



Perspectives on children's experiences in families with parental substance misuse and child protection interventions



Louise O'Connor^{a,*}, Donald Forrester^b, Sally Holland^c, Annie Williams^c

^a Department of Social Work, Royal Holloway, University of London, United Kingdom

^b Tilda Goldberg Centre, University of Bedfordshire, United Kingdom

^c School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 July 2013

Received in revised form 7 January 2014

Accepted 16 January 2014

Available online 23 January 2014

Keywords:

Parental substance misuse

Children

Generation

Resilience

Narratives

ABSTRACT

This paper presents data from a Welsh mixed methods study of a service for families whose children were at risk of entering out-of-home-care due to parental substance misuse (out-of-home care is referred to as Local Authority Care in the UK). Three sources of data are drawn on to focus on the experiences of children and young people: interviews with a small number of young people, interviews with parents where they discussed their children's experiences and measures of child and family functioning. The inclusion of qualitative data from two generations of families illustrates the complex interwoven nature of children's and parents' experiences. Analysis suggests that key messages for practitioners are the need to engage with substance using families in ways that avoid unhelpful binaries focusing on either the child's or the adult's needs. Children and young people may benefit from brief interventions during a period of crisis and longer term interventions which address cumulative effects and attachment complexities and promote sources of resilience.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to provide perspectives on the experiences of children and young people living in families with parental substance misuse, drawing on the views of a small number of young people who provide first person retrospective accounts of living with parental drug and alcohol use. This data is combined with material from interviews with parents at which some children contributed and standardised outcome measures. The data is drawn from a mixed methods study of an intervention service in Wales for families whose children were at risk of entering local authority care due to parental substance misuse. All families had been referred to child protection services. The term substance misuse is used to refer to the misuse of alcohol, illicit or prescription drugs or any combination of these.

The original study of 27 families and 84 children investigated the impact of a specific short term intervention service that had received an earlier evaluation (Forrester, Copello, Waissbein & Pokhrel, 2008). All families were referred due to child welfare concerns reaching statutory child protection¹ thresholds and two-thirds were at risk of children entering out-of home care. The intervention provided is an intensive family preservation service, based on an adapted model of the American "homebuilders" intervention (Hamer, 2005; Kirk & Griffith, 2004).

Practitioners from a range of backgrounds provide intensive crisis intervention services in the family home over a brief (4–6 weeks) period, including 24-hour availability. Techniques such as motivational interviewing and solution focused brief therapy are used to constructively engage with the family and to draw up safety plans and goals. Practitioner skills are central to the intervention and identified as significant by participants (Holland, Forrester, Williams & Copello, 2013a). This article represents the fourth paper to report findings from the study. We have reported elsewhere ethical issues arising from the study (Holland, Williams & Forrester, 2013b), overall outcomes for families who received the services and a non-intervention group (Forrester, Holland, Williams & Copello, 2014) and parents' qualitative accounts of the negative impact of substance misuse on family life, relationships and parenting (Holland et al., 2013a). This paper focuses on reporting findings which provide insights into children's experiences of growing up with substance misusing parents subject to statutory child protection interventions.

By drawing on qualitative accounts from parents and young people this paper argues for a more informed consideration of the needs of both children and adults in families affected by substance misuse and the avoidance of unhelpful binaries which can result in a predominant focus on the needs of children for protection or the adults' needs in relation to substance misuse, with the potential to lose sight of the complex interwoven nature of their needs which are likely to have ongoing repercussions post-intervention. Similarly, whilst substance misuse may be a key presenting factor, coexisting factors such as violence, neglect, disrupted attachments and loss may require longer term resilience-promoting interventions with young people, which

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0) 1784 414965.

E-mail address: louise.oconnor@rhul.ac.uk (L. O'Connor).

¹ The term child protection is used to ensure clarity for international readers. Current terminology in the UK uses the term safeguarding to refer to child protection thresholds and intervention.

take account of these complexities and the impact of child protection interventions.

2. Background and context

The impact of parental substance misuse on children is recognised as complex and ambiguous. Impact varies dependent on the presence or absence of key protective factors, the nature and frequency of substance misuse, the child's age and stage of development (Bancroft, Wilson, Cunningham-Burley, Backett-Milburn, & Masters, 2004) and environmental factors such as socio-economic deprivation and unemployment (Velleman & Templeton, 2007).

Neglect, increased risk of emotional abuse, exposure to violence and the complex emotional impacts of stigma, secrecy, anxiety and role reversal have been identified as risk factors for children. Early socialisation into substance misuse or crime and potential difficulties in transition from childhood to adolescence are identified risks. The coexistence of parental substance misuse and domestic violence increases the potential risk for child welfare as do cumulative parent-related factors such as both parents being users, the nature of substance use and high levels of family disharmony (Tunnard, 2002; Velleman & Templeton, 2007).

