Parenting and Family Support for Families 'at risk' - Implications from Child Abuse Reports

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Parenting and family support for families 'at risk' – implications from child abuse reports

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Abstract

The importance of family experiences on children's development and wellbeing has been widely documented. Yet, recent reports generated by inquiries into child abuse and neglect in the Irish context raise disturbing questions with regard to how the severe maltreatment of children can occur within the family context. It is imperative that the messages generated from these inquiries can effectively inform policy and practice in terms of protecting children from harm and providing support to families at-risk. The present paper draws together key issues for parenting and family support for families 'at risk' based on the Roscommon and Monageer inquiries with a view to gaining insight into key issues which need to be addressed in terms of protecting children from harm and providing support for parents experiencing adversity. A number of implications arising from these reports are outlined and discussed. Specifically, the need to amplify the focus on support for parenting in the context of poverty and substance abuse is highlighted with a particular emphasis on developing sensitive screening and assessment for parents who may be difficult to engage with due to chronic mental health issues. The importance of accessing the voice of children within the provision of family support is also underlined in these findings. A key recommendation from these reports is that the needs, wishes and feelings of each child must be considered as well as the totality of the family situation. Moreover, the need for staff in child welfare and protection services to have access to ongoing training and professional development to meet the complex and changing needs of the children and families they are working with is also highlighted. Specifically, ongoing training for frontline staff in understanding the effects of drug and alcohol dependency, and, in particular, the effects on parenting and parent-child relationships is underscored in findings from these reports.

Introduction

The profound influence of family interactions and, in particular, parent-child relationships on children's development and wellbeing cannot be over-emphasised. However, recent reports on inquiries into child abuse and neglect in family contexts raise disturbing questions with regard to how the abuse and severe neglect of children can be perpetrated within particular family contexts (Roscommon Child Care Case Report, 2010; Monageer Inquiry Report, 2008). Fortunately, such contexts are relatively rare and generally associated with extreme family dysfunction and parental psychological disorder. Reports generated from these inquiries provide an opportunity to reflect on key issues which need to be addressed in terms of protecting children from harm and providing support to families at-risk. As cited in a recent report by Amnesty

International (Holohan, 2011, p. 8) "The past only becomes history once we have addressed it, learnt from it and made the changes necessary to ensure that we do not repeat mistakes and wrongdoing." The present paper aims to draw together some of the key messages for parenting and family support which arise from these reports with a view to gaining greater knowledge and insight into developing effective and comprehensive responses to support and enhance parenting in contexts of adversity.

Current national policy on children emphasises the role of the family in the lives of children and holds that family, extended family and communities must be included in services for children to ensure their effectiveness as outlined in, for example, *The Agenda for Children's Services* (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2007). Devaney (2011) emphasises that Family Support is one way in which children's wellbeing can be protected and promoted and families assisted in this role. Pinkerton, Dolan & Percy (2004) (as cited in Devaney, 2011, p. 17), define family support as follows: "both a style of work and a set of activities which reinforce positive informal social networks through integrated programmes. These programmes combine statutory, voluntary and community and private services and are generally provided to families in their own homes and communities. The primary focus is on early intervention aiming to promote and protect the health, well-being and rights of all children, young people and their families, paying particular attention to those who are vulnerable or at risk". Yet, as evidenced by Dolan (2010), the report of inquiry into the Roscommon childcare case highlights the problems and significant shortcomings of the Irish childcare system in failing to keep children safe from harm from their parents. Implications for family support services arising from these recent inquiries raise well-worn arguments for the need to increase the circle of child protection through family support services (Holohan, 2011). Buckley (2003) summarises a number of ongoing concerns about disparities of thresholds at which children and families are deemed eligible for services, tensions between the levels of resources invested in family support services as opposed to child protection investigation, and lack of meaningful engagement with children themselves as opposed to parents and carers. Specifically, Buckley highlights the potential danger of filtering out families experiencing considerable difficulties when actual signs of abuse exist. These arguments amplify the importance of promoting and supporting collaborative interagency work in such a way that child protection and family support practitioners can work more effectively together to ensure the wellbeing and protection of children.

