

Caring for the “hidden children”

Judy Adams

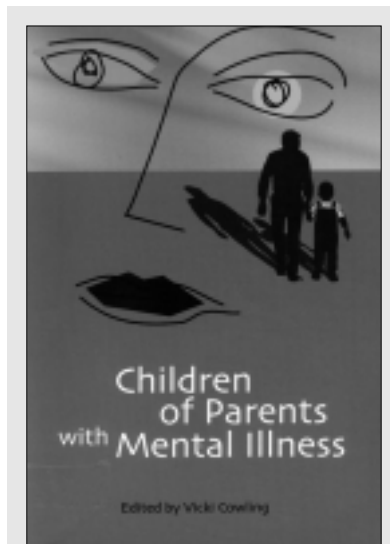
According to the editor of this book, an estimated 27,000 children in Australia have parents who suffer from mental illness. Sometimes referred to as the ‘hidden children’ because of their past neglect by the mental health system, they are now recognised as being potentially at risk for poor intellectual and social outcomes.

These children often have to deal with the symptoms of their parent’s illness, as well as professional interventions which they may not understand. Risk to children may arise from impairment of a parent’s capacity to provide adequate care and supervision, from trauma, or from absence of the parent because of periods of hospitalisation.

The book presents the insights and perspectives of a range of contributors including workers in the mental health system, parents with a mental illness, and children of mentally ill parents.

In Part I, professionals with experience in the area describe the clinical issues for parents and children, and how mental illness impacts on the family. In Chapter Two, Sandra Lancaster describes the types of disorders most likely to affect the children of mentally ill parents, and the effects of these disorders on children at different ages.

Part II presents the results of the research project, *Children of Parents Experiencing Major Mental Illness*, which addressed the questions: What did parents and professionals identify as the needs of the children? What did parents identify as their own support needs, and, if they not seek support, why was this? Also described is the Southern Partnership Project which aimed to facilitate a process of developing collaborative and cooperative links among service providers to ensure that vulnerable children are identified and receive appropriate support, to enable parents to feel that they are entitled to ask for help in caring for their children, and to develop appropriate prevention and



Children of Parents with Mental Illness

Edited by Vicki Cowling, ACER, Camberwell, 1999. Price: \$24.95.

early intervention programs. Chapter Four provides perceptions of the needs of parents and children from a parent’s point of view.

Part III deals with mental health and the law in Victoria. Parental mental illness may contribute to the risk of child abuse or neglect. When the parent receives appropriate treatment, has supportive family and friends, and has access to adequate income and housing, the vulnerability of a child is reduced. However when other risk factors are present, such as substance abuse, family violence, poverty, homelessness or social isolation, the child’s vulnerability is increased. Author Robert Ross warns that: ‘in the presence of multiple risk factors, such as mental illness and family violence, it is important that assessment and planning address each issue separately while considering how they may be interrelated.’

Professionals may be faced with situations where the rights of child and parent are in conflict. When this occurs,

response needs to be tailored to the needs of the mentally ill parent, the family and the children, and inter-agency collaboration is essential for this to happen.

Part IV describes recent programs available for parents and children. Until the Families Together program began in New South Wales, there was no comprehensive community-based home visiting support program in Australia for parents with a long-term mental illness who have a dependent child. While the programs described in this book are generally at an early stage of development, their very existence is heartening and an indication that children of mentally ill parents are losing their ‘invisibility’.

One program provides a home-based outreach support service for women with psychiatric disabilities who have dependent children in their care. The program is described and two consumers provide feedback. The respectful, non-judgemental one-to-one support is valued, as are the group meetings: ‘I’m glad that the MSP exists. It really is a help to me.’

Also described is Parenting Together, a community peer support program for the mentally ill parents. Feedback from the group’s participants is again positive: ‘It has helped me to get well through support, confidence and people who had confidence that I was an okay mum.’

The Anglicare Croydon Family Support program is an outreach, in-home support program for families with children aged 0–13 years. Approximately 40 per cent of the parents have a mental illness. A strength of the program is its capacity to work with families on a long-term basis, and well-established networks facilitate inter-agency communication and cooperation.

