

# Parent Information Evenings: Filling a gap in Irish Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services?

It is estimated that 20% of children experience psychological problems at any one time.

Ireland are under-resourced. Recent economic downturn has hindered the possibility of increased funding to alleviate these deficits. It is now imperative that mental health professionals create innovative and cost effective solutions to promote positive mental health. Recent literature has focused on the benefits of self delivered parenting programmes, with minimal costs incurred. supporting self directed approaches, the Lucena Foundation has initiated a series of parent information evenings. These evenings are offered on a monthly basis, and are free to attend. To date 1,538 parents have attended. Feedback from parents has been very positive with 80.5% of them finding them 'useful' or 'very useful'. Further longitudinal research into these initiatives is required to examine possible long term effects on subsequent mental health outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) in

<sup>2,3</sup> Based on the developing evidence

In Ireland one in every five euro of public money is spent on health.

15.8 billion, we are still behind our international counterparts. Of this, only 7.8% is spent on Mental Health and despite almost 23% of the population in Ireland aged less than 16, only 7% of total mental health expenditure goes to CAMHS. development of child and adolescent community mental health teams (CMHT) and recommends two teams per 100,000 populations by 2013. there are only 47 CMHTs in operation, many without the full complement of staff. There are over 3,600 children on CAMHS waiting lists, waiting on average in excess of 12 months. Understandably in the current economic climate full implementation of the Vision for change is unlikely. The recognition of further financial cuts being inevitable must lead mental health professionals to reevaluate current service provision and to search for new and innovative ways to help promote positive mental health in the nation's children.

<sup>2</sup> Despite an increase in Budget 2009, bringing the overall spending to

<sup>2</sup> A Vision for Change strategy commits to the  
Currently,

## Evidence Base for Parent Education Programmes

Investing in parent education provides parents with skills and confidence to parent in an optimum way, specific to each child's developmental trajectory, and increasing the likelihood of achieving positive mental health outcomes, both in their children and in themselves. Programs incorporating parent education are based on the premise that the promotion of caring, understanding, and positive parenting are central to creating safe and supportive environments for children. Parent education not only empowers parents with necessary skills and knowledge, but also assists in normalising the challenges and difficulties inherent in parenting. Group based treatments assist in proactively building support networks and reference frames for parents. Frequent attendances at groups may reduce the need for more expensive and intensive clinician delivered treatments. For those families awaiting child mental health services, offering practical advice on parenting and mental health issues can set the scene for subsequent and necessary change. In children who already have an established mental health difficulty, parent psychoeducation is considered a standard part of effective treatment, either delivered individually or in a group setting. Some parenting information sessions, such as those associated with the Incredible Years (IY) parenting programmes for conduct disorder or ADHD specific parenting programs have a particularly strong evidence base.

## Lucena Foundation Parent Information Evenings

Faced with long waiting lists, a heavy demand on services, and drawing on the evidence base supporting parent education programs, the Lucena Foundation set up a monthly series of information evenings for parents. These aimed to promote optimal child mental health development as well as provide information on established mental health difficulties. They were designed to be offered as a stand alone service or as an adjunct to existing CAMHS services. Each information evening is delivered by a mental health professional, (clinicians in child psychiatry, psychology, social work, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy) with a high level of expertise in the given subject. The evening is chaired by another clinician, with an in-depth knowledge of the topic and an understanding of local clinical arrangements and resources. Members from support organizations are also involved. The format of the evening involves a short didactic power point presentation (45 minutes), followed by a 10 minute break during which questions are encouraged via written submission to ensure confidentiality and to encourage questions from less confident speakers. The evening ends with a question and answer session (60 minutes).

## Parent information evening - Progress to date

The Lucena Foundation began the parent information evenings in 2006, and have offered 21 talks on topics such as Autism, ADHD; anger management; issues in adolescence; anxiety; depression; eating disorders; exam stress; selective mutism; speech and language problems and psychosis. By June 2009, 1,583 parents had attended. Feedback forms were completed anonymously after each session. 807 parents returned evaluation forms. Most of the parents reported hearing about the parents evening in the health supplement of the 'Irish Times' (44%). 81% of parents found the talks 'useful' or 'very useful'. Only 105 parents answered questions relating directly to their own child, the majority (94%) had a child already attending a CAMHS, of which 60% were satisfied with the service received. 6% had a child on a CAMHS waiting list. Parents were also given the opportunity to write qualitative comments on the feedback forms. Two major themes emerged: parents' frustration about the lack availability of services; and the benefit of peer support: 'Enjoyed the seminar, and would like to see more seminars specific to speech and language as I am very frustrated about the lack of resources generally'; 'I have had to go down the route of private care to avail of the resources that my child needed'; 'It is good to know we are not on our own'; 'It was good to meet with other parents who have children with similar problems, even to just chat on a social level...'; 'Very enlightening, no longer feel I am crazy...'

## Reflection and Future Directions

Preliminary feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Further longitudinal research into this initiative could assist in identifying effectiveness with respect to subsequent mental health outcomes. In the current economic climate child mental health services are overstretched, and waitlists are continuing to grow. The Lucena parents' information evenings could provide a cost effective intervention, assisting in promoting positive mental health both in typically and atypically developing children.

## Acknowledgement

The Lucena Foundation information evenings are held in the school Hall of St Peters School, which is sited in Lucena Clinic, Rathgar. Further information is available at [www.lucenaclinic.ie](http://www.lucenaclinic.ie)

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