Parenting and child maltreatment

Parents maltreat their children for many reasons and combinations of reasons (Barth, 2009). According to Johnson, Stone, Lou, Ling, Classen & Austin (2008) models of maltreatment differ in terms of the emphasis placed on specific aspects of the ecology and the mechanisms by which particular characteristics and conditions combine to raise the likelihood of maltreatment. They emphasise that there is broad consensus that child maltreatment results from a complex interplay between child, caregiver and family characteristics, as well as particular socio-contextual factors (Azar, Povilaitis, Lauretti, & Pouquette, 1998; Garbarino & Eekenrode, 1997). The contexts in which parenting occurs is clearly a highly significant factor to consider when attempting to support children and families at risk. A key message from the reports which were generated in response to the Roscommon and Monageer inquiries is the need to prioritise and

amplify the focus on parenting within contexts of poverty and deprivation. The potential for such contexts to impact on family outcomes is borne out in these recent reports on child abuse in the Irish context. Specifically, the family at the centre of the Roscommon report lived in circumstances of deprivation and extreme poverty. As demonstrated by the case at the centre of the Monageer inquiry, individual family contexts in which child abuse and neglect are embedded can be so extreme that it is almost impossible to identify factors or characteristics which contribute to our understanding of these behaviours. Notwithstanding this, the Monageer report outlines how neither Aidan Dunne nor his wife Ciara had ever been employed, how both of them had lived on social welfare for years and how, at the time of their deaths, they had moved home seven times. While it is worth noting that the majority of families who experience poverty do not abuse their children, poverty - particularly when it is allied to additional risk factors such as alcohol or drug abuse, depression and social isolation - clearly increases substantially the likelihood of maltreatment. As highlighted by Martina Deasy in a recent report commissioned by Amnesty International Ireland (Holohan, 2011, p. 329) "The gross failure of the Irish State to properly respond to the needs of families, and most especially children, living in poverty has clearly been established in the Ryan report. There remains, however, a need to consider how historic attitudes to those living in poverty might still be evident within today's services and systems."

Clearly, child maltreatment and abuse cannot be understood with reference to any single factor or underlying cause. Similarly, no single family profile can capture the range of family contexts in which abuse and maltreatment occur (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott & Kennedy, 2003). In a recent review of outcome data generated from parenting programmes with families deemed to be at risk of child maltreatment and/or abusive and/or neglectful behaviour, Johnson et al. (2008) emphasise that aspects of the caregiving environment, such as parenting beliefs, behaviours, and the quality of parent-child interactions and relationships, consistently emerge as key etiological factors in child maltreatment and are considered to be critical levers for intervention (Azar, Nix & Makin-Byrd, 2005; Azar, Povilaitis, Lauretti & Pouquette, 1998). Johnson et al. (2008) go on to emphasise that "while child maltreatment has multiple determinants at multiple ecological levels, the caregiving environment constitutes an important pathway between caregivers' personal and social characteristics and child outcomes" (p. 196). In the case of the families at the centre of the Roscommon and Monageer inquiries, it is clear that these contexts were so complex that they demanded a multi-faceted approach. However, there is also much evidence to suggest that helping parents to be more effective with their children can help address mental health needs and help improve the chances of substance abuse recovery (DeGarmo, Patterson & Forgatch, 2004). Improved parenting is, therefore, potentially the most important goal of child abuse prevention. This is borne out, to some extent, by a recent report from the Growing Up in Ireland national longitudinal study which reinforces the value of supporting families and working with parents and their children to provide optimal relationship experiences. Nixon (2012) points out that policies that increase access to counselling or therapy, or support for parents to strengthen relationships, either with their partners or with their children should be a key concern of policymakers and practitioners who work with children and families, as such measures are likely to benefit children's wellbeing.

As outlined above, child maltreatment occurs among parents who struggle with multiple and substantial stressors. Parenting in the context of parental substance abuse and/or mental health issues generates specific risk factors to the children within these families and has been found to contribute to a substantial proportion of child maltreatment reported to the child welfare services (Barth, 2009). In the case of the family at the centre of the Roscommon inquiry, chronic substance abuse and its impact on parenting was clearly evident. The report states that both parents had a considerable dependence on alcohol which clearly affected their parenting capacity. Specifically, the report documents how the children were frequently left alone with the responsibility for minding and feeding younger children typically falling to the older children. As evidenced in the Roscommon inquiry, parents who are dependent upon alcohol or drugs may place a higher priority on their substance use than on caring for their children, which can lead them to neglect their children's basic needs. What is clear from the findings of these inquiries is the need to develop sensitive screening for alcoholism and other substance addictions when assessing parents in order to address the parenting problems arising from such abuse and neglect (Miller, Smyth, and Mudar, 1999; Harris, 2008). However, the mechanism through which substance abuse is responsible for child maltreatment most likely involves a complex profile of parental dysfunction. In developing parenting support, it is important to consider this complexity. Similarly, mental health problems often co-occur with substance abuse and exposure to traumatic events like domestic violence (Barth, 2009; Harris, 2008). Devaney (2011) points to the difficulties in addressing such issues. Specifically, in situations where parents have an intellectual disability or a mental health issue, the challenges in achieving meaningful partnership with parents are amplified and strategies to address these challenges urgently need to be considered.

