

Parents with Mental Illness: Opportunities for Support

Kate Biebel, Ph.D.

**Research Assistant Professor of
Psychiatry**

**Center for Mental Health Services Research
University of Massachusetts Medical School**

November 3, 2006

Kathleen.Biebel@umassmed.edu

508-856-8717

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:

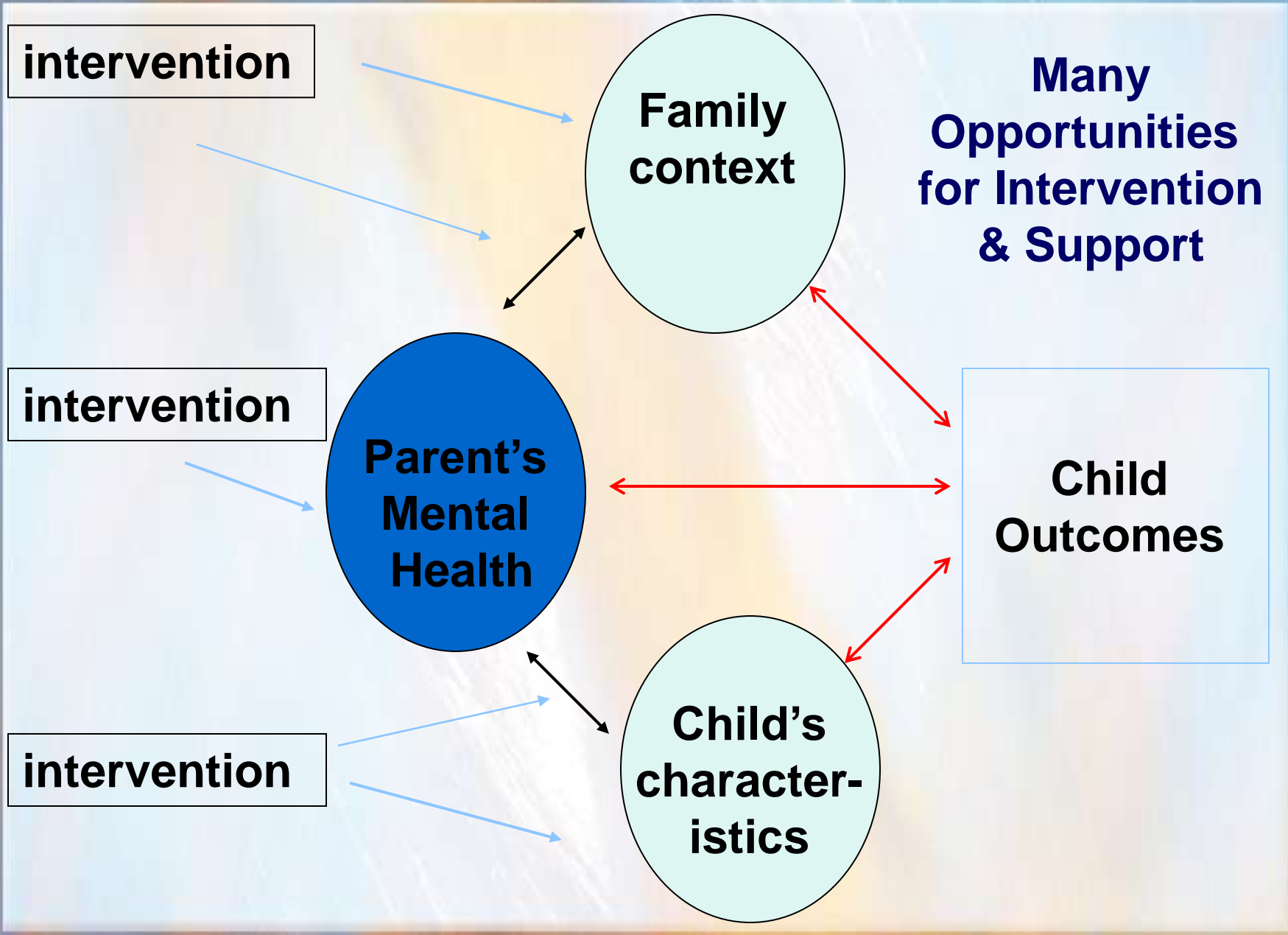
- Medication
- Hospitalization
- Relationships with helpers
- Advocacy
- Child's perception of parents' illness
- Child's role in illness management
- Communicating with child about mental illness

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**



intervention

Family context

Many Opportunities for Intervention & Support

intervention

Parent's Mental Health

Child Outcomes

intervention

Child's characteristics

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 Institute on Mental Health:**
www.nimh.nih.gov has links to publications like “Real Men. Real Depression,” “Depression: A Treatable Illness,” “Men and Depression,” & “Going to Extremes: Bipolar Disorder.” Many available in English & Spanish, at an easy reading level.
- **National Mental Health Association web site:**
www.nmha.org has links to fact sheets & information, resources, etc.
- www.parentingwell.org