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Families with multiple and complex problems: Issues for the safety and wellbeing of children

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Overview

- Definitions & prevalence
- Why do problems co-occur?
- Key issues for assessment
- Key issues for intervention
- Service system implications



Families with multiple and complex problems are:

- families with multiple, chronic, and inter-related problems, the constellation of which can result in children's needs being unmet, and children being at heightened risk of abuse and neglect (Cleaver et al. 2007; Cleaver et al. 1999)



Why focus on families with multiple and complex problems?

- The primary problems of families involved with child protection services are:
 - parental substance misuse
 - domestic violence
 - parental mental health problems
- Data show that the co-occurrence of these problems are the norm



Statistics

- NSW Reports (Wood, 2008)
 - 3 most common features of reports were DV (31%), D&A (20%); Mental Health (14%)
- Vic investigations (Allen Consulting, 2002)
 - 4 most frequent 'concerning characteristics' were DV (40%); Drugs (25%); Alcohol (21%); Psych (15%)
 - Average no. of problems increased over 5-yrs



Statistics Cont.

- SA Children in Care (Jeffreys et al., 2009)
 - Of the children entering care due to parental substance abuse, 69% of parents also exp. DV and 65% had mental health problems
 - Authors concluded “the picture that emerges is one of poverty, violence, unpredictability and high risk”



Why do problems frequently co-occur?

- Impact of past trauma
- Trauma induces debilitating symptoms – can in itself constitute multiple and complex problems
- Research – substance misuse, domestic violence and mental health issues all linked with past histories of child abuse and neglect



Why do problems frequently co-occur?

- Problems themselves inter-related
 - Frequently a pre-cursor or consequence of another problem
- Substance misuse - a way of self-medicating for a mental health problem
- Strong associations between domestic violence and substance misuse:
 - Alcohol and other drugs used to relieve emotional pain of experiencing DV



Why do problems frequently co-occur?

- Impact of social exclusion and disadvantage
- Social exclusion manifests through interlinked problems including:
 - poverty, homelessness, unsafe neighbourhoods, unemployment, poor health, isolation, crime, teenage pregnancy, poor education



Key issues

- Families with multiple and complex problems are not a marginal group – they are primary client group of child protection services
- Problems of domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health problems inter-related



Key issues for assessment

- Limited research identifying how problems interact to impact on child health and wellbeing
- It is not enough to note the presence of problems
- How does each problem impact parenting?
- 3 issues often confounded in literature:
 - Impact on individual
 - Impact on parenting
 - Risks and effects to children



Example: Assessing parental substance misuse – impact on individual

- Misuse of licit (alcohol, prescription medications) or illicit (opioids, amphetamines, psychoactive) substances
- Effects of intoxication:
 - Senses, perception, motor skills, speech, judgment
 - Heighten responsiveness or flatten it
 - Induce violence or paranoia
 - Cause lethargy, loss of consciousness, coma, death



Example: Assessing parental substance misuse – impact on individual

- Effects of withdrawal:
 - anxiety, irritability, disturbed sleep, depression, vomiting, paranoia
- Association between substance misuse and risky and/or illegal activities:
 - Drug dealing (as buyer or supplier), Shoplifting (attempt to finance drug habit)
- May be the cause of significant health problems



Example: Assessing parental substance misuse - impact on parenting

- Potential impacts on parenting of being intoxicated or in withdrawal include:
 - Lack of routine, poor nutrition, being emotionally unavailable, financial difficulties, unpredictable moods, inconsistent & negative parenting & discipline, verbal aggression, inattentiveness, secrecy, and blurring of parent-child roles



Example: Assessing parental substance abuse: Risks and effects to children

- Exposure to drug use heightens risk of all abuse and neglect
 - High risk of neglect, emotional abuse - inadequate supervision, inattention to emotional, developmental, nutritional, hygiene, routines, and sleep needs
 - Risk of physical abuse - if parent violent, reactive or punitive
 - Increased risk of sexual abuse while parent intoxicated if parent predisposed
- Criminal activity
- Deep-seated fear of discovery, parental imprisonment, being removed from family, removal from support network



Main points for assessment

- Similarities B/W impacts of DV, substance misuse and mental health problems– particularly parenting impacts
- Assessments should examine how problems affect parenting capacity and place children at risk
- Effective assessments also look at:
 - Parent-child interactions
 - The quality of the home environment
 - Parent's social support networks
 - Parent's ability to problem solve etc.



Key issues for planning an intervention

- An effective intervention is planned and purposeful
- Trying to address all problems simultaneously is overwhelming for families
- Addressing problems individually is also ineffective



Maslow's Hierarchy of Need



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Key issues for intervention

- Therapeutic interventions responding to parents own traumatic past
- Effective strategies for responding to trauma in adults include:
 - Building problem-solving skills
 - Planning and doing positive activities
 - Developing skills for managing distressing reactions
 - Developing helpful thinking
 - Developing supportive social connections



Key issues for intervention

- Parenting interventions - evidence based that target incapacity of parents meeting children's needs
- Components for effective parenting interventions include:
 - One-on-one learning
 - Focusing on strengths
 - Building strong client-practitioner relationships
 - Developing positive expectations for change
 - Praising parents wherever possible
 - Providing clear and concise information



System implications in brief

- Research suggests breaking down silos in a whole-of-government approach
- Whole-of-government example: *Think Family* in the UK (2008)
- Integrated and joined up services – no wrong door for service delivery
- Resourcing prevention and early intervention services the biggest challenge



Conclusion

- Families with multiple and complex problems are the primary client group in child protection
- Assessment:
 - Similarities B/W the impacts of DV, substance abuse and mental health problems on parenting
 - Identifying problems not enough
 - Identify how they impact parenting and put children at risk
- Interventions need to be evidence based and target parents incapacity to meet children's needs
- Systems need to be designed for multiple problems



National Child Protection Clearinghouse

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