A focus on specific risk factors in isolation may not be useful and it is, therefore, important to attempt to gain insight into the way in which these factors operate to impact on parenting skills and, thereby, to unpack the mechanisms through which they may result in behaviours of parental abuse and neglect. A large body of research suggests that social contextual conditions exert their influence on maltreatment through their effects on parent distress and parenting practices (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov, 1994; McLoyd, 1998, Johnson et al., 2008). Five core domains of parenting difficulty have been identified in the literature based on empirical and theoretical work. Specifically these include social cognitive processing, impulse control, parenting skills, social skills and stress management (Azar et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2008). It is believed that these parenting difficulties arise across contexts of physical abuse, emotional abuse and, to a less extent, sexual abuse. Social cognitive processing refers to a parent's ability to accurately read and respond to a child's needs and signals. Caregivers at risk for maltreatment have been identified as frequently having hostile attribution biases (Johnson et al., 2008). In other words, these parents tend to attribute hostile or negative intent to their children's behaviour. Moreover, these parents typically hold inappropriate expectations that children, as opposed to parents, will provide care and nurturance to family members.

Given the central role of parental stress in child abuse behaviours, identifying specific predictors of stress for abusive parents warrants particular attention. Support for the notion that determinants of parenting stress might vary across different groups of

parents has been highlighted in the literature (McPherson Lewis, Lynn, Haskett & Behrend, 2009). For example, Mash and Johnston (1990) drew attention to the importance of parental attribution when investigating the role that stress plays in child abuse. The authors found that stress for parents of hyperactive children was generated primarily through child characteristics while stress for abusive parents arose from parental characteristics such as perceptions of children and attributions for children's misbehaviour. Further evidence of the role parental attribution may play in mediating child abuse is the finding that physically abusive parents have been found to rate the aggressive behaviour of their children far more negatively than do independent raters (Barth, 2009). Similarly, McPherson et al. (2009) found that intolerance predicted parenting stress only for abusive parents. Thus, abusive parents were not only more intolerant of child misbehaviour but their experience of stress in the parenting role was affected by that intolerance. The authors indicate that with regard to protecting against parenting stress, it is important to provide an additional intervention component for abusive parents to focus on the *impact* of children's misbehaviour on parents' stress levels. Such a component would focus on developing strategies to modify parents' interpretations and perceptions of their children's misbehaviour. Intervention practices for physically abusive parents that include identifying and directly challenging cognitive distortions and negative scripts related to children's problematic behaviours have been found to be effective (Kolko and Swenson, 2002).

Provision of parenting and family support

Reports into the neglect and abuse of the children in the Roscommon and Monageer cases draw attention to a number of serious shortcomings in the provision of parenting and family support and these are outlined and discussed below.

Parenting assessment

A key feature of developing and tailoring parenting and family support to the needs of the diverse, individual family contexts which it serves, is the development of assessments which can go beyond what Woodcock (2003) has termed a 'surface-static model' of parenting – a model which focuses upon the surface of parental behaviour. In contrast to such a model, Woodcock (2003) advocates the need to conceptualise parenting as a dynamic system capable of change. Farnfield (2008) further points out that too many cases seem hopelessly stuck, with social workers relying on information from other agencies rather than meaningful interactions with parents and children themselves. Focusing upon the 'surface of parental behaviour' was clearly a significant shortfall in family support services to the children and families at the centre of the Roscommon and Monageer inquiries. In the Roscommon report, it is stated that "Workers were not sufficiently alert to indications of ongoing neglect. Such indicators included the squalor in which the children almost constantly lived, the fact that they were left alone or in the care of an under-aged sibling, made to carry home shopping bags containing alcohol, left without adequate clothing and bedding; and the hunger which they regularly experienced" (p. 71). The report goes on to make reference to findings from a study undertaken in one Irish health board area (Horwath & Bishop, 2001), which indicated that although neglect accounted for more than half of cases reported, there appeared to be a general lack of understanding of the precise meaning of 'neglect'. The Roscommon case Inquiry Team noted that a parenting assessment based on gathering information, interviewing the parents and observing the home conditions

could have occurred at a much earlier point and may have impacted significantly on plans for these six children.

