



Parental Mental Health: The Impact on Children 2026


Barnardos
Because childhood lasts a lifetime

Parental Mental Health - The Impact on Children



Introduction

Barnardos provides services across 56 service locations in the country, working with over 35,000 children and families last year, including over 5,000 through targeted support services. At Barnardos, we believe that all children deserve the best start in life. Our services aim to transform the lives of vulnerable children because childhood lasts a lifetime.

One of the most important ways of providing children experiencing disadvantage the best opportunity for positive wellbeing and development is to make sure they live in a safe, consistent and secure environment with loving adults who can parent positively. Unfortunately, there are adversities that can make that more challenging.

This briefing focuses on one of those issues, poor parental mental health. We are working with more and more families where this is an issue and witnessing the impact on the children in those households. This report outlines the prevalence of the issue across the country, the impact on children and actions that could be taken to reduce the resulting childhood trauma and harm.

Without adequate supports, children living in households experiencing poor parental mental health are at greater risk of developing their own mental health problems, disengaging from school, struggling to build relationships and generally experiencing poorer wellbeing and future opportunities.

In order to improve children and young people's mental health across the country, a firm commitment made under this Government, it's important to prioritise addressing the negative impact of parental mental health. Wrap around family supports mitigate and reduce the potential harm and negative impacts on children. Enhancing and making them more readily available should be a first step, because childhood lasts a lifetime.



Methodology

In developing this report, we commissioned Amárach Research to carry out a nationally representative survey of 1,000 parents across the country. This was carried out in March 2026. Additionally, we spoke to parents across our services facing mental health issues and staff supporting them to get their experiences and views on parental mental health, how it affects children and supports needed to prevent harm.

Prevalence of Poor Parental Mental Health

Poor parental mental health is a wide-ranging issue, from diagnosed conditions to struggles around persistent anxiety and feelings of being constantly burnt out. Last year just over one thousand children we supported in our targeted services had experienced poor parental mental health (19%).

Research has estimated that approximately 20% of adults in Ireland suffer from a mental health illness¹ and almost a quarter of all families (23%) have at least one parent who has, or had, a mental health illness². A study on adverse childhood experiences found that 15% of participants had an immediate family member with a mental health condition³.

However, existing research tends to primarily focus on parents who have engaged with mental health services or have received a formal diagnosis of a mental health illness, therefore, missing out on those who have not come forward for support or who have missed specific thresholds⁴. The survey we commissioned goes into detail about the wide-ranging mental health issues parents are currently facing and have experienced in the past and the impact this has had on their children.

¹ Mulligan, C. et al. (2021). 'The Family Talk Programme in Ireland: A Qualitative Analysis of the Experiences of Families with Parental Mental Illness.' *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12. doi:10.3389/fpsy.2021.783189

² [PRIMERA-Research-Briefing-Report.pdf \(cmhcr.eu\)](#)

³ [Associations and mediating factors between adverse childhood experiences and substance use behaviours in early adulthood: A population-based longitudinal study - ScienceDirect](#)

⁴ Furlong, M. et al. (2021). 'Family Talk versus usual services in improving child and family psychosocial functioning in families with parental mental illness (PRIMERA – Promoting Research and Innovation in Mental Health Services for Families and Children): study protocol for a randomised controlled trial.' *Trials*, 22(243). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-021-05199-4>



Survey Results

Poor mental health

Results from the Amárach survey of 1,000 nationally representative parents show that over one in ten parents (12%) said they were currently experiencing poor mental health. An additional 34% of parents said at some point in the past, since having children, their mental health was poor. Cumulatively almost half (46%) said their mental health had been poor at some point since having children. Forty seven percent reported moderate current mental health and 42% stated good mental health⁵.

Worryingly, almost double the number of parents in lone-parent households (19%) said they were currently experiencing poor mental health compared to parents in two-parent households (10%).

Anxiety/Depression/Burn out

One quarter of parents reported being burnt out most of the time (24%), one in ten said they felt depressed (9%) most of the time with one in seven saying they were anxious most of the time (16%) and a similar number saying they felt overwhelmed most of the time (17%).

