

ADOPTING A FAMILY APPROACH

Short Guide Series

Children of Parents with Mental Health Needs

Mental health problems are common. There is no single clear definition and mental health problems alone should not be taken as a risk factor without contextual information. The state of a person's mental health is changeable and can be affected by various factors. Therefore, capacity to parent safely may also be variable so an understanding of the factors which may increase risk is an important part of any assessment.

Which children are at risk?

A child who has suffered, or is likely to suffer significant, harm or whose wellbeing is affected by parental mental illness could be a child who:

- Features within parental delusions.
- Is involved in their parent's obsessional compulsive behaviours.
- Becomes a target for parental aggression or rejection.
- Has caring responsibilities inappropriate to their age and should be assessed as a young carer.
- May witness disturbing behaviour arising from their parent's mental illness.
- Is neglected physically and/or emotionally by an unwell parent.
- Is at risk of severe injury, profound neglect or death.
- Is an unborn child of a pregnant woman with a history of major mental illness.

How can a child be affected by parental mental ill health?

When making an assessment of parenting ability and the child's development/needs consider the following:

- Does the child take on roles and responsibilities within the home that are inappropriate?
- Does the parent/carer neglect their own and their child's physical and emotional needs?

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- Does the parent's mental health problem affect the development of a secure attachment with the child?
- Does the mental health problem result in chaotic structures within the home, such as meals and bedtimes etc?
- Does the parent/carer's mental health have implications for the child within school, attending health appointments etc?
- Is there a lack of the recognition of safety for the child?
- Does the parent/carer have an appropriate understanding of their mental health problem and its impact on their parenting capacity and on their child?
- Are there repeated incidents of hospitalisation of the parent/carer or other occasions of separation from the child?
- Is the child included within any delusions of the parent/carer?
- Does the wider family understand the mental health problem of the parent/carer, and the impact of this on the parent/carer's ability to meet the child's needs?
- Is the wider family able and willing to support the parent so that the child's needs are met?

Protection and Escalation

Where it is believed that a child of a parent with mental health problems may have suffered, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, a referral to children's social care should be made. Please see the contacts page on the Family Approach Toolkit for information on how to refer a concern.

If you are working with a child and have concerns about an adult carer who may have mental health needs, please see the contacts page on the Family Approach Toolkit for information on how to refer a concern.

It is essential that staff working in adult mental health services and children's social care work collaboratively to ensure the safety of the child and the management of the adult's mental health.

Children's social care must assess the individual needs of each child and within this, incorporate information provided by mental health workers.

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Further information

HIPS Procedures: [5.3 Children of Parents with Mental Health Problems](#)

HIPS Procedures: [5.4 Children of Parents with Learning Disabilities](#)

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