Identifying outcomes

The need to provide sustained planned and targeted family support that is focused on identified outcomes in order to ensure a safe family for children is highlighted in findings from the Roscommon and Monageer inquiries. The Report on the Roscommon Childcare Case stated that following repeated case conferences there was no evidence to suggest any additional monitoring or protective intervention, such as increased home visiting or individual work with the children. The need to develop an outcome-focused approach to family support in the Irish context has recently been highlighted (Canavan, 2010). A central component of the assessment of parenting competence is the ability to establish whether there is a realistic opportunity to produce substantial change in a particular family setting (Farnfield, 2008). Accurate measurement of parenting competence, its impact on child behaviour and wellbeing, and its capacity to change is necessary in order to be able to confidently establish whether more positive outcomes are both possible and being achieved over time. In contrast to this, the inquiry team in the Roscommon case did not find any evidence that any area of the family's parenting showed a positive consistent change over the eight year period from 1996 to 2004. Consistent with these findings, the possibilities and potential of outcome-focused family support work and the need to develop an evidence-base for practice was highlighted in recent research exploring the perspectives of family support practitioners (Devaney, 2011). Specifically, the view that a focus on outcomes would facilitate the "delivery of something tangible for children and families" (p. 203) was put forward while, at the same time, acknowledging the challenges of measuring the impact of services. A further benefit of such an approach highlighted by practitioners was that a focus on outcomes would warrant specific training for staff to ensure that the focus of interventions was clearly understood and that staff were trained and upskilled in order to facilitate the achievement of intervention goals.

Inclusive models of parenting support

The Roscommon and Monageer reports clearly draw attention to the silence of key actors in family contexts - voices and perspectives which must be accessed and included in any work to support parenting in neglectful or abusive contexts. In an evaluation of the Springboard Family Support Project, McKeown (2001) draws attention to the need to ensure that services to *families* should not be treated as synonymous with services to *households* and should give careful consideration to all elements of the family system and offer supports in a holistic and inclusive manner. Yet, a clear finding across the various enquiries into child abuse and neglect was the lack of emphasis on the importance of hearing the voice of the children themselves in these family settings where the abuse was occurring. Specifically, the reports details how the focus was exclusively on working with parents and that, in the case of the children in the Roscommon case, until the children themselves were taken into care, there was little record or detail of them as individuals on file. A key recommendation from these reports is that the needs, wishes and feelings of each child must be considered and reported on as well as the totality of the family situation. Further support for this comes from Dolan (2010, p. 16) when he says: "We should not be waiting for interventions with families before we listen to the views of children. This has to be guaranteed.

Although there are cases where children or young people will not declare any instance of harm, they still must always be offered the opportunity to be heard." Furthermore, The Agenda for Children's Services (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2007) highlights a whole child/whole system approach to meeting the needs of children and repeatedly emphasises the need to ensure inclusion of the voice and expertise of the children and families who utilise them. Despite these findings, the ability for social workers to work directly with children continues to be impeded due to constraints on time and available resources.

The importance of accessing the voices and views of extended family members and beyond is clearly highlighted in the Roscommon and Monageer reports. In the course of the Monageer Inquiry, the profile of the Dunne family emerged as one of isolation, particularly from wider family and friends. Moreover, the children were rarely seen playing with any other children in their neighbourhood. Similarly, the Roscommon Report draws attention to the consistent but vain attempts by relatives and neighbours to highlight the plight of the children at the centre of this case. The concerns expressed by neighbours and family members were consistent with each other and over time. Specific recommendations arising from this include that third parties who express concerns should be interviewed as part of the assessment of the family and that that those reporting concerns are interviewed wherever possible and their concerns investigated fully. Such a finding highlights the need for an emphasis on family as inclusive of members beyond the immediate nuclear family unit. Dolan (2010) draws attention to more intensive community-based family-support provision which would enable more therapeutic interventions with and for children and parents, and thereby facilitate more effective support for very difficult family contexts. Devaney (2011) provides further support for this idea when she draws attention to the need to broaden the concept of family to provide a wider focus on extended families and communities. The author goes on to state that families and family life do not exist in a vacuum, with extended family, neighbours, and communities playing an interconnected influential role in family functioning. As summed up by one of the professionals working with families: "I emphasise that is not just simply to see children in terms of the relationship with their parents, but brothers and sisters, friends, relatives, neighbours, everybody who is significant in their network could potentially play a role in their lives" (p. 191).

