



Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime



# Parental Mental Health and the Impact on Children

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Summary Report – January 2024

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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 focuses on one of those issues, parental mental health and wellbeing. In particular, the impact it can have on parenting and the lives, wellbeing and development of children.

Although there has been considerable attention over recent years on child and adolescent mental health and the lack of supports available to them, there has been a lot less focus on parental mental health. 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, because childhood lasts a lifetime.

## Methodology

Barnardos commissioned [Amárach](#) to carry out a nationally representative survey with over 315 parents/guardians with children aged under 18 in their care. We also carried out 15 one-to-one detailed interviews with parents being supported by Barnardos services with mental health issues, reflecting on their experiences prior to receiving support from Barnardos. Finally, we surveyed and spoke to staff across our services to get their views on the issue and how it affects families we support.

## Parental mental health and wellbeing

This report aims to cover the full spectrum of mental health and mental wellbeing issues that parents feel negatively impacts on their parenting and the lives of their children. As a result, we considered it important that the report does not focus exclusively on parents who have been diagnosed with a mental health illness.

We commissioned Amárach to carry out a survey looking at all parents who felt they had mental health and wellbeing issues. One in five parents (20%) said they currently had poor mental health. 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. Generally, two thirds of parents said that at some point, they had poor mental health and wellbeing. A substantial proportion of parents reported feeling anxious, depressed and/or overwhelmed most or some 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%

\*some totals might sum to more than 100% due to rounding figures

Over three-quarters of parents (78%) said that one of the issues below had negatively affected their mental health.

Has your mental health been affected by the following issue	
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 experienced more than just parental mental health issues. Many were dealing with considerable complexities and facing numerous additional challenges and adversities. These additional adversities were often the cause of or certainly exacerbated their mental health and mental wellbeing. It meant that they had a greater need for support and help in order to minimise any negative impacts on their children.

Without support, parents spoke of the adversities intersecting and increasing feelings of being overwhelmed. As one parent said, 'there's just too much to deal with on my own'. The main additional adversities that parents we spoke to faced and said were interlinked with their mental health problems were: **inter-parental conflict; domestic violence; unsuitable housing; substance use; poverty and deprivation.**

## Impact on Parenting

Parents who completed the Amárach survey who said they had poor mental health, were asked how this affected their parenting. Over one in ten (12%) said it had a significant impact on their parenting, over half (54%) said it had a moderate impact and one-third (32%) said it had little to no impact.

### Impact on parenting among parents experiencing mental health issues

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 social activities	12%
Standard of parenting being less than what they would expect of themselves	15%

The parents we interviewed acknowledged that their mental health and wellbeing issues affected their ability to parent as effectively and as positively as they would like. Below we outline the main findings that emerged from our interviews.



### Struggles with day-to-day parenting tasks

Parents repeatedly described their mental health issues reducing their energy levels, making them routinely more tired, and finding it difficult to carry out day-to-day parenting tasks.

“Tiredness takes over – therefore I do not have the energy to make sure I cook a good meal or spend quality time with my children.”

– Parent

“I didn't have the energy to think let alone help a child.”

– Parent

“Basic tasks become overwhelming.”

– Parent



### Lack of motivation and negativity

Alongside increased tiredness and lack of energy, parents spoke about a general lack of motivation that resulted from their mental health and wellbeing issues. This lack of motivation led to many parents becoming preoccupied by negativity.

“ 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.”

– Parent

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

– Parent



### Difficulties making decisions

Parents stated that they struggled making basic decisions for their children and their families, affecting their confidence and belief they were doing the right thing for their children.

“ My mind was so foggy with anxiety I couldn't make decisions for my children, making easy decisions became hard.”

– Parent



### Establishing and enforcing routines

Nearly every parent we spoke to, talked about the difficulty they found setting and enforcing routines, despite knowing its importance in positive parenting.

“ 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.”

– Parent



## Reduced patience and tolerance

Every parent we spoke to said that their issues around mental health and wellbeing affected their patience with their children. It made them more irritable more quickly and reduced their tolerance levels.

“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.”

– Parent

“You don't have the same amount of patience when you're struggling yourself.”

– Parent



## Emotional detachment

One of the main concerns parents had about their own parenting that resulted from their mental health and wellbeing issues was the fact it could make them become more detached from their children, less attentive and affectionate, preventing them from being there for them emotionally.

“Severe depression caused me to become very withdrawn and emotionally unavailable to my children.”

– Parent

“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.”

– Parent





## Feelings of guilt and failure

Parents repeatedly discussed their sense of shame and guilt for not being the best parent that they could be due to their mental wellbeing issues. There was a sense of failing as a parent.

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

– Parent

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

– Parent

## Impact on children

The consequences of poor mental health and parenting on children can be extremely detrimental to children's health and wellbeing. 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 it had considerable impact.

Almost half (46%) of parents said it affected their children emotionally and mentally, leading to issues around low mood and increasing anxiety. One-third (33%) 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. Below we outline the impacts parents we interviewed highlighted.



## Increased anxiety

Nearly every parent we spoke to was concerned that their own mental health issues were negatively affecting their children's own mental health, particularly in relation to anxiety.

