



The University of Edinburgh

Understanding Society:
Future of Families Policy Conference



Parental mental health & child development

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Background

- Parental mental health issues are prevalent
 - Almost a quarter of parents have a probable mental health issue in the UK ([Public Health England, 2020*](#))
 - About a third of children live with at least one parent reporting symptoms of parental distress
 - Many more families likely to be affected due to dimensional nature of mental health



Caveat

- Quantifying effects of parental mental health on child development **is challenging**, e.g.:
 - Need to follow up for a long time
 - Extraneous factors that are difficult to account for (e.g., genetic effects)
- **Despite these challenges much evidence points to diverse impacts of parental mental health on child development**



Three principles

1. **Start early** in development (& continue to support families thereafter)
2. The **family as a whole system**
3. **‘(parental) mental health in all policy’**



Principle 1: Start early in development...

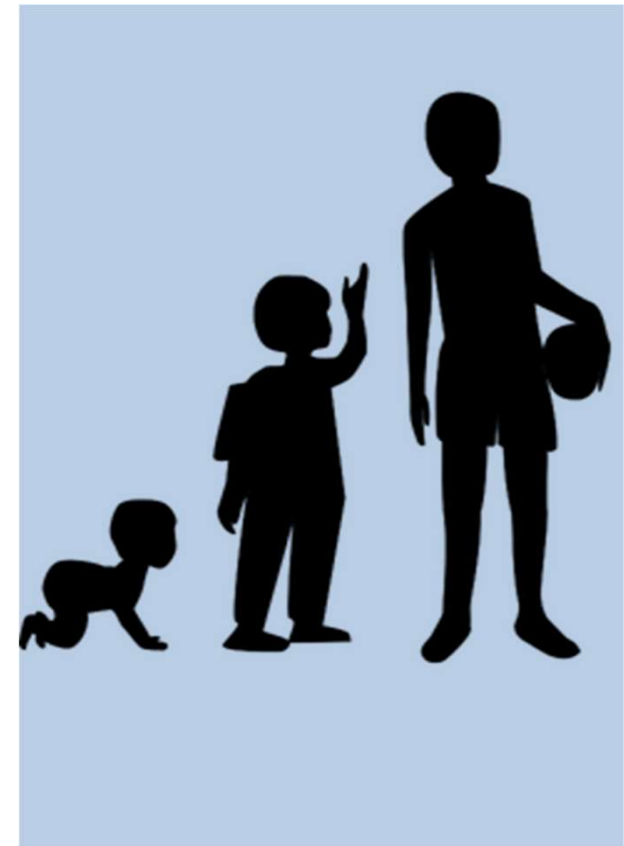
- Parental mental health already impacts child development in perinatal period e.g.:
 - **Prenatal stress exposure** has direct biological impact on prenatal development
 - Prenatal mental health impacts **health behaviours** that affect foetal development
 - Post-natal mental health associated with **caregiving behaviours** e.g., breastfeeding
- Health services contact in perinatal period provide unique opportunity to intervene





Principle 1:... but continue thereafter

- Effects **continue over course of development** via e.g.,:
 - Trauma/ poverty
 - Parental supervision
 - Cognitive stimulation
 - Parent-child relationship quality
 - Observational learning ,
 - etc...
- **Adolescence** as second critical period
 - Increase in mental health issues at this time ([Murray et al., 2022](#))*
 - **Increased influence of parental mental health** on child health ([Bencsik et al., 2023](#))*





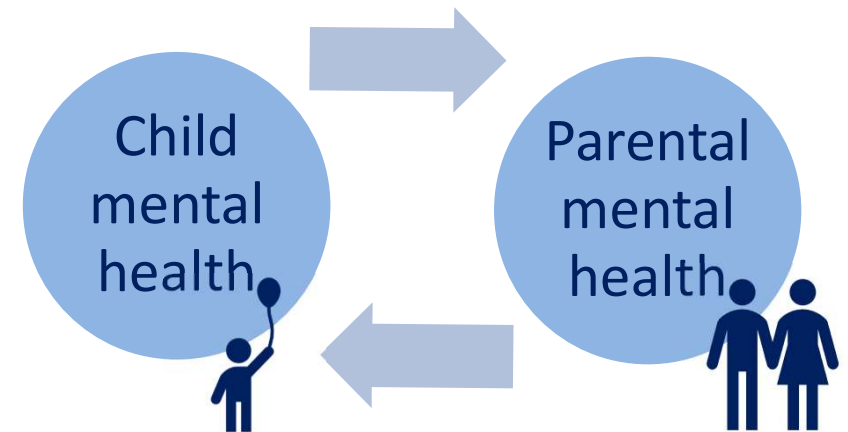
Examples

- Mental health screening:
 - Mental health screening at antenatal (booking) appointment recommended by [NICE](#), with referrals to GP or mental health services
- Parental leave:
 - More 'generous' parental leave (longer duration and better paid) associated with better parental mental health ([Heshmati et al., 2023](#))
- Health visiting:
 - Mechanism to detect and support families affected by parental mental health issues that doesn't rely on help-seeking ([Condon et al., 2020](#))



Principle 2: Family as whole system

- Bidirectional relations between child and parent mental health over development ([Speyer et al., 2022](#); [Webb et al., 2017*](#))
- Families with parental AND child difficulties at greatest risk of outcomes like adolescent self-harm & suicidality ([Zhu et al., 2023](#))
- Parental engagement a key influence on the success of interventions aimed at the child
- **Interventions should consider parents and children together**





Examples

- Family-focused practice ([Lagdon et al., 2021](#))
 - Professionals engage service user within the context of their family
 - Considers an adults' role as a parent
 - Endeavours to meet needs of both service user & family members
 - Professionals equipped via training with the skills and confidence to do so
- Whole-family interventions
 - Engage multiple family members
 - Argued to be more effective/cost-effective than engaging individuals within families
 - Promising but in need of more high quality evidence ([Moltrecht et al., 2020](#))

Principle 3: (parental) ‘mental health in all policy’

- Diverse risk factors for parental mental health e.g., ...



Principle 3: (parental) ‘mental health in all policy’

- Diverse proposed impacts of parental mental health on children e.g., ...





Principle 3: (parental) ‘mental health in all policy’

- Many policy areas can impact (and be impacted by) parental mental health
 - Co-ordinated approach across different policy areas
 - Consider impact on parental mental health in policy areas beyond health
- Consistent with a prevention/promotion approach → £ savings?



Example

- ‘Mental health in all policy’ (MHiAP) framework:
 - Aims to promote action within non-health policy areas
 - Emphasises impact of public policies of mental health
 - Highlight opportunities of better mental health to different policy areas (mutual benefits)
- Examples of mental health in non-health policy:
 - Parental leave
 - Affordable high quality daycare
 - Access to green spaces
 - Participation in social/cultural activities
 - Reduced workplace stress
 - Educational policies that promote child health & wellbeing, reduce risk factors such as bullying



Supplementary principle...

- **Support & utilise research that can underpin effective policymaking**
 - Fast evolution of the situation of children & families with new questions always emerging
 - Up to date, population-representative data on children & families is essential
- Example from *Understanding Society*
 - COVID-19 & family mental health [Naumann et al. \(2022\)*](#):
 - Increase in mental health difficulties of children during the pandemic
 - Children's mental health was significantly associated with that of their parents
 - Especially pronounced for mothers' mental health and for younger children



Summary

1. Start **early** in development
2. The **family as a whole system**
3. **'(parental) mental health in all policy'**