difficulties regulating emotions*

Parents expressed concern that their mental health affected their children's ability to regulate and deal with their own emotions.

*'My child has difficulty managing emotions, particularly anger. I see the outbursts happen when I'm less able to provide support.'*

*'It used to make me panic when something went wrong, and my children then panicked.'*

For some parents they felt that *'being emotionally shut down'* meant that children would at times copy them, or prevent them from developing skills to manage their own emotions. It was thought this could lead them to particularly struggle to cope or regulate sadness or anxiety.

*'I didn't have the skills to manage or regulate my emotions, therefore my children did not learn those skills. They shut down or act out and I can't manage or help them when I can't help myself.'*

*'I don't think I have modelled how to emotionally regulate sadness and anxiety well enough which has made teaching them how to do this themselves more difficult.'*

Being able to regulate your emotions is a fundamental part of positive development. Children who struggle to regulate their emotions, without support, can find it difficult to follow routines and structures; develop relationships with others; and react poorly to new situations. Further below we set out the support that Barnardos provides, and provided to the families we interviewed, to help children improve how they regulate their emotions.

#### *Lack of attention*

All parents interviewed spoke about the impact reduced parental attention and affection had on their children. Although parents felt it affected children in varying ways, they all said it affected their children's behaviour and personalities to some degree. Below we set out the main ones parents reported to us during our interviews.

#### **Children feel more insecure and less confident**

For some parents, the impact of their reduced focus and attention exhibited itself in their child becoming more insecure and less confident. Several parents said this was potentially because their children felt less secure about their own relationships with their parent, due to detachment and more limited attention.

*'I have noticed an insecurity in my child at times, where she needs reassurance.'*

*'I feel that their confidence and self-esteem was hugely affected.'*

*'My eldest was not sure I loved her anymore'*

Some parents reported that this lack of confidence in themselves made them more timid about making new relationships

*'Self-conscious no self-confidence fear of engaging with people.'*

*'She is very quiet, shy, she have a problem with socialising'*

### **Becoming withdrawn**

Some parents said that their children could become withdrawn as a result to the lack of attention and support they were receiving from their parents, being less confident in how their parents would respond to them in different situations. The lack of consistency meant they felt safer withdrawing.

*'They become distant and unresponsive.'*

*'They became withdrawn and or angry.'*

*'They stay out of my way, avoid me when I'm bad.'*

### **Attention seeking**

Other parents stated that their children would do the opposite of withdrawing. They noticed the reduced attention and would try and get it through new ways, becoming more demanding or clingy, or their behaviour becoming more negative.

*'They would withdraw, or attempt to do negative thing to get any kind of reaction.'*

*'Look for attention with behaviour more negative than positive.'*

*'I'm sure the children feed in to the feelings of negatively and respond with even more challenging behaviour because they are feeling the effects of being snapped at, handled impatiently and with a lack of consistency.'*

### **Coping with problems on their own**

Parents said their children would often try to cope with problems and issues by themselves instead of seeking help from themselves or other adults. In many circumstances parents felt that their children wouldn't confide their problems with them because they thought it might worsen their mental health. For others it was because the children did not trust their parents to do anything.

*'Children not telling me their problem as they knew I would panic or worse not able to talk to you when they have problems of their own.'*

*'Younger son does not ask for help, holds feelings in, wants to work out everything by himself.'*

Staff witnessed similar experiences, in which children felt they could no longer confide in their parent.

*'Some children feel unable to express their worries about the situation to a trusted adult, many feel unable to talk to talk to their parent.'* (Barnardos project worker)

### Hyper Alert

Parents were aware that their unpredictability and the lack of a stable environment could mean that children were always slightly on edge or hyper-alert. These children might constantly be looking for something that they could see as a threat or a source of danger. This can make them less able to interact with others, build relationships and engage with things such as school.

## Help and Support Parents Want

One of the primary aims of this research was to understand directly from parents experiencing poor mental health, what changes could be made that would help them to address their mental health issues as it impairs their parenting, in order to reduce the negative impacts it has on their children.