Other programs such as the CHAMPS project at the Mental Health Research Institute work directly with the young people affected by the mental illness

of a parent. CHAMPS offers a peer support program in the form of a camp, designed to have a balance of activities between robust physical exercise and quiet times, between structured and unstructured activities. The educative process is not separate but evolves from the camp activities and ensuing discussions. Comments from children and leaders clearly indicate their success.

As Rose, a camp leader, comments: 'The questions and revelations come thick and fast, so that the children compete for "air time" to pose their question or describe a particularly harrowing event. Watching hands being raised in the air, frantically trying to get answers they haven't had before, saying things never before said. Looking around and realising they are not aliens from another planet just because they have a mum who is different. Seeing the seasoned players offer advice, comfort. Watching in awe as the 13-year-old tough boy gently wove beads into the hair of a quiet nine-year-old, all the while chatting about this and that. Makes the exhaustion by Sunday night worthwhile.'

Loosely modelled on the Melbourne CHAMPS program, Kids with Confidence was a pilot peer support program for children located in the Loddon Southern Mallee region. This program consisted of eight weekly sessions after school, of approximately one-and-a-half hours' duration. Each session had a specific theme or topic for discussion, followed by an activity, a brief summary and some time for the children to 'do their own thing'. As yet the program has not been formally evaluated, but the project team found the experience rewarding and the approach promising. Post-program responses from the young participants were positive.

Another program for young people is Paying Attention to Self (PATS) run by the Centre for Adolescent Health in Melbourne. This is a peer support program which aims to provide young people with the opportunity to share their experiences and be supported by other young people in a similar situation. The program runs over a six-week period, with young people coming together for two hours once a week. Between five and eight young people aged 13-17 attend each group, which is co-facilitated by a health professional and a peer leader (who also has a parent with mental health problems). The focus is on developing skills among young people to increase their resilience and deal with their parent's illness.

Children of Parents with Mental Illness, concludes with principles for

NEW PUBLICATION

Looking after children

Research conducted in Australia and overseas has found clear evidence of poor physical and psychological outcomes for some children looked after away from home, raising concerns about the quality of services provided to children and the extent to which the interventions of the child and family welfare system actually meet the needs of those for whom they are intended.

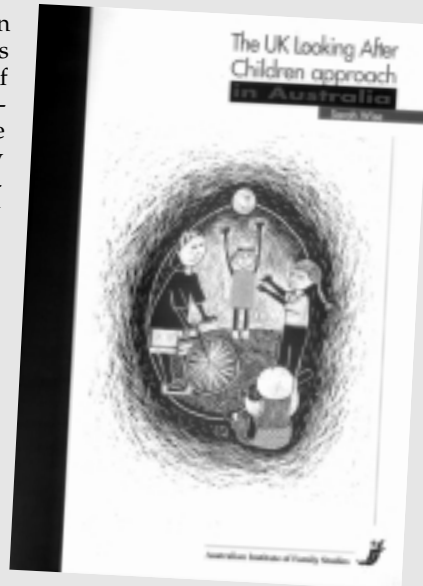
In the United Kingdom, the same concerns led to the development of the 'Looking After Children' approach. Looking After Children is an assessment, case-planning and review system designed to promote positive development outcomes among children and young people who are required to live away from their families of origin.

The Looking After Children approach in Australia, published by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, provides an informative account of the development of Looking After Children in the United Kingdom, and an analysis of its applicability in Australia. It argues that the Looking After Children approach may have measurable benefits for child care services in Australia.

The experience of a Victorian pilot implementation of Looking After Children, including details from an evaluation of the success of the pilot in improving the health and wellbeing of the children and young people in substitute care, is reported to demonstrate the potential of the approach to improve assessment, case-management and review systems, and in this way to secure children's wellbeing.

This book is a useful resource for anyone concerned with the wellbeing of children and young people who, for whatever reason, are required to live away from their families of origin.

The Looking After Children Approach in Australia, by Sarah Wise, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999. 76 pages, \$15.00 plus \$3.00 postage and handling.



collaboration and a model for developing a collaborative approach. A useful list of resources, which cover both professional material as well as books suitable for children and young people, is provided in an appendix.

The book is impressive by virtue of its comprehensive coverage of research,

policy, practice and legislation. A major strength is the insights provided by the representation of consumers and carers, as well as service providers. The book constitutes a valuable resource for anyone concerned about families with mental health problems, and is also immensely readable.