

Parental mental health and child welfare: Review of professional education (summary)

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The review questions

- To what extent do professional education bodies and workforce strategies provide a framework for professional education to address the linked issues of parental mental health and child welfare?
- Do standards and requirements in professional education at the qualifying and post-qualifying levels contribute to the development of knowledge, values and skills needed for work with parents with mental health needs and their children?

Methodology used and why

This review of professional education included the most recent guidance on qualifying and post-qualifying education for the following professional groups:

- adult and child psychiatrists
- clinical psychologists
- social workers (adult mental health, child and adolescent mental health services and children and family services)
- community psychiatric nurses (adult mental health and child and adolescent mental health)
- occupational therapists
- general practitioners
- health visitors and midwives.

Relevant publications on occupational and professional standards and requirements – as well as those addressing workforce skills and development, and the quality assurance of professional education – were also included in the review.

The perspectives of those people and their carers who use these services on professional education's role in addressing parental mental health and child welfare were elicited through consultation with an 'expert' group recruited through the Comensus community engagement initiative at the University of Central Lancashire. A number of key stakeholders in relevant professional education fields were also consulted to provide advice and guidance. Online searches of professional organisations' and government websites were undertaken and the documents identified were searched both electronically and by hand using a set of key terms. These key terms included those covering inter-professional/inter-agency work and communication as well as those focusing more specifically on the linked issues of parental mental health and child welfare. The framework for synthesising the evidence collected was organised into key themes found across all areas of professional education searched.

Results

- This review found limited evidence that professional education is addressing the skills and knowledge that professionals need in order to work on the linked issues of parental mental health and child welfare. While education guidance for most of the professional groups covered by the review recognises the impact of parental mental health problems on children and acknowledges patients' roles as parents, little material was identified which focused in depth or detail on the skills, values or knowledge needed for this area of work. One exception to this was the British Psychological Society's Child Protection Portfolio.
- Reviewing occupational and professional requirements and standards across the seven professional groups revealed a similar picture. While skills and knowledge for inter-agency and inter-professional communication and work feature heavily in professional standards and competencies, skills and knowledge specific to intervention with families where parents have mental health needs were rarely identified. This was particularly evident in the documents searched for nursing and occupational therapy.
- The review found recent recognition in professional education guidance that existing professional specialisms and service divides do not reflect families' needs. However, separation between learning in mental health and learning in child welfare still seemed to characterise much professional education at both the pre-qualifying and post-qualifying levels.
- While guidance from most of the professional groups emphasised the value of inter-professional education for achieving better integrated services, overall progress towards realising this aspiration appeared limited with inter-professional learning initiatives located at the post-qualifying or specialist levels seeming further advanced. People and carers using these services who were consulted emphasised the value of inter-professional learning for developing skills in inter-professional work.
- Those people and carers using these services who were consulted noted the need for more education on mental health for all professional groups and wanted understandings of the impact of parental mental health on children to take account of children's experiences outside the home and of the differential effects of parental problems according to children's age and development. They also commented that professionals needed to recognise that, as well as parents' problems impacting on children, children's needs and problems affected parents and their mental health.
- As was found in the review of policy in this field, educational guidance and materials only very occasionally discriminated between different explanations and models of mental health need.

- Likewise, there was little awareness of gender found in much of the material searched, with few references found to the mental health of fathers.
- While the professional bodies have signalled their willingness to involve people using services and their carers in the design and delivery of professional programmes, the review found little evidence that they are doing this in respect of parental mental health and child welfare. Those people and carers who were consulted warned against tokenism when involving users and carers in professional education.
- Training programmes for approved mental health professionals offer inter-professional learning opportunities to ensure that children's needs are acknowledged and responded to as part of the process of assessment under the *Mental Health Act*.

The strength of the key findings

Many of the key findings of this review are consistent with the findings of the policy review also conducted to inform this guideline. Unsurprisingly, guidance on professional education and workforce development reflects the concerns of central government.

Implications for practice

- This review encourages professional education to move beyond recognising the influence of parental mental health needs on children's welfare and to seek to develop the skills, knowledge and values for work with families where parents have mental health needs. Some innovative models for this type of learning are available and are identified in the review.
- Specialist routes in professional education can have the effect of separating learning about mental health from learning about children. Attention should be paid to ensuring that opportunities for learning on parental mental health and child welfare are built into such programmes.
- Increasing opportunities for inter-professional learning on professional education programmes at qualifying levels as well as at post-qualifying levels could contribute to building practitioners' skills in inter-professional work.
- Professional education curricula need to acknowledge that models of mental health differ and that mental health is a contested concept informed by different types of knowledge and understood differently by different professional groups.

- Professional education on parental mental health needs should take account of gender, distinguish between mothers' and fathers' parenting and address the role of fathers.
- The involvement of people and carers who use services in the design, planning and delivery of professional education addressing parental mental health needs and children's welfare is recommended and such involvement needs to be meaningful, not tokenistic.
- It is recommended that training on the impact of parental mental health needs on children and skills in working with children is incorporated into training programmes for AHMPs.

Strengths and limitations of the review

This review covered a very substantial range of material on professional education across a number of different professions. However, it was not possible within the remit of this review to address locally delivered practitioner training such as that offered by Local Safeguarding Children's Boards. While professional education programmes have to meet professional bodies' requirements and national occupational standards, the details of curricula are determined by programme providers and there is therefore considerable variation in the content of programmes which this review has not been able to capture.

Recommendations for increasing the evidence base

Surveys of professional education programmes or of students on those programmes could provide further evidence concerning the extent to which professional education programmes are developing practitioners' skills, values and knowledge for work with parents with mental health needs and their children.