We spoke to parents at length about what would have helped make a difference at an earlier stage. The responses varied, depending on the impact the mental health issue had on them and their family. However, it was clear there were numerous changes all parents felt that would have helped them and they felt would help others in the future.

### Amárach survey results

Parents completing the survey were asked what support they would like around their mental health:

<b>What support would be helpful?</b>	
Practical help with their children	43%
Help and support around their emotions so they can patient and present with their children	43%
Support for their children around their emotions and to help them understand the situation	39%
Help introduce better routines	29%
Counselling	40%
Better information about what help is available	34%

Amárach then surveyed parents about what barriers prevented them from seeking or accessing the support they felt they needed.

<b>Why did you not get support?</b>	
Thought it was something they had to deal with on their own	36%
Did not feel comfortable asking friends and family	24%
Concerned about stigma and being judged as a parent	19%
No support offered locally	17%
Did not know of local support	18%
Did not reach support thresholds	10%

### Parenting support

As noted above, all parents were aware of the impact that their mental health had on their parenting capabilities, and how that in turn negatively affected their children. Each parent we spoke to felt that having easily accessible parenting support that matched their level of need would have made a significant difference to their lives and those of their children. '

*'Having free, local and easily accessible parenting support with workshops that are created to teach parenting strategies, coping skills would have really helped.'*

*'Parenting support would develop strategies to help me better support my child and to have tools to navigate the day.'*

Parents who were interviewed all received support around parenting and their children from Barnardos. They stated it was exceptionally helpful, but that it was a shame that they did not get it earlier. They were aware that there are a lot of parents out there in similar positions who don't get any support at all.

*'I would have gotten support so much earlier if I'd known what was going to happen.'*

Parents spoke of wanting to have more confidence in their parenting and the decisions they are making for their children. They said that consistent and reliable parenting support, with a safe space to talk and get advice, earlier would have significantly helped.

*'Knowing there was a quality service available and be able to rely on.'*

Parents acknowledged external support for themselves and their families made a significant improvement. Without it, some felt that they had only struggled on by themselves, to the detriment of their children. This was particularly the case for parents dealing with numerous disadvantages simultaneously.

*'At the time, I felt powerless to help myself and my children'*

*'Family support worker earlier would have made all the difference'*

*'More support and advice and not a pill for the answer'*

*'Wellbeing classes and parenting classes'*

*'Maybe home worker could have helped me react better to children's behaviour and parent courses.'*

Parents we spoke to were often dealing with substantial complexity in their lives. For parenting support to be effective they said it needed to be focused and reactive to their circumstances and needs. For example, in terms of practicality in most cases it had to be based in their home.

*'Parenting support coming in to the home as it was difficult to go to thing with three small children either on line or in person every few months.'*

Parents particularly want parenting support to help regulate their emotions better. They felt it would help them to cope in situations better, remain calm and enable them to be a better role model for their children.

*'Learning skills to emotionally regulate and identify when I wasn't coping well. I felt like I wasn't "sick" just that I wasn't a good parent.'*

Finally, parents want the person providing the parenting support needed to be:

*'A trusted person to talk it over with, somebody credible to give advice, suggestions and reassurance'*

#### *Support for children*

Parents repeatedly said that alongside support for themselves it would be extremely beneficial for their children to get support simultaneously. They felt their children should be able to get support to understand the actual mental health difficulties that the parents are going through. They found

this aspect of the support received from Barnardos to be particularly valuable. Many parents said they didn't know how to talk to children about their own mental health, they didn't know what language to use and how open and honest to be with them.

*'Having someone to explain to the kids what was happening in a way they could understand and give them ways to cope, so they wouldn't blame themselves for my feelings.'*

*'The right language to speak with my child or explain if appropriate.'*

In addition, parents were concerned that their children's ability to regulate their emotions and feelings had been impaired due to their mental issues. They felt that services should be offered to children in these circumstances to help them deal with their parents mental health issues, and mitigate some of its negative impact on them.

