

Early Intervention for Preschool Children of Parents with Mental Illness: The Evaluation of a Resource for Service Providers

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Abstract : Background: Many people with a mental illness have young children. Research has shown that early childhood is a particularly vulnerable time for children whose parents have a mental illness. Moreover, repeated research has demonstrated the effectiveness of a multiagency approach to family focused practice for improving parental functioning and preventing adverse outcomes in children whose parents have a mental illness, particularly in the early years of a child's life. However, there is a paucity of professional development resources for professionals who work with families where a parent has a mental illness and has young children. Significance of the study: This study will make a contribution to addressing knowledge gaps around resource development and workforce needs for early childhood and mental health professionals working with young children where a parent has a mental illness. Objective: This presentation describes a newly developed resource, 'Pathways of Care', specifically designed for early childhood educators and mental health workers, alongside pilot evaluation data regarding its effectiveness. 'Pathways of Care' aims to promote collaborative practice and present early identification and referral processes for workers in this sector. The resource was developed by the Children of Parents with a Mental Illness (COPMI) National Initiative which is funded by the Australian Government. Method: Using a mixed method design, the effectiveness of the training resource is also presented. Fifteen workers completed the Family Focus Mental Health Practice Questionnaire pre and post using the resource, to measure confidence and practice change; semi-structured interviews were also conducted with eight of these same workers to further explore the utility of the resource. Findings: The findings indicated the resource was effective in increasing knowledge and confidence, particularly for new and/or inexperienced staff. Examples of how the resource was used in practice by various professions emerged from the interview data. Conclusions: Collaborative practice, early identification and intervention in early childhood can potentially play a key role in altering the life trajectory of children who are at risk. This information has important implications for workforce development and staff training in both the early childhood and mental health sectors. Implications for policy and future research are discussed.

Keywords : parents with mental illnesses, early intervention, evaluation, preschool children

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