



Supporting the Children of Mentally Ill Parents

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Practical case studies from everyday school life demonstrate the need for a network to be established between schools, the field of psychiatry/child and adolescent psychiatry and special services in order to provide appropriate support for the children of mentally ill parents. During the preparatory phase of the HOPE congress, it became clear from the number of applications that there was a great interest in the topic "Supporting children of mentally ill parents". It was however necessary to limit the number of participants to a maximum of 40 individuals to retain the character of a workshop.

The welcome address given by Dr. Ulrich R uth, Senior Consultant for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Heckscher Clinic in Munich was followed by a brief introduction of the speakers and their fields of operation. In order to coordinate the content of the workshop activities as closely as possible to the expectations of the participants, a brief survey of their prior knowledge and personal experience relating to the topical area was carried out.

The workshop was divided into three main sections:

Overview of current research findings (ca.15 mins.)

Interdisciplinary group activities focused on core content (ca. 60 mins.)

Discussion, results and future outlook (ca. 15 mins.)

1) At the beginning of the workshop, the focus was on the presentation of significant research findings. The most common psychological disorders affecting parents, the epidemiology and important risk and protective factors affecting the child were outlined in a Power Point presentation. The broad spectrum of reality in the lives of the children of mentally ill parents was illustrated: a video in which a depressive mother reflected on the reality of her adolescent daughter and a radio feature in which a mother with a borderline disorder and a daughter with an alcohol-dependent father and mother suffering from depression objectively described their everyday family life both provided a vivid impression of the daily situation of affected children and adolescents.



The children and adolescents of parents with mental illnesses are subjected to excessive levels of stress. As late as the 1990s, the field of psychiatry concentrated exclusively on the parents and virtually ignored the children. In the meantime, experts within this field have recognised the necessity of focusing to an equal extent on the affected children and adolescents. The parents' disorders disrupt the entire family system and the resulting stress factors can place an excessive burden on child development.

Scientific research has confirmed that around half a million children alone in Germany have one or both parents with mental illnesses (Beeck, Katja, Netz und Boden - Unterstützung für Kinder psychisch kranker Eltern, 2004, quoted from: v. Holst/Kaulke-Niermann, p.3). Transferred to the school environment, this means that one in thirty children has a parent suffering from a mental illness, i.e. an average of one child in every class is affected – a trend that is on the increase. For this reason, this topic has enormous relevance.

Owing to the established significance of this topic for schools and the educational objective of meeting the needs of children and adolescents in their extreme situation, the salient aspects of the reality of these children was examined. This reality was characterised by:

- disorientation, incomprehension and anxiety
- feelings of guilt
- feelings of shame towards peer group; prohibition of communication due to taboo topic
- social isolation
- parentification
- detachment problems in adolescence
- disruption of the development of a reliable image of reality
- loss of trust in relationships
- establishment of negative or instable self-concept and loss of trust in self-efficacy
- loss of ability to be carefree and relaxed
- disturbance of self-perception

Affected children and adolescents particularly display problems within emotional, social and cognitive areas:

emotional problems such as anxiety, feelings of guilt, depression, loyalty conflicts, rage, anger and disappointment;

social problems such as behavioural disorders, isolation, low levels of social competence...

cognitive problems: problems at school, learning difficulties and concentration problems.

On the other hand, protective factors have been established which these children have developed to protect themselves from the mental illness of their parents. Essential protective factors for the child include:

- above-average ability for crisis management
- high degree of independence



- substantial consciousness of responsibility
- highly developed empathy for other persons
- robust temperament
- positive self-concept
- intelligence
- financial resources
- psycho-education
- girls

The risk that children and adolescents with one or both parents suffering from mental illnesses can themselves succumb to psychological disorders (e.g. schizophrenia, neuroses, depression or personality disorders) is significantly increased: this risk is 10-15 % with one parent suffering from a mental illness and rises to 35-50 % if both parents display psychological disorders (v. Holst/Kaulke-Niermann, S.3). In addition to genetic conditional factors, psycho-social burdens such as unemployment, isolation, poverty, marriage/partner conflicts, defective parent-child interaction, lack of social support etc can play an essential role in the probability of the child developing a psychological disorder. The correlation of “nature” and “nurture” has been examined within the framework of a vulnerability-stress-hypothesis in order to investigate the aetiological foundations of mental illnesses.

2) In the second part of the workshop, participants were divided into eight working groups to address specific psychiatric clinical pictures, their symptoms and possible effects on child development and education with the aid of concrete case studies. A worksheet outlining the core symptoms of one of the clinical pictures listed below (cf. appendix) provided the structural basis of each assignment.

As examples, the following psychiatric illnesses of parents were selected:

- a) depression
- b) schizophrenic psychosis
- c) bipolar disorder
- d) personality disorder (borderline type)

During the progress of these group activities, participants gained an intense insight into the relevant everyday situation of the affected children, their problems and possible behavioural disorders at school and also acquired knowledge of essential support measures to be provided by the educational specialists to help the child. Through the concrete involvement with the symptoms of the clinical pictures, it was possible to focus on desired/vital assistance for children and adolescents with parents suffering from mental illnesses. Fundamentally, parent- and child-centred measures are both vital elements in the provision of support for the children of parents with mental illnesses.