#### *Addressing stigma*

Every parent we spoke to mentioned in some shape or form the stigma they feel or is associated with mental health, and how that is even more heightened when you're a parent. Unfortunately, that stigma, prevented many parents looking for any form of support, or made them hesitate doing so. Almost one in five (19%) parents completing the Amárach survey said that they did not seek support because of concerns about being judged and as a parent. It meant they would hide the issue from friends and families and wouldn't discuss with others around them. Parents said that they want to be able to discuss their problems more openly around their mental health and be able to look for support without feeling shame.

*'Take the taboo out of the situation, make it OK for mother's not to feel OK and talk openly.'*

*'More understanding of my illness and less stigma. I felt guilty being in hospital and away from my child with depression and there was a lot of stigma attached to it.'*

*'Shouldn't be embarrassed by asking for help. I was embarrassed to acknowledge that I was struggling.'*

*'Understanding that I didn't have anything to be guilty or ashamed about. Knowing that there was no rush and it is ok to make mistakes.'*

*'I felt like I couldn't have mental health issues as a mother. Afraid that you'll be seen as an unstable mother. If my mental health is deteriorating, how am I supposed to be a ma.'*

At the more severe end of things, some parents were concerned about looking for help because they thought that social services might be contacted, or it could reflect badly for them in custody disputes with ex partners.

*'Out there fending for yourself. Everyone is scaremongering about Tusla. If I rang Tusla or GP for help, worried they'll threaten to take my kids. System is backwards.'*

*'Felt that I wasn't grateful if I was giving out. I should be able to say it without fear of losing my baby. Make you feel bad about feeling depressed.'*

#### *Better awareness and knowledge of support*

*'Knowing earlier signs and symptoms for myself to get help.'*

Numerous parents said that when their mental health issues were beginning they did not know of the likely impacts poor parental mental health and wellbeing could have on their children. They did not think the general public understand how it can make parenting a lot more difficult. Some

parents wanted there to be more awareness generally about the impact that parental mental health has on children.

*'More awareness of how parental mental health impacts children'*

Parents said that their initial lack of awareness prevented them from proactively seeking support around parental mental health issues and their families when they first started to appear. Looking for help did not seem to be the *'done thing'*, and therefore, parents often felt as though it was something they would have to deal with themselves on their own.

*'We need to tackle feelings like this. Parents should not need to deal with these issues on their own.'*  
*'Society as whole owes a duty to help parents.'*

*'I don't know. I feel it is my burden to bear, I just get on with it and hope I am not messing them up too badly.'*

Additionally, many stated they were generally unaware of any supports that were out there around parental mental health and family, and the positives that support could have on their children. As a result, many said that they waited until the problem worsened before they sought support. On reflection, some parents appreciated that the longer you wait for support, the worse the issue become and the harder it can be to engage with services.

*'You don't look for the support until you are very bad. But when you are so bad you are embarrassed about being so bad, and can't engage with services.'*

Parents felt more could be done to let parents know of what support is actually available and greater messaging about how it can help families. Coming forward to get help as early as possible should be seen as a positive. However, parents were aware that even when you did seek to get help at an earlier stage it could be very hard to find.

*'However, even if parents want support it's not always there'*

*'Once I opened up to the reality of needing help, my world changed for the better. Supports were not easy to find.'*

*'There was no support about how to parent children when your mental health is bad. And what to do with them.'*

#### *Someone to talk to*

Every parent spoke of wanting to have someone that they could talk to about their issue and how it affects their parenting and children. Parents said they often felt isolated due to their mental health issue, with nobody to confide in.

*'Someone to talk to.'*

*'Being a parent, want someone to talk.'*

*'I had family support as a single but still found it lonely at times. Talking to someone.'*

Ideally, parents said they wanted to be able to talk to someone consistently who was non-judgemental and who understands the issue. Parents knew that it was unhealthy to keep their issue to themselves.

*'To have someone to support me and not judge me.'*

*'Talking about problems without fear of being judged.'*

*'Someone to talk to in a non-judgemental manner.'*

*'Having someone to talk to without being judged.'*

*'Someone to talk to that could understand and to air your issues or concerns to as often they're all bottled up with nowhere to go.'*

*'Felt very lonely. Felt very overwhelmed, had nobody to say my fears to.'*

In conjunction with wanting to have an individual to speak to about the issue, parents spoke about the desire for more peer support groups locally around parental mental health and parenting, so that they would have someone to talk to who had been through the same thing.

