Supporting children when providing services to families experiencing multiple problems

Perspectives and evidence on programmes

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Abstract

Recently, there has been growing interest amongst researchers, practitioners and policy-makers in approaches to understanding and ways of helping parents, children and the communities in which they live to respond to 'families experiencing multiple problems' (FEMPs). There is a strong need for information – both descriptive in terms of the services actually offered directly to children as well as their ability to benefit from the services provided to the whole family, and also evaluative, with a focus on outcomes. Motivated by the need for practice-oriented knowledge this special issue was prepared. The contributions have been divided into two parts; the first part focusing on perspectives on helping these families with special attention to the position and the interests of children; the second part covering empirical research on intervention programmes for FEMPs that support them in coping with daily struggles and challenges, and helping them to prevent unnecessary out-of-home placement of a child.

Introduction

"There is a small but persistent number of parents, who have not experienced parenting themselves, are poorly educated, and may struggle with personal problems including mental health, disability and drug or alcohol misuse. Add to this the pressures of economic deprivation and living in communities that experience high rates of crime and unemployment, and the multiplicity of problems facing some families can be overwhelming. Without effective interventions, these problems can be inter-generational, passed on through families where aspirations and achievements are low." (Tickell, 2012, p. 9)

The complex issues around providing appropriate services for children and their parents experiencing a combination of environmental, personal and relationship difficulties were explored in the practice literature of the 1960s (e.g., Philp & Timms, 1962), but for the decades that followed, practice with families with complex problems remained under-researched and debated. However, since the turn of the century there has been growing interest amongst policy makers, practitioners and researchers in approaches to understanding and ways of helping parents, children and the communities in which they live to respond to 'families with multiple problems' (Spratt & Devaney, 2009; Tausendfreund et al., 2015b; Tickell, 2012), 'families with longstanding and complex problems' (Thoburn, Cooper, Brandon, & Connolly, 2013), 'multi-problem families' (Asen, 2007), 'multi-stressed families' (Sousa & Eusébio, 2007) or 'troubled families' (Casey, 2012; Davies, 2015). Recent writing frames this issue within the context of 're-imagining' child protection services (Featherstone, White, & Morris, 2014), reunification of children from out-of-home care (Thoburn, Robinson, & Anderson, 2012), workforce issues and the impact on professionals of relationship-based practice with parents and children living in highly stressed families (Parr, 2015), and long-term costs to the community and to public child welfare services of 'troubled' and 'troublesome' families (Casey, 2012; Thoburn, 2014).

An estimate of the prevalence of families experiencing multiple problems (FEMPs) is difficult to arrive at, impacted on, for instance, by varying definitions of the target group and unsatisfactory registration systems resulting in poor quality or total lack of data. In a recent Dutch review study numbers of 1.5% and 3.5% FEMPs were estimated for rural and urban areas, respectively (Holwerda, Reijneveld, & Jansen, 2012). Tickell (2012, p. 11) refers to the number of 120.000 families in England (0.67%) who are "according to the government" experiencing multiple problems, which means that they experience at least five substantial 'problems' (those listed are: no work, poor housing, no qualifications, mental health problems, longstanding illness or disability, low income).

The accumulation of problems in these families leads to an increased risk for neglect and/or abuse of children (Denholm, Power, Thomas, & Li, 2013; Fuller-Thomson & Sawyer, 2014; MacKenzie, Kotch, & Lee, 2011) and an increased risk for severe behavioural and developmental problems in children (Appleyard, Egeland, Van Dulmen, & Sroufe, 2005; Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1998; Knot-Dickscheit & Tausendfreund, 2015). Practitioners working with these families have the complex

task of working in the best interests of the child and provide help to parents which is both acceptable to them and effective. Research indicates that there is a risk that children receive too little attention because of the major focus of professionals on the parents (Knot-Dickscheit & Tausendfreund, 2015). Explorative research (Metselaar, 2011; Tausendfreund, Knot-Dickscheit, Schulze, Knorth, & Grietens, 2015a) found that interventions that specifically are aimed at working together with parents *and* children (following a systemic approach) and supporting them in the building of a social network, can encounter difficulties in achieving this – especially in working direct with the child(ren). Some researchers report that the effects of interventions for families with multiple problems in parenting skills and family functioning are limited (Holwerda et al., 2014), and that the problems of children in these families are quite often not alleviated (Holwerda et al., 2014; Kemper, 2004; Knot-Dickscheit & Tausendfreund, 2015; Rots-De Vries, Mathijssen, Kroesbergen, Roeg, & Garretsen, 2015; Tausendfreund et al., 2015a; Veerman, Janssens, & Delicat, 2005).

