

Practitioner Research Summary

Parents who misuse substances' views of support

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Parents who misuse substances: views of support

The overall aim of this study was to find out if substance misusing parents actively changed their lifestyle on learning they were going to have a child or when they had their child/children. The research explored issues including what makes it difficult for substance misusing parents to access support, the most appropriate time for support to begin, and whether parents are able to prioritise their children's needs.

Research design and methods

This research was undertaken using qualitative, semi-structured interviews with nine families who were contacted via CHILDREN 1ST and other agencies working with families affected by substance misuse in the East Lothian area. Both the contacting agencies and the parents were given information about the purpose of the research, and interviews were undertaken in a venue chosen by the participants.

Findings – changes in substance misuse

- Overall, approximately 90% of the mothers in this study either sought to reduce their substance misuse, stabilized their methadone or come off their drug of choice whilst pregnant. For some of the mothers, this was with their youngest child. This shows that the mothers actively sought to change their lifestyle on learning they were going to have a child.
- The very small number of fathers who took part in this study did not change their substance misuse whilst their partner was pregnant. The mothers said that they would have liked more support from their partner.
- Once their child(ren) were born it appears that: approximately 60% of the mothers were stabilised on methadone; approximately 20% of the mothers slightly increased their substance misuse; about 10% who had abstained whilst pregnant started to use again; and approximately 10% continued to use on the same basis.

Findings – accessing support

- It appears that pregnancy was a motivator for mothers to seek direct support to change their lifestyle. For around 80% of the families, where children had been accommodated or were living with relatives,

pregnancy was a motivator as they did not want to risk 'losing' their unborn baby or child. When looking at the most appropriate time to begin support, 80% of the parents said that they had not had enough support in pregnancy, or had not known what was available to them. 20% of mothers said that they would have liked someone to talk to.

- All the parents in this study said that they found direct support beneficial to help them understand their child's development, ease their isolation, give them confidence and to show those concerned that they could keep their children safe. Several parents said that they were able to access other supports through a service once they had first engaged with that service.
- Parents' barriers to accessing support were based on their past experience of social work intervention, the fear of their children being removed and the likelihood of a high number of people being involved in their lives, as well as not being aware of what support was available to them. Several acknowledged that this lack of support has caused a negative situation for their child which had impacted on their development and behaviour and affected their whole life. CHILDREN 1ST and other service providers need to look at how parents can access services and see the services as relevant to them, and consider how we can work with parents much earlier to prevent this lack of support.
- Parents have not always been able to prioritise their children's needs over their own. From this research, the parents' vulnerability is obvious and they are not having their own needs met. This raises the question of how can a parent put their children's needs first if they have not had their own needs adequately met.
- Support needs to be more accessible, responsive to parents' views, and provided at a time when parents feel that it would benefit them.
- Parents need to have more information about the effect of drugs/alcohol on their bodies and upon their unborn child or children.
- Parents want support that can be accessed directly when they need it without having to wait for a crisis situation which may impact negatively on their children. Parents do not feel they have a choice in accepting intervention, as social services are often not involved until families are in crisis.

This research was carried out by Fiona Herriot, senior project worker at the Young Families Outreach Project, East Lothian, as part of a series of CHILDREN 1ST practitioner research studies. For a copy of the full report, please email info@children1st.org.uk

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