*'Finding 'my village' and not having to do it all alone.'*

*'Support groups'*

*'A place for parents to 'group think'-connecting and chatting over coffee and in a casual setting'*

*'Local groups to support mams dealing anxiety/depression.'*

*'Well informed support groups'*

*'A local support group with others in a similar position able to reach out.'*

#### *Improved mental health services*

Most parents said that they could not access mental health services when they went to get help with their issue, in particular in relation to counselling services. Those who did get support found that it finished after a short period, and sometimes they were left still feeling very overwhelmed. Parents felt that mental health professionals only rarely took their families into consideration or that fact that they were parents when determining treatment and therapy options.

*'Wish there was more mental health support out there. There isn't enough. A place you could have a chat with people about these issues, somewhere that would mind the kids when you were talking to professionals.'*

*'Better resourced mental health services.'*

*'Professional, comprehensive support - quick diagnosis, therapy for all family, dedicated social worker with knowledge.'*

*'Mental health support could be a million times better.'*

*'Easier to get a bag of cocaine than to get support for myself.'*

*'Practical support to help to get back on top of things when feeling overwhelmed. And counselling to help recover from traumas and build good mental health.'*

#### *Addressing complicating additional adversities*

As mentioned above, most parents we spoke to were dealing with numerous challenges and adversities in addition to their mental health issues. They acknowledged that to address their poor mental health, reduce its impact on their parenting and therefore their children, they needed to resolve those other issues. In most cases, they would require support in order to successfully do so.



Although they appreciated that would take some time, they felt they could really do with the elimination of the most pressing causes of their anxieties and poor mental health or things that at least exacerbate it. This list was extensive and varied from wanting more supportive partners, to having decent housing, to increased income to pull them out of deprivation.

#### *Space and time to recover*

A large proportion of parents said that in order to address their mental health issues, and to be the parents they had in the past or wanted to be they needed some space to deal with the problem. However, that is hard to get with children around, as it means at times putting themselves first ahead of their children.

*'Helping deal with the guilt of putting my needs first in order to be ok for them.'*

*'Space to get better.'*

*'To better understand what is happening with me, and taking time for myself without guilt, in better being able to support my child.'*

For a lot of parents they felt their mental health would generally improve and they would be better parents if they just generally had some time just for themselves.

*'Stress of not having anyone around. Even getting a few minutes to myself.'*

*'Being able to take time out for myself.'*

## Support provided by Barnardos

Barnardos works in 50 sites across the country, supporting thousands of children and their parents annually. Our internal statistics show that in approximately 30% of families we support there are parental mental health wellbeing issues are present, making it one of the main issues families we support currently face.

Through our family support services, we offer a range of support for those parents experiencing mental health and wellbeing issues. Our aim is to put parents in a better place to allow them to focus on their parenting skills, improve household environments and relationships for families and generally give children living in those homes better opportunities to thrive, because childhood lasts a lifetime. Our intensive, home-based, one-to-one parenting support programme for parents has been proven to improve parent-child relationships; parent's confidence and reduced anxiety; parent-child communication; parental understanding of, and ability to manage, their child's behaviour; social development of the child; consistent routines; parental involvement in the child's education<sup>27</sup>.

Below we set out some examples of the specific support we can provide parents and children living in homes in which there are parental mental health issues before providing three case studies of families who have been helped.

### Trauma informed home based support

All our services are trauma informed. This means that we are conscious of what parents and children might have been through and work with them in a holistic and strengths based manner. This is particularly important when working with parents experiencing mental health difficulties, which may be the result of earlier trauma that they have faced themselves.

### Trusted and non-judgemental worker

Staff provide parents who might be struggling with their mental health a trusted and consistent individual with whom they are able to discuss their issues. Parents stated how helpful it was knowing that someone would be coming out to their home to talk to them regularly and provide advice and support in a non-judgmental way. This can immediately help with some issues around isolation which can further entrench mental health issues.

