

Family-Centered Mental Health Services Research: Introduction to Part II

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This is the second of a two-part special issue that focuses on family issues in children's mental health. These publications illustrate growing research attention to family issues that have been largely ignored until very recently. Topics such as families' experiences with seeking and receiving services, relationships, with helping professionals, access to and coordination of services, and the impact of child mental health problems on the lives of parents and other family members are relatively new areas of investigation. In addition, the authors of this special issue use and value family members as primary sources of information, treating their perceptions and preferences as legitimate subjects of study. Several authors also address the expanded roles of family members within local and state-level systems of care.

Petr and Allen's article examines family members' interactions with professionals and their estimates of how frequently their expectations and preferences for professional behaviors are met. The authors' comparison of the responses of parents of children with serious emotional disorders and parents whose children have other disabilities when asked to identify desirable professional behaviors provides a useful foundation for the examination and further development of professional training. That parents of children with mental health problems were significantly less likely to have their expectations met underlines the need for more careful examination of professional practice within children's mental health.

The article by Jivanjee and Friesen focuses on professional education practices that address child and family issues, with an emphasis on interagency and family-professional collaboration. Their study of multidisciplinary university-based and agency-based training programs explores the role of families in the design, implementation, and evaluation of professional training efforts.

Brannan and her colleagues report on the development of an instrument to assess caregiver strain associated with caring for a child with an emotional disorder. This short instrument differentiates negative effects associated with objective, observable occurrences (e.g., interruptions, missed work, social isolation) and two dimensions of subjective negative feelings. This work adds to the very small body of literature that gives attention to the impact on the family of the circumstances and behaviors of children with serious emotional disorders.

Comparing the empowerment of family caregivers whose children have serious emotional disorders with the status of those whose children have emotional disorders and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is the focus of the article by Singh and his colleagues. Their finding of a strong association between membership in parent support groups and high levels of empowerment is one of the first reports about this relationship. This research lends support to efforts throughout the country to develop and strengthen family support organizations and other mechanisms designed to increase empowerment.

Farmer and her colleagues examine the relationship between the impact of a child's circumstances and behavior on caregivers and patterns of mental health service use. In addition to adding to the very small body of knowledge about "family impact," these findings suggest the need for more systematic examination of factors, including negative impact on caregivers, that account for entry into services.

Adding to the knowledge base about objective strain as conceptualized by Brannan and colleagues in this issue, Brennan and Poertner examine the relationship between employment patterns, child behavior, and stress in families whose children have serious emotional disorders. Their research constitutes an important beginning in this largely unexplored area of work and family research.

This special issue represents both a growing recognition of the importance of family members' experience and an acknowledgment of their contributions to system reform. The special issue features methodological advances but also demonstrates how much knowledge development remains to be done. We hope that this collection of studies and commentaries will be useful in the continuing effort to achieve appropriate, responsive, community-based services for children with emotional, behavioral, or mental disorders and their families.

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