There is a strong need for further information – both descriptive in terms of the services actually offered directly to children as well as their ability to benefit from the services provided to the whole family, and also evaluative, with a focus on (interim or longer-term) child wellbeing outcomes. Motivated by this need for practice-oriented knowledge we prepared this special issue of IJCFW on children in families experiencing multiple problems.

Contributions

The contributions to this special issue have been divided into two parts; the first part focusing on perspectives on helping families experiencing multiple problems with special attention to the position and the interests of children in these families, the second part covering empirical research on intervention programmes for FEMPs that support them in coping with daily struggles and challenges, and helping them to prevent unnecessary out-of-home placement of a child.

Perspectives

When considering the position of the child living in highly stressful and risky family circumstances a broadly valuated frame of reference is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), which lists a number of requirements that should guarantee the child's prosperous and safe development to adulthood within the social/ family context in which the child is growing up. One of those refers to the issue that in all circumstances of professional intervention and decision-making 'the best interests of the child shall be a *primary* consideration' (Article 3 CRC), implying the creation of the best possible opportunities for development of a child (Article 6 CRC) (see, for instance, Kalverboer 2014, p. 10). The question could be put forward of how this relates to children in FEMPs: How do different jurisdictions, and different professionals within jurisdictions, take into account 'the rights and duties of his or her parents' (Article 3,2 CRC) and the safeguarding duties of child welfare agencies when determining what is in 'the best interest of the

child'? In what ways do they seek to safeguard the child's wellbeing? Do professionals find ways of ensuring the space for each child to be a child (cf. Grietens, 2011)? Are professionals who work with these families sufficiently alert to the interests, needs and voice of each child?

This final question is one that is bothering *Tim Tausendfreund* (St.Gallen University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland) and *Jana Knot-Dickscheit* (University of Groningen, The Netherlands) in the next article. They call for more attention to the needs of children in families experiencing multiple problems, with that indirectly expressing the child's best interests perspective. Various research findings are reviewed showing that most intervention programmes are not of sufficient duration to solve or even substantially alleviate the adversities encountered by the target group. In addition, the psychosocial problems of the children often prove to be strong and to persist after the intensive family support programme has ended. To enhance children's position within a family support approach the authors suggest the usage of a *children's coach* in addition to the family worker.

The Tausendfreund / Knot-Dickscheit paper does not adopt a position in the child protection *versus* family support 'debate' (Featherstone, Morris, & White, 2014; Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011) because they argue in terms of complementary services. Briefly, in 'child protection', interventions are directed at identifying and protecting children who are at risk of abuse or neglect, sometimes resulting in children being moved to substitute care. 'Family support', however, is characterised as services and interventions with FEMPs which aim to strengthen the care of children and the capacities of their parents, thereby avoiding children's long-term placement away from the family. *Brigid Daniel* (University of Stirling, Scotland) in her contribution indeed touches on this debate but calls for integration of the family support *and* child protection approaches. Her focus is on child neglect. The effects on children's wellbeing and development are profound and practitioners are struggling to find effective responses to these children. Based on empirical research undertaken in the UK, informed by an international literature review, and inspired by the parenting styles model of Baumrind (1971), the needs of neglected children for care and protection require in Daniel's opinion a model of *authoritative practice*.

Evidence on programmes

Families experiencing multiple problems often are faced with child protection and youth treatment and rehabilitation services (Tausendfreund et al., 2015a). Recently in the Amsterdam area an innovative approach in child protection and youth parole services was introduced that strongly relies on a systems-based support model: the Intensive Family Case Management (IFCM) approach. *Inge Busschers* and *Leonieke Boendermaker* (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands) report on an evaluation study focused on two main issues: 1) are practitioners actually working in accordance with the family/system intervention model, and 2) are the needs and safety of children adequately promoted? The results show that family meetings were organised in only half of the cases whereas in just a quarter of these face-to-face contacts all the family members were present. In nearly all families the tools for

child safety and risk assessment were used. As a conclusion the authors call for a more solid monitoring of family- and child-oriented activities of practitioners.