Ongoing training and professional development

Consistent with previous literature (Buckley, 2000; Dolan, 2006) recent reports on childcare inquiries strongly emphasise the need for staff in child welfare and protection services to have access to ongoing training and professional development in order to be able to update their knowledge and skills to meet the complex and changing needs of the children and families with whom they are working. With specific reference to understanding and supporting parents where mental health issues and substance abuse are present, the Roscommon Report highlights that additional training could have supported the work of the frontline staff. For example, training on attachment theory, drug and alcohol dependency (in particular its effects on parenting) and working directly with children (p. 93). Moreover, the level of skills and expertise which is required to effectively identify child abuse in families where there is a significant element of manipulation and deceit has been emphasised in both the Roscommon and Monageer reports. Consistent with this, Devaney (2011) highlights concerns about the

need for further training in building the particular skills and expertise needed to be able to discriminate between families where there is a common will and effort to improve the wellbeing of children, and those families where a positive emotional connection between members is seriously lacking. Implications for professional training and service delivery with particular reference to building these skills need to be addressed.

Ongoing training in principles of parenting and parent-child interactions for frontline staff working to support parenting in families has been highlighted through a focus on the Roscommon and Monageer reports. Tarabulsy et al. (2008), in summarising reviews of work with different high-risk populations, have underlined that the most effective prevention initiatives with high-risk families have been those that bring close attention to interactive processes. The authors point out that strategies which focus on the proximal processes of parent-child interaction, those processes involved in the development of the attachment relationship, have shown greater short and medium-term impact on infant and child development when compared with strategies which focus on improving parental well-being, support, and community integration, although these latter strategies are acknowledged as critical aspects of the family developmental ecology (Olds, Sadler & Kitzman, 2007; Spieker, Nelson, DeKlyen, & Staerkel, 2005). In keeping with this view, Devaney (2011, p. 192) draws attention to "a deficit in many of the current education and training programmes focused on children and families in fundamental areas, such as child development, attachment theory, and the dynamics of family relationships." Specifically, the author emphasises a need for knowledge and specific training in the area of attachment and to ensure that a focus on attachment and relationships is an integral aspect of a Family Support approach. According to Tarabulsy et al. (2008), in order to positively influence the quality of parental care and parent-child interactions at the heart of maltreatment, it is necessary to develop a component of intervention programmes that directly targets these specific behavioural dimensions. As cited by the authors "In a child protection perspective, the purpose of this approach is the development of sensitive parental behaviours with the overarching objective of improving the daily interactions that take place between parents and children, of which abuse and neglect are extreme markers. Reaching this basic goal will, in the long term, decrease the human, social, and economic costs associated with maltreatment" (p. 330).

Conclusion

It is imperative that findings generated from past inquiries into child abuse and neglect in the Irish context clearly and effectively inform present and future family support policy and practice. Key messages for parenting and family support services which have emerged from the Roscommon and Monageer reports include the need to further amplify a focus on the particular stressors which impact on parenting in adverse circumstances. Parenting assessments need to include sensitive screening for alcoholism and other substance addictions in order to prevent and/or address the parenting problems which are typically associated with such addictions and other mental health issues. A greater focus on family interactions and dynamics, specifically parent–child interactions, is also warranted based on the findings from these reports. Moreover, parenting and family support clearly needs to prioritise a focus on children themselves within their family contexts in order to better understand their feelings, wishes and precise needs. Similarly, the value of making contact with extended family members

and neighbours within the community in the provision of parenting and family support is reinforced through findings from these inquiries. Finally, a greater focus on outcomes in terms of parenting quality and child wellbeing is required. Related to this, the need to provide ongoing training in principles of parenting and parent-child interactions for staff working to support parenting in families is emphasised. With reference to the Roscommon case it has been argued that greater emphasis on monitoring safety and intensive family support coupled with therapeutic services, could have provided more effective protection for the children in this family. As highlighted by Dolan (2010), there are many new ways of working with families and others in the community to support parenting and to help protect vulnerable children. Models of support for children and families need to be further developed and research conducted which can help to bring together an evidence base of what works in family support.

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