Parents with Mental Illness: Opportunities for Support
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A mental illness diagnosis...

- Is a professional communication tool which groups symptoms, rather than people
- Does not tell you about the individual expression of a disorder
- Does not tell you how well an individual is functioning in general, in a particular role domain, or at a point in time
Numbers of parents with mental illness:

- **Lifetime prevalence of psychiatric disorder** (Kessler et al., 1994)
  - 45% of American women
  - 30% of American men

- **Prevalence of parenthood** (Nicholson et al., 2004)
  - 68% of women with psychiatric disorders are mothers
  - 57% of men with psychiatric disorders are fathers
Impact of parenting with a mental illness:

- Generic parenting challenges
- Challenges specific to having a mental illness
- Concerns about custody loss
Generic parenting challenges:

- Housing
- Employment
- Money management
- Transportation
- Health care

- Family relationships
- Child care
- Child behavior management
- Managing role strain
Challenges specific to parents with mental illness:

- Medication
- Hospitalization
- Relationships with helpers
- Advocacy

- Child’s perception of parents’ illness
- Child’s role in illness management
- Communicating with child about mental illness
Custody loss:

- 25% to 75% in various small-scale studies of clinic samples no longer have custody of their children.
- 27 states restrict parental rights of individuals with mental illness/incompetence labels (Hemmens et al., 2002).
- Prevalence of child abuse unknown.
Impact of parental mental illness for children:

- Children whose parents have mental illness are at greater risk for developing problems than children whose parents do not (30% to 50%)
- Many children whose parents have mental illness do well (50% to 70%)
- Outcomes are related to many variables, alone or in combination with parental mental illness
Parent’s Mental Health

Family context

Many Opportunities for Intervention & Support

Child Outcomes

Child’s characteristics

intervention

intervention

intervention
Parents say children need:
- Nurturance & effective discipline
- Positive role models & friends
- Support for interest, talents
- Safe, dependable home
- Open communication & information about MI
- Don’t have to fix the problems
- To feel “normal”
What “works” for families?:

- 2000 – Identified 20 programs across the US that serve families living with parental mental illness

- Family case management
  - Comprehensive array of services
  - Coordination of multiple services
  - Communication among providers

- Parenting skills, parent-child relationship, education re: child development

- 24-hr. crisis intervention & support services

- Flexible funds to meet unique needs
Key program ingredients:

- Family-centered
  - Integration of adult and child services
  - Interagency collaboration
  - Funding to meet families’ needs

- Strengths-based
  - Non-judgmental approach
  - Support of positive adult role model
  - Trusting provider-family relationship
Family Options program:

- Marlborough, MA
- 17 families (21 parents/40 children)
- 3.5 family coaches
- Focus on strengths, not deficits
- Services for all family members
- Liaison and advocacy
- Respite and flex funds
- 24-hour support
The “Typical Day” interview:

- Ask parents & children to describe activities from wake-up to bed
- Listen for “who does what, when, why.”
- Identify things family members do well: strengths & resources, happy times, positive interactions
- Identify times or tasks that are difficult
- Begin to define things family members would like to change
Considerations re: parent with mental illness:

- Nature, severity of psychiatric symptoms
- Chronicity, pattern of illness
- Functioning in important role domains; what helps parent function well?
- Age, stage, needs of children; impact of illness on parent’s capacity to meet child’s needs
What resources and supports can be put into place, to support the optimal functioning of parents and children, in times of stability and in anticipation of times of crisis?
Resources:

National Alliance on Mental Illness: www.nami.org has fact sheets & information, chat rooms.


National Mental Health Association web site: www.nmha.org has links to fact sheets & information, resources, etc.

www.parentingwell.org