Essential aspects of child-centred support measures include: age-appropriate information from the children regarding the relevant clinical pictures of their parents, special help for affected families in the form of parent/family training courses and advisory services, the involvement of the children in the treatment of their parents and an increase in public awareness for psychological illnesses.

Alongside these measures, parent-centred support measures must also be considered: it is vital to utilise the stable good phases of health during the illness of the parents constructively for the benefit of the child; it must be assumed that even ill parents also desire to be “good” parents and still possess a high degree of responsibility for their children. A study established that 55% of parents questioned had either not begun or broken off necessary inpatient treatment in adult psychiatric clinics due to concerns about their (unprovided for) dependent children (cf. study by Kölch et al. (2008)). The compilation of a so-called emergency plan in which parents with psychological disorders can precisely formulate during healthy phases what should be organised in the case of an acute phase of illness has been proved to be an indispensable support measure. What is ideal is the installation of a network e.g. in the form of individuals who can provide support and relief for the children and adolescents in cases of emergency to enable them to retain the greatest possible degree of normality during these phases.

3) All working groups came together to pool the results of the topics covered. Essential aspects of these topics were discussed and queries addressed. Each participant received a summary of the lecture, work materials utilised in the group workshops and a list of relevant specialist literature and books for children and adolescents suitable for educational work with affected children.

Conclusion and future prospects

In conclusion, the indispensable necessity of cooperation and establishment of a network between the family home, school, youth welfare services and clinic and other institutions involved within this area was presented in detail as a guideline for all individuals working with parents with mental illnesses and their children and adolescent offspring.

Appendix : worksheet “Schizophrenic psychosis“

SCHIZOPHRENIC PSYCHOSES – illnesses suffered by parents

Symptoms

Tension and agitation

Impaired thought processes

Delusions and hallucinations

Ego disorders, experiences of foreign influences

Emotional poverty

Dejectedness and hopelessness

Internal emptiness



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Depression, despondency

Listlessness

Social withdrawal

Literature:

Mattejat, F.; Lisofsky, B. (Hrsg.) (2000): Nicht von schlechten Eltern. Kinder psychisch Kranker. Bonn: Psychiatrie-Verlag

Kinder- und Jugendbücher:

Bock, Thomas (2003): Pias lebt gefährlich, für Jugendliche, Psychiatrie-Verlag, Bonn

Boie, Kirsten (2005): Mit Kindern redet ja keiner, Fischer Taschenbuch, Frankfurt a.M., ab 11 J.

Cave, Kathryn; Riddell, Chris (1994): Irgendwie anders, Oettinger, Hamburg, Kindergartenalter

Haugen, Tormod (2003): Die Nachtvögel, dtv Junior, München, ab 10 J.

Homeier, Schirin (2006): Sonnige Traurigtage, incl. Info-Materialien, Mabuse-Verlag, für Grundschul Kinder

Homeier, Schirin; Schrappe, Andreas (2009): Flaschenpost nach irgendwo, Mabuse-Verlag, für Grundschul Kinder

Mannsdorf, Peter (2005): Fliegen ohne Flügel + (Forts.) Robbi und sein ungezähmter Vater, Shift (Selbst-) Verlag, Berlin, ab 10 J.

Minne, Brigitte (2004): Eichhörnchenzeit oder der Zoo in Mamas Kopf, Sauerländer, Düsseldorf, ab 8 J.

Mosch, Erdmute von (2008): Mamas Monster, Balance, buch + medien verlag, Bonn

Lund Eriksen, Endre (2007): Beste Freunde oder der ganz normale Wahnsinn. Dressler, Hamburg, ab 10 J.

Rees, Gwyneth (2005): Erde an Pluto oder als Mum abhob, Ravensburger Buchverlag, Ravensburg

Stratenwerth, Irene; Bock, Thomas (2003) Die Bettelkönigin, Balance buch + medien verlag, Bonn, ab 9 J.

Wilson, Jacqueline (2005): Ausgeflipt hoch drei, Ravensburger Buchverlag, Ravensburg, ab 10 J.

Wunderer, Susanne (2010): Warum ist Mama traurig? Ein Vorlesebuch für Kinder. With an advice section, Mabuse-Verlag.

Furthermore recommended

[www.lzg-rlp.de/lzg-shop/Teske, C; Knichel K. \(2007\): Leon findet seinen Weg, Bilderbuch](http://www.lzg-rlp.de/lzg-shop/Teske, C; Knichel K. (2007): Leon findet seinen Weg, Bilderbuch)

www.psychosis.ch: FuFu und der grüne Mantel, Bilderbuch

Material for tuition, children's books, adults

www.irremenschlich.de: Unterrichtsmaterial

[www.openthedoors.de: compiled learning package on the topic "Mental Patients" for schools](http://www.openthedoors.de: compiled learning package on the topic)

www.psychatrie.de/familienselbsthilfe: Information and contact addresses of the Federation of Relatives of the mentally ill; materials for children and young people mentally ill parents

www.kinderschutzbund-bayern.de / publication

www.lzg-rlp.de/lzg-shop: u. a. Bilderbuch zur Suchtprävention



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www.bzga.de: website of federal agency for Health Education, information material often available free of charge

www.bag.kipe.de: Homepage of the Federal Association for Children of mentally ill parents, association of professionals of various projects

www.netz-und-boden.de: Initiative for children of mentally ill parents ; c/o Katja Beeck

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