### Practical help

For parents with mental health issues practical support can be more important than it is to others, and it is a way that staff can help to gain trust and build confidence. Our staff will offer immediate practical support. This might be about addressing day-to-day bills or helping with other practicalities such as filling in application forms. This can help another source of worries for parents which could be exacerbating mental wellbeing.

### Regulation

When working with families with parental mental health issues staff will look to see if they can help parents improve emotional regulation. This can help provide more consistency to children and a better home environment. They will also look to work directly with children on their own regulation skills.

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<sup>27</sup> Partnership with Parents (PwP) Evaluation [pwp-evaluation\\_final\\_web.pdf \(barnardos.ie\)](https://www.barnardos.ie/pwp-evaluation-final-web.pdf)

### Building routines

Additionally, our staff will help parents focus on implementing positive routines with their children and how to stick to them. In some instances, this will require working with the parent to learn coping skills to make sure that they don't find confrontation with their children triggering for their mental health issues. This can then help parents engage more with their children and again have a more loving home atmosphere.

### Support for children

Our staff will work to support the children individually. This might be in relation to regulating emotions, but could also include helping them build coping strategies themselves and being able to discuss their concerns and worries directly with someone about their parents mental health issue.

### Partnership working

Barnardos works closely in local communities with all public and voluntary sector organisations, having built up close relationships with them over time. We work with parents to sign post them to other support services and will also often act as the link with other local agencies. This can be particularly important for parents experiencing mental wellbeing issues as they can find engaging directly with other bodies as stressful and triggering for anxiety, for example engaging with their child's school.

### *Case study 1*

A mother of three, Jane, was struggling with her mental health, particularly around anxiety as a result of historic trauma. Her daughter, Sarah, was struggling to engage with school and was beginning to develop mental health issues of her own.

This started to trigger Jane's issues and worsen her mental health. She found it difficult to cope and as a result she could not properly enforce routines and somewhat ignored the issue, showed less affection to Sarah and generally became more detached from her. Over time, this meant that Sarah got worse and worse, to the point she started to completely refuse going to school.

At this point the family were referred to Barnardos. Immediately a project worker started working with Jane, going out to her house routinely for visits. She was able to identify the causes and things exacerbating the issue and mental health problems by working and developing a relationship with Jane. It was clear that Jane's mental health issue was preventing her from practicing her parenting skills. The project worker helped her build coping mechanisms for her stress and anxiety being triggered. She was able to demonstrate to Jane more positive parenting actions and better utilise her existing parenting strengths. Simultaneously, Sarah was offered individual support and was now back and fully engaging in school.

Jane could not have spoken more highly of the help the project worker had provided. She did not know that the support was available when the problems were beginning and felt if she had known about it earlier she would have definitely referred herself across.

### Case Study 2

A mother of two, Sinead, developed mental health issues during her second pregnancy. She received support from mental health support teams during her pregnancy but that finished a few weeks after her daughter was born.

Sinead had recently been made redundant prior to becoming pregnant which made her worried about being about to afford and manage all the practical things necessary for a new-born. She was also worried about bonding with her new-born and maintaining a positive relationship with her older daughter, particular due to her mental health issues.

A nurse put her in contact with Tusla and then to Barnardos. At the time she had little to no idea what sort of support Barnardos could offer in relation to parental mental health. Within a few weeks of being referred a project worker called out to the house. She helped with practical issues, bringing food bags to alleviate some immediate concerns. It was clear that Sinead was struggling to control and regulate her emotions and was getting overly angry with situations. This was making her struggle with what was otherwise strong parenting skills.

The project worker worked with Sinead how to cope with anxieties and prevent anger building up. She also worked with the older child on what was happening with mum. After a few months, Sinead could see a real difference in her family's life. She had developed a close bond with her newborn, was able to manage her anger and anxiety to the point it didn't affect her parenting, and was in a better position to look forward to the future.

Sinead previously had no idea this support existed. She stated that having somebody who was coming, just a professional who was there to listen, who was coming every week and could open some doors to you was invaluable.

### Case study 3

Mum of three, Ciara, has struggled on and off with mental health issues. At times, she has become very low and received inpatient mental health treatment. However, she has not found it to be the best service. The aftercare support is somewhat lacking, her treatment has stopped on a few occasions when her health has been quite poor and it rarely took her children or the fact she was a parent into consideration. This was both in terms of practicalities, such as times for appointments, and when thinking about her general circumstances.

