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From individual problem to family centred practice: the challenges for social workers in supporting parents with learning disabilities

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Background and purpose

Social workers are under pressure to support an increasingly diverse range of families, despite having less resources to draw on as a result of austerity measures. One such group of families is those where one or both parents has a learning disability. While we do not have accurate data on the number of families affected, it is estimated that there are currently around 5000 families in Scotland (Stewart and MacIntyre, 2016). These families face significant disadvantage and are likely to be living in poverty, in poor housing and without employment (MacIntyre and Stewart, 2012). They are also far more likely to be subject to child protection measures than other families and around 40% will have their children removed (Emerson, et al 2005). Over the last ten years, evidence has suggested (Stewart and MacIntyre, 2016) that taking a 'family focused' approach that acknowledges the needs of both children and parents is the most effective way to support such families. Yet despite growing recognition of this barriers to supporting families remain.

Methods

This paper draws on data from a national survey to identify some of the reasons for these barriers. The study, funded by the Scottish Commission for Learning Disabilities on behalf of the Scottish Government aimed to identify current practice in supporting parents with learning disabilities across Scotland. An online survey was sent to representatives from Local Authorities, NHS Boards and third sector organisations. 47 completed surveys were returned. In addition, 15 key informant interviews were carried out to explore the issues raised in the survey in more depth. Survey data was analysed to produce descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Findings

The data suggests mixed practice across the country with five pockets of 'geographical good practice' being identified. Good practice centres on early identification of parents with learning disabilities alongside early intervention that allows workers to focus on carrying out preventative work rather than crisis driven interventions that focus primarily on child protection concerns. A number of barriers to supporting parents with learning disabilities remain. In particular, respondents identified difficulties in identifying parents, a lack of accessible information and poor practices around joint working as particular concerns.

Conclusion and implications

The research argues that taking a 'whole family' approach is essential when working with families where there is parental learning disability. Despite this families continue to fall between the gap of children and families and adult social work services. It is argued that conceptualising these families as 'vulnerable' directly contributes to their marginalisation. While being labelled as vulnerable is essential to access services given the increasingly stringent eligibility criteria in operation, the label impacts negatively on assumptions about the capacity of parents with learning disabilities to parent. This leaves social workers with a significant ethical dilemmas as they consider how best to support families going forward.