

The 'Let's Talk About Children' Approach

'The Let's Talk About Children Method is a compilation of thematic discussions about children, carried out between the worker and the parent(s).'
Solantaus, 2006 Manual and Log

Introduction

'Let's Talk About Children' (Let's Talk) aims to make talking about children and parenting issues a natural part of the alliance between parents and practitioners. It has been developed for work with parents with dependent children who are experiencing a mental illness or mental health issue.

The approach uses conversations with the parent to help both the parent and worker to explore the needs of the child, how the parent's mental health may be affecting their parenting and their child, and the assistance they may need. It uses supportive resources to equip parents to have conversations with their child and family about their mental health issues.

The Structure

Let's Talk occurs in three stages and consists of a series of conversations between the parent and their worker: if necessary, a fourth stage, a Parent Support Network Meeting with other invited individuals, can follow.

Preliminary Discussion

As part of a regular appointment, the practitioner suggests participating in Let's Talk, explains the approach and explores any ambivalence the parent may have about participating. The option of inviting the other parent or another carer of the child to participate and when is best for that to occur in the process is discussed.

Discussion One

Using the age-appropriate Log to guide and record the discussion, the parent identifies the strengths and vulnerabilities of each child, and raise concerns they may have. Additional scheduled time may be required depending on the number of children, as each child is discussed separately.

Discussion Two

The parent and practitioner spend time reflecting back on discussion one and move onto exploring specific topics relevant to families where a parent experiences mental health issues. Together, the parent and practitioner consider how the parent can best promote their child's development, build on strengths and address any areas of vulnerability. Guide books 'How can I help my child?' and 'When your parent has a mental illness' along with other resources for children, young people and parents found on the Emerging Minds website are used for reference.

Optional Parent Support Network Meeting

Together, the parent and practitioner identify and invite other workers, family or support people to a meeting. The workers are either currently involved with the family, or might be able to offer other supports to develop a consistent plan. The parent takes a central role in the planning of this meeting.

Benefits

- Addressing parenting stress, resulting in improved mental health outcomes for parents.
- Supporting healthy parent-child relationships, promoting protective factors for the child's wellbeing.
- Broadening the practitioner's understanding of the issues facing the parent and improving the client/practitioner alliance.
- Easily integrated into ongoing work and the recovery approach.
- Helps parents to develop their own strategies to build on identified strengths and to address vulnerabilities regarding their child and family.

Key Principles

- Acknowledges that parents may have fears about discussing their parenting and child's issues and finds ways to reassure them.
- Gives parents a rationale as to why Let's Talk would be beneficial.
- Reinstates parents as the experts on their child.
- Assumes the parent is the best person to talk with the child about their mental illness.
- Recognises that all parents need support.
- Considers the needs of all family members, including children.
- Builds trust to facilitate conversations about parenting and children.
- Employs a strengths/vulnerabilities focus.
- Employs a non-judgemental approach with enquiring questions.
- Utilises a trauma-informed approach.

The Stance

Let's Talk practitioners adopt a 'stance' or position that underpins a strengths-based collaborative approach to talking about children and parenting. The essential elements of the stance are:

A Proactive Approach to Addressing Hesitancy and Stigma

Let's Talk aims to counter the stigma that often surrounds talking about children and parenting in the context of a parent's mental illness. For this reason, it is important that practitioners anticipate a parent's hesitancy to be involved and persist with the goal of offering Let's Talk. Some of the hesitancies that you can anticipate and respond to will be explored later in this Guide.

Child and Parenting Focus

A practitioner with a child and parenting focus recognises the interconnection between parental mental health and child mental health and development. In practice, this means that a practitioner will explore and support parenting and child needs as a routine and important part of the treatment and recovery process. Within Let's Talk, this stance encourages discussions primarily about parenting, the parent-child relationship and opportunities to strengthen child development, within the structure of the Log.

Parent Role Orientation

In contrast to working with an individual-orientation that is focussed on the symptoms and management of an individual's mental illness, practitioners step back and view their clients in terms of their experience and expertise as parents.

Understanding

This position centres on the importance of understanding the unique experiences of both parents and their children. It involves taking on the role of a listener and being genuinely curious, whilst sensitively asking parents to help with understanding their experiences of parenting and their perceptions of child strengths and vulnerabilities.

Health Promotion

This stance presents an opportunity to prevent the emergence of difficulties and to promote child development and wellbeing. This involves continually asking: 'How can I support parents to influence environments that support children to thrive?'

Reflective Practice

It is important that practitioners are encouraged to reflect on their skills, knowledge and the emotional content of their work. Reflection and supervision can support professional development as well as supporting practitioners to understand and manage the attitudes and emotional responses that they may encounter when talking about parenting, children and families.