

Children of parents with a mental illness and children in out-of-home care

Children of parents with a mental illness

Not all parents who have a mental illness experience difficulties in their parenting role. However, for some, their mental health problems can affect their interactions with their child (e.g., they may be less affectionate and responsive and may heighten the risk to their family of experiencing relationship difficulties, discontinuity of care, poor general parenting skills, social isolation and poverty).

Children of parents affected by mental health problems are at an increased risk of developing psychosocial and mental health problems themselves. In particular, the mental illness of a parent can impact upon the: formation of a healthy attachment between an infant and parent; development of emotional and behavioural problems in toddlers; ability to make a successful transition to school (as a result of separation anxiety and poor school readiness); and risk of developing conduct disorder, depression and anxiety in adolescence. Children of parents with mental health problems may also incur additional responsibilities, such as caring for their parent or siblings.

Data on the prevalence of children of parents with mental health problems is currently not available for Australia. However, it is estimated that:

- 29 per cent to 35 per cent of female clients of mental health services have dependent children under the age of 18 years;
- 25 per cent to 50 per cent of children and young people who have parents affected by mental health problems will experience a psychological disorder during their childhood compared to 10 per cent to 20 per cent in the general population; and
- These children have a 10 per cent to 14 per cent chance of being diagnosed with a psychotic illness at some point in their lives compared with 1 per cent to 2 per cent for the general population.

Children in out of home care

Children in out-of-home care are themselves at particularly high risk of poor long-term outcomes such as mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction and welfare dependency.

While there are no exact figures on the number of children affected by this, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) estimates that there are currently 20,500 children in formal foster care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2004), including 8,600 children in the care of relatives, predominantly grandparents. This does not account for all children living away from their parents. In 2003 there were 22,500 grandparent headed families caring for 31,000 children aged 0-17 years, most of whom were outside the state and territory formal care and protection systems.

The majority of children coming into the primary care of their grandparents or other relatives currently do so because of substance abuse, death or mental illness of their parents. Living with grandparents and other relatives is likely to provide a more stable arrangement than foster care for children and is likely to result in a closer attachment to the carer. However, grandparent carers, in particular those outside the statutory systems, have identified difficulties relating to inconsistencies in the availability of financial and other support services.