However, resilience literature suggests that many children living with parental substance misuse can become well-functioning adults without developing serious psychological or behavioural difficulties. Factors promoting resilience include the presence of a non-using adult, supportive extended family and access to supportive environments such as school and community activities (Velleman & Templeton, 2007).

Unpicking the impact of parental substance misuse on children and identifying the most effective methods of intervention continue to be a complex challenge. Rhodes, Bernays, and Houmoller (2010: 1493) identified strategies that substance using parents utilise in efforts to maintain 'normalcy' but which 'may not serve parents and children equally well'. Working with the interplay of secrecy, denial and the complexities of child and adult relationships and needs presents a challenge to practitioners. Young people can become 'invisible' when there is a predominant focus on the needs of vulnerable parents (Turney, Platt, Selwyn, & Farmer, 2011). Children can have innate loyalties to their parents and ambivalence about sharing information whilst 'desperately wanting someone to know' (Kroll, 2004: 137), secrecy and silence being linked to maintaining the fiction of a 'normal' home and self-preservation (Barnard & Barlow, 2003).

Studies which access children directly are relatively rare due to the sensitivities and ethics involved (McKeganey, 2011; Templeton, Velleman, Hardy, & Boon, 2009). The complex and shifting dynamics within substance misuse families can lead to children and young people making sense of reality in various ways as a means of coping and adapting to the particular circumstances they are in. This may result in 'assumed or assigned roles' (Kroll & Taylor, 2003: 173) which are likely to influence their interpretation of events, expectations of adults and the narratives they present to both themselves and others.

In this study, the sample is small and does not claim to be representative. Narratives are understood in the context of parental substance misuse but cannot be divorced from wider structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, social marginalisation or the current policy and intervention discourse in the UK (see Featherstone, Morris, & White, 2013). Nonetheless, the authors believe that these findings provide rich qualitative insights into the social and emotional experiences of a marginalised and under-researched group, drawing on two generations' accounts of children's experiences of living with parental substance misuse.

3. Method

This paper draws on a complex 'bricolage' of data from this mixed-methods study which together help build a picture of children's experiences in 27 families affected by parental substance misuse and child

protection concerns. Participants came from an original sample of 75 families who had been referred over an eight-year period to a crisis intervention service at a point when children were at risk of being placed on a child protection register² or at risk of removal from their families to out-of-home care due to child protection concerns. A significant number of families had moved away from the area and researchers were not able to contact them. Of the remaining families, eight did not wish to participate in the study, 26 families participated in interviews and a 27th family provided a lengthy written contribution from the mother. The study took place on average 5.6 years following the original referral.

Data relating to children's experiences are drawn from five in-depth qualitative interviews with young people, 26 interviews with parents where they discussed their children's experiences and in eight of which young people were present and actively contributed, measures of children's emotional and behavioural well-being (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ), Goodman, 2001), parental substance use (Marsden et al., 1998), family functioning (Moos & Moos, 1986), parental well-being (Goldberg, 1978) and data on whether children remained at home or moved to friends and family or foster care. Interviews with parents explored their experience prior to referral for substance misuse intervention, their experience of other services in the community and their views of the intensive family preservation service in terms of whether it had made a difference and in what way. Young people present during parental interviews at times corroborated and contradicted their parents' perspective and some contributed detailed personal views. Interviews with young people explored their memory of life at the time of referral for intervention, their awareness of or use of other services, perceptions of change, their lives at the time of interview in terms of family, school, community, and relationships and their physical and emotional health. Interviews concluded with exploration of their hopes and expectations. The majority of participants gave permission for interviews to be recorded; a number of the young people did not give consent to audio recordings.

Qualitative interviews were transcribed, read and re-read by members of the research group. Transcripts were uploaded to NVivo and coded using a thematic framework of codes and sub-codes. In addition interviews with young people and parental interviews where young people were present were further thematically analysed to identify additional codes or patterns related to the child/children's retrospective perceptions and experiences of life within their families.

The study received ethical approval from the University of Bedfordshire and the research design included careful consideration of consent, accessible written and verbal information for participants and opportunities to withdraw from the study at various points. A full discussion of the ethical conduct of the study may be found in Holland et al. 2013b.

All the families in the study were referred to a specific intensive intervention project but not all received this service if there were no spaces available at the point of referral. The 'no spaces' group received usual social and health services, some accessing alternative substance misuse services in the community. Although there were some differences in outcomes for the two groups, with more positive results for the intensive intervention group (see Forrester et al., 2014), the general experiences of living with parental substance misuse were largely similar across the two groups. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper there is no differentiation between the groups.

Retrospective narratives of young people and parents relate to their experiences over the preceding eight to ten years. The young people interviewed were aged between 14 and 18 at the time of interview. They were all members of sibling groups although their individual

² The terms 'Child Protection Register' or 'subject to Child Protection Plan' are used in the UK when a Child Protection Conference decides that children are likely to suffer significant harm without multiagency child protection interventions (Working Together to Safeguard Children (DfE), 2013; Children Act, 1989).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/346195>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/346195>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)