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

– Parent

“ My children perceive the stress I feel, asking if I'm ok, they shouldn't have to worry about their mum being ok.”

– Parent



## Poor routines

Parents said that due to their reduced energy levels and lack of motivation their children might have poor routines, become more stressed quickly, struggle to engage with others, and in school behave more erratically.

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

– Parent

“ They adapt the same mood, poor sleep patterns as me and are generally more challenging.”

– Parent



### Feeling unsafe and unhappy

Parents appreciated that their mental health issues could mean children do not live in as safe, loving and generally positive environment as they should. This combined with their parents' regularly inconsistent moods, made children generally feel less happy.

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

– Parent



### Difficulties regulating emotions

One of the biggest concerns that parents expressed was the impact on their children's ability to regulate emotions.

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

– Parent

“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 couldn't manage or help them when I couldn't help myself.”

– Parent





## Lack of attention

All parents spoke about the impact reduced parental attention had on their children, stating that their children:

- **Feel more insecure and less confident**  
 “ I have noticed an insecurity in my child at times.”
- **Became more withdrawn**  
 “ They stay out of my way, avoid me when I’m bad.”
- **Started attention seeking**  
 “ Respond with even more challenging behaviour because they are feeling the affects of being snapped at, handled impatiently and with a lack of consistency.”
- **Cope with problems on their own**  
 “ Children not telling me their problem as they knew I would panic or worse.”

## The Help and Support Parents Want and Need

Parents completing the survey were asked what support they would like around their mental health and what barriers prevented them from seeking or accessing the support they felt they needed.

### What support would be helpful?

Practical help with their children	43%
Help and support around their emotions so they can be 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%

### Why did you not get support?

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%



We asked the parents we interviewed about what support should be introduced to reduce the negative affects parental mental health issues can have on children.



### Parenting and family support

Each parent we spoke to said 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 which cover workshops that are created to teach parenting strategies, coping skills would have really helped.”

– Parent

“ Parenting support coming in to the home as it was difficult to go to things with three small children either online or in person every few months.”

– Parent



### Support for children

Parents repeatedly said that alongside support for themselves, it would be extremely beneficial for their children to get support simultaneously, particularly around the ability to regulate their emotions and feelings, and to understand the actual mental health difficulties that their parents are going through.

“ 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.”

– Parent



## Addressing stigma

Every parent we spoke to mentioned the stigma they feel, or stigma associated with mental health, and how that is more heightened when you're a parent. Unfortunately, that stigma prevented many parents looking for any form of support or even just being able to discuss their mental health problem with others around them.

“Shouldn't be embarrassed asking for help. I was embarrassed to acknowledge that I was struggling.”

– Parent

“I felt like I couldn't have mental health issues as a mother. Afraid that you'll be seen as an unstable.”

– Parent



## Better awareness and knowledge of support

Numerous parents stated that they were not aware of any supports that were out there around parental mental health and family. They also felt as though society expected you to deal with it on your own, not understanding the impact that could have on a child.

“I don't know. I feel it is my burden to bear, I just get on with it.”

– Parent

“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.”

– Parent



## 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. Ideally, someone consistently who was non-judgemental and who understands the issue.

“Talking about problems without fear of being judged.”

– Parent

“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.”

– Parent



## Improved mental health services

Most parents said that they could not access mental health services when they went to get help with their issue. Those who did get support found that it concluded too quickly.

“Wish there was more mental health support out there. There isn't enough.”

– Parent

“Mental health support could be a million times better.”

– Parent

## Support Provided by Barnardos

Approximately 30% of families we are supporting have issues around parental mental health, making it one of the main issues families we support currently face. Our intensive parenting support programme has been proven to improve parent-child relationships; parent's confidence and reduce 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. It is trauma informed, home based support, and provides families with trusted and non-judgemental workers who can help: provide practical help; guide developing coping mechanisms and improve emotional regulation; build and introduce better routine; support for children; link with other local agencies and organisations.



### Case study

Jane, a mother of three, often struggled with her mental health, particularly around anxiety. Her daughter, Sarah, began struggling to engage with school. This triggered Jane's mental health issues. She found it difficult to cope with and stopped enforcing routines and showed less affection to Sarah. Sarah got worse and started to completely refuse going to school. Jane and her family were referred to Barnardos. A project worker started regular home visits, developed a trusting relationship with Jane, helping her build coping mechanisms for her stress and anxiety. She was able to demonstrate to Jane more positive parenting actions and better utilise her existing parenting strengths. Simultaneously, Sarah was offered individual support. Sarah is now back fully engaged with school and the relationship between Mum and daughter is much improved.

## Conclusion and 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.

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. As a society, we have made considerable progress in making children and young people feel comfortable talking about their mental health. We now need to make similar progress in normalising parents discussing mental health in the context of being a parent, and for parents to feel comfortable doing so. Below we set out recommendations, based on the views of parents, that will help improve the lives of children and place them in a better position to thrive in the future.

### Reduce stigma within society and increase awareness

- The government should develop a campaign raising the awareness of parental mental health 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 support

- 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.

### Adult mental health services

- 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.

## 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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