Over time, Ciara found that her mental health issues was affecting how she was parenting her children. She was struggling to engage with them and finding herself becoming detached, looking for ways on occasion to avoid her children. This was making her children seek her attention in different ways than usual.

A Barnardos project worker was able to get her children back into positive routines, help them to think of ways to stick to the routines and also helped Ciara to think about ways to bond better with them when she was feeling low. It provided her space to think about how to play with her children and get her enjoyment back of being a mum.

*'Barnardos has been really helpful, got me and the kids back on the right track'*

Ciara found being able to chat to the worker in a non-judgemental way to be helpful, to talk through her feelings and emotions with someone she felt she could trust. Over several months, Ciara became better placed to know how to react to her children and generally parent during periods of worse mental health and wellbeing, times when she became particularly anxious and stressed.

## Recommendations

It is clear that a significant proportion of parents across the country are dealing with mental health and wellbeing issues. Many of these parents will find their parenting impaired because of their mental health difficulties. As a result, thousands of children across the country will have their childhoods negatively affected, as well as their future adult lives, particularly children living in homes and families facing numerous adversities and disadvantages.

Unfortunately, despite the impact on children, there is a considerable lack of public awareness and national attention on the issue. Too many parents still feel societal shame and guilt around the problem and struggle to access support, ultimately to the detriment of their children.

Greater attention should be placed on helping parents, and the public more broadly, to understand how mental health impacts their parenting and their children. Support should focus more on the whole family, rather than parents as individuals, taking family circumstances, responsibilities and needs into consideration.

Below we set out recommendations, based on the views of parents, which will help improve the lives of children and place them in a better position to thrive in the futures.

### Reduced stigma within society and increased awareness

The issue of parental mental health and the impact on children can be huge as outlined throughout this document. However, as parents themselves told us, too often society as a whole and individuals don't appreciate the impact that it has on children.

As a society, we have made huge progress in making children and young people feel ok and comfortable talking about their mental health. We now need to make progress helping parents feel comfortable discussing and talking about mental health in the context of being a parent.

#### *Recommendations:*

- The government should develop a campaign raising the awareness of parental mental health, the impact on children, and local parenting support services.
- Establish a network of local peer support groups, utilising the Parent Peer Support Fund, in communities for parents and families dealing with parental mental health issues within the home.

### Intensive family and parenting support services

It is important that alongside addressing stigma and the lack of public awareness associated with parental mental health that we must ensure parents and their families get the support that they need. It is clear from discussions with parents the desire for easily accessible family support. Those who had received it spoke of the difference it had made to their lives and the lives of their children. From the results of the Amárach survey the issue of parental mental health issues is more prevalent than we anticipated, and is certainly not matched by the level of support currently available.

#### *Recommendations:*

- Increase funding for targeted intensive supports for parents facing mental health issues. This needs to be individualised family support provision that will meet the specific needs of each family.

- Under the national parenting support strategy<sup>28</sup> an aim is to achieve greater access to parenting support services with a commitment to 'Identifying and addressing gaps in the provision of parenting support services across the country'. Commitments under this strategy must specifically look at gaps relating to parental mental health and parental support.

#### Changes to adult mental health services

Parents who were engaged with or had been engaged with mental health services felt that generally they did little around the fact they were parents, with many adult mental health practitioners not being aware that they are working with a parent, meaning the vulnerability of children living in their homes remains hidden.

#### *Recommendations:*

- The parenting status of all adults engaged with mental health services should be recorded.
- All adults with children under 18 who are engaging with adult mental health services should be offered a referral automatically to local family/parenting support services.

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<sup>28</sup> Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services

## About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960s, Barnardos works with vulnerable children and families to provide practical, social and emotional support.

Barnardos supports children and families all across Ireland who have been affected by traumatic life events such as abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction. Our core purpose remains the same; 'to help the most vulnerable children in society achieve their full potential – regardless of their family circumstances, their gender, race or disability' – Because Childhood Lasts a Lifetime.



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