

Special needs of children with mentally ill parents – preventive strategies as a prospective challenge for psychiatric care

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Background

According to study findings, children of mentally ill parents are at a higher risk of also developing mental disorders or disruptive behaviour (e.g. Downey & Coyne 1990, Ihle et al. 2002). Besides a genetic predisposition psychosocial risk factors caused by the parents mental illness influence the conditions of childrens development (Mattejat et al. 2000, Schone & Wagenblaus 2002, Werner 1999).

Study findings in the field of psychiatric care show that about one fourth of mentally ill patients in psychiatric care have minor children (Grube & Dorn 2007, Lenz 2005). Even though children experience the burden of living with a mentally ill parent, they are barely recognized by health care professionals. That is the reason why there are no appropriate preventive strategies for this particular vulnerable group so far, even though psychiatric care could reach the target group easily.

Objective

The research project focuses on developing, implementing, and evaluating an intervention in psychiatric care to reduce the risk of children to develop mental illness or disruptive behaviour and to improve their developing conditions. The intervention aims at (I) children aged six to twelve years of parents with affective disorders and Schizophrenia (II) who have not yet shown any developmental disorders. The study objectives are:

- to reduce the burden children of mentally ill parents experience,
- to strengthen the capabilities of affected families.

Precondition of the intervention

The intervention is based on the following research stages:

- a qualitative analysis in order to identify the families needs of help and support
- a literature review to assess existing preventive strategies for children of mentally ill parents.

Elements of the intervention for children of mentally ill parents

Interviews with parents and children,

...in order to help them to improve the self- and family management of mental illness.

Godparenthood for children,

...in order to have a familiar person who keeps company during their leisure time and who supports in questions of health and basic care.

Training for parents,

...in order to help mentally ill parents to identify with their parenting roles and to support them in the responsibilities towards their children.

Skill-training for children,

...in order to support them in normalizing their everyday life, to offer relief through exchange with other children and to help them to deal with difficult situations.

Networking/Qualification,

... of professionals in health care and social services in order to sensitize them for the problems and challenges of children with mentally ill parents.

Duration	October 2008 – March 2012
Funding	German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF)
Collaboration	Bielefeld University, School of Public Health Ev. Krankenhaus Bielefeld, Dept. of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy
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Intervention and transfer

The intervention will be implemented in the department of psychiatry and psychotherapy, Bethel. It will be offered during the treatment of mentally ill parents. Based on the participants individual needs for support, some or all elements will be used. In the course of the project it's a main objective to implement the elements of intervention as a standard operating procedure in mental health care.

