Parents’ experiences seeking help for their children with mental health issues

What is this research about?
Many children with mental health problems don’t actually receive the care they need. This can do with the issues their parents face when looking for help from the mental health system. It is often believed that seeking help follows a linear four-step process, but the help-seeking experience for parents might not be so straight-forward after all.

What did the researchers do?
Ontario researchers interviewed 300 parents who had a 4-17 year old child and who had contacted 1 of 15 children’s mental health agencies in Ontario looking for help for their child. Only parents who contacted the agencies themselves were included in the study. Families weren’t included if the youth called for help themselves or if someone called on behalf of a child in her/his care (e.g., child welfare worker). The parents were asked questions about all the contacts they made with agencies and professionals during the past year in seeking help for their child.

What did the researchers find?
Overall, how families seek help for their child’s mental health issues is much more complex than originally believed. Families had contacted an average of 4 different service providers during the previous year. Most families were involved with multiple sectors (in other words they were receiving help from the mental health sector along with the education, medical/health, child welfare, or juvenile justice sectors).

About half of parents looked for different types of treatment for the same problem (for example, individual counseling along with medication for a child with anxiety problems), or help for different problems at different agencies (for example, help for their child’s depression at one agency, and eating problems at a different agency). A quarter of families turned down at least one treatment that was offered, mostly due to access issues or disagreement with the treatment approach. Almost 1 in 5 families had been involved in the mental health system for more than one year. Characteristics of the child and family...
did not differ between families who have been looking for help for more than one year compared to those who were looking only within the past year.

**How can you use this research?**

Having families involved with multiple mental health agencies can lead to greater system costs, increased burdens on families, insufficient treatment, or unequal distribution of services. Administrators and policymakers may find this study interesting in order to re-evaluate the structure and service model of the mental health system.

**Limitations and next steps**

This study excluded parents who did not speak English, who did not have a telephone at home, or who lived in a shelter. Cases where an adolescent self-referred, the child was under the care of child welfare, or the child had development disability were also excluded. Future research may examine: barriers faced by youth who self-refer; why families disagree with treatment approaches; or other factors that push parents to seek help from multiple places.

**About the researchers**

Graham J. Reid is an Associate Professor at the University of Western Ontario (UWO). Charles E. Cunningham is a Professor at McMaster University. Juliana I. Tobon is a PhD student at UWO. Barrie Evans is a Psychologist with the Thames Valley District School Board. Moira Stewart is a Professor at UWO. Judith B. Brown is a Professor at the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry and at UWO. Barbara Lent is an Associate Professor at UWO. Richard W. J. Neufeld is a Professor at UWO. Evelyn R. Vingilis is a Professor at UWO. Gregory S. Zaric is an Associate Professor at UWO and Canada Research Chair in Health Care Management Science. Dianne C. Shanley is the Director of Psychology Clinic/Lecturer at Griffith University, Australia. This Research Snapshot is based on their article “Help-Seeking for Children with Mental Health Problems: Parents’ Efforts and Experiences,” which was published in *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, vol. 38, no. 5 (2011): 384-97. greid@uwo.ca

**Keywords**

Help-seeking, mental health, children, adolescents, parents, health care system

This Research Snapshot is based on an article that has been critically appraised for quality and susceptibility to bias.

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