In three boroughs of another city, London, an experiment with the so-called Family Coaching Service (FCS) (part of the national 'troubled families' programme) has been researched. As described by the colleagues *Marian Brandon, Penny Sorensen, June Thoburn, Sue Bailey* and *Sara Connolly* (University of East Anglia, England), this early intervention project is directed towards 'turning around' the lives of families, based on the notion of creating 'turning points' that impact the family members' situation and their individual development (cf. Gilligan, 2010; Zeller, 2014). By doing so the programme aspires to save money spent on anti-social behaviour, worklessness and school absence of youth. The service is mostly delivered by para-professionals who lack formal qualifications but do have a host of paid or voluntary experiences, like mentoring, sports coaching, respite care, et cetera. *Relationship-based* work is considered key. Results show that families and coaches are quite congruent in their (positive) appreciation of the service, without denying tensions that were also evident. Some cost savings were noted.

A third programme for vulnerable families was run in the city of Aveiro (Portugal), and evaluated by a team working at the Universities of Aveiro – *Sofia Rodigues* and *Liliana Sousa* – and Coimbra (Portugal) – *Madalena Alarcão*. The authors investigated the PoupArte intervention, an imaginative programme inspired by the so-called Photovoice methodology (Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998), and aimed at empowering vulnerable families by working partly with *non-verbal* means, i.e. photos and the exhi-bition of photos. A preliminary evaluation of the programme, covering ten sessions with a group of families and – during the last session – an audience of neighbours, friends and relatives, shows that three themes were pivotal: daily rejoicings and worries; savings and minimizing expenses; and 'my children'. The themes aptly represent the ups and downs in FEMPs and illustrate parents' stresses and difficulties, especially regarding finance and children.

As indicated above, in families experiencing multiple problems there is a quasi-permanent 'threat' that one or more children might be placed out of home by the child welfare and protection authorities (Knot-Dickscheit & Tausendfreund, 2015). To explore how the process of assessing placement needs in different countries is defined and what sevices are available to prevent out-of-home placement, survey data were obtained from 21 jurisdictions representing 16 countries – half of them being European jurisdictions, half of them extra European. The team, comprising the colleagues *Anat Zeira* (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel), *Cinzia Canali* and *Tiziano Vecchiato* (both Fondazione A. Zancan, Padova, Italy), and *June Thoburn* (University of East Anglia, England), discovered similarities as well as differences in processes and services, including such topics as legally defined thresholds for service provision, court involvement, the role of parents in decision making, and the exercise of professional discretion by practitioners. The authors conclude that a two dimensional model for mapping the necessity of out-of-home placement can be found in all jurisdictions. They demonstrate the usefulness of a multi-dimensional tool for risk-assessment that aims to support practitioners in well-considered decision-making, thereby

avoiding unnecessary out-of-home placement of children.

Placement prevention is also the central topic in the contribution of *Harm Damen* and *Jan Willem Veerman* (Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands). They report on an extensive Dutch research project concerning a well-known placement prevention programme, called 'Families First' (FF) (see also Kinney, Haapala, & Booth, 1991; Schuerman, Rzepnicki, & Littell, 1994). They included data of nearly 4.500 families who received the regular variant of FF, and data on close to 1.000 families who received the variant for mildly learning disabled children. Damen and Veerman focused on practitioners' *adherence* to the FF model, assuming that outcomes can be predicted by the level of treatment integrity (cf. Perepletchikova & Kazdin, 2005), i.e. the extent to which family workers adhere to the core quality of core aspects of FF. Next to corroborating their central hypothesis the authors discovered that four programme elements were key in achieving the result strived for, i.e. increasing the chance of preventing out-of-home placement. These elements were 'specificity', 'midterm evaluation', 'goal evaluation', and 'duration', suggesting the need for careful monitoring of the helping process.

Finally

Taking the five 'empirical' papers together (including the literature reviews they include) we cannot avoid reaching the conclusion that the evidence base regarding well-being outcomes of children living in families experiencing multiple problems is still thin. Not one of these articles reports specifically on children and youth's observable behaviour and/or their subjective experiences. The implicit assumption seems to be that 'what is good for the family' is also 'good for the children' within the family. With a systems-based or family-oriented perspective as a starting-point – a position more or less taking by all the programmes discussed in this special issue – this is a logical way of thinking (Thoburn et al., 2013); in a more child-oriented perspective (Kalverboer, 2014) this is less the case.

The collected papers offer a wealth of new findings regarding a target group that, in our opinion, deserves much more attention in social and behavioural research and development.

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