Nearly every parent (95%) said they currently experience one of the issues at least some of the time with over half (54%) saying they currently felt all of the issues at least some of the time.

How often do you feel:	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
Overwhelmed	17%	69%	13%
Anxious	16%	68%	16%
Depressed	9%	55%	36%
Burnt out/exhausted	24%	61%	15%

⁵ Interestingly, adults with only children aged 18 or over were twice as likely to report good mental health (65%) and half as likely to report poor mental health (6%.)



Mothers were two and a half times more likely to say they felt overwhelmed most of the time (25%) compared to fathers (10%) and almost twice as likely to feel anxious most of the time (20% compared to 12%).

Parents in one-parent households were twice as likely as parents in two-parent households to say they felt overwhelmed most of the time (29% compared to 15%), and two and a half times more likely to say they were depressed most of the time (19% compared to 7%).

Diagnosed conditions

Just over one in ten parents said they had a diagnosed mental health condition (11%). A similar proportion said that the other carer in the household (if there was one) had a diagnosed condition. One in five (19%) parents under the age of 35 said they had a diagnosed mental health condition compared to just 6% of parents aged over 55.

Additionally, one third of parents said that they experienced depression during their time being a parent (32%) and one in five (20%) said they had experienced other symptoms or conditions affecting mental health and wellbeing, such as panic attacks or extreme mood swings, since becoming parents.

4. Impact on Children - Interview Results

Existing research

Growing up with a parent experiencing poor parental mental health is an adverse childhood experience. Exposure to any adverse childhood experience during critical periods of early life may increase the likelihood of exposure to a range of adverse factors.

The consequences of living in a home with a parent dealing with poor parental mental health can be detrimental to children's health and wellbeing. Parental mental health difficulties can lead to a whole range of issues for children and



young people, including worse mental health, more behavioural problems⁶⁷, lower self-esteem, reduced academic attainment⁸ and lower future developmental outcomes⁹¹⁰. Results from our survey further reinforce these findings.

Research demonstrates that the potential impact of poor mental health on parenting can be significant, and may lead to parents' disengagement and detachment from their children and their needs, combined with decreased patience and increased harshness. Parents who are able to experience positive mental health or manage their mental health issues are typically: better able to model positive behaviours for their children, including stress-management and coping mechanisms; more likely to provide a stable and nurturing environment for their children; and better positioned to manage family functioning¹¹.

Survey findings

Out of all 1,000 parents surveyed, just under half (44%) said during their time being parents their mental health had moderately (36%) or substantially (8%) negatively impacted their children. 55% said it had never or only had a minor negative impact.

One in five parents with diagnosed mental health conditions (21%) said their mental health had significantly negatively impacted their children compared to

⁶ Meadows Sarah O., McLanahan Sara S., Brooks-Gunn Jeanne. 2007. "Parental Depression and Anxiety and Early Childhood Behavior Problems across Family Types." *Journal of Marriage and Family; Minneapolis* 69(5):1162-77; Schepman Karen, Collishaw Stephan, Gardner Frances, Maughan Barbara, Scott Jacqueline, Pickles Andrew. 2011. "Do Changes in Parent Mental Health Explain Trends in Youth Emotional Problems?" *Social Science & Medicine* 73(2):293-300.

⁷ Parental mental health problems may act as a stressor for children during a sensitive period because parents are central to the lives of their children and provide an essential source of social control, self-esteem, and belonging. Wilkinson Renae, Andersson Matthew A. 2019. "Adolescent Socioeconomic Status and Parent-Child Emotional Bonds: Reexamining Gender Differences in Mental Well-Being during Young Adulthood." *Society and Mental Health* 9(1):95-110.

⁸ Roberts, J.P. (2022). *Parenting in a Pandemic: A Two-Part Study Exploring the Impact of COVID-Stress, Technoference and Paternal Mental Health on Parenting & Child Development*. Ph.D. Thesis. University of Surrey. Available at:

<https://openresearch.surrey.ac.uk/esploro/outputs/doctoral/99679065802346/filesAndLinks?index=0>

⁹ Roberts, 2022

¹⁰ They are significantly more likely to develop psychopathology than children whose parents do not have a mental illness. They are five times more likely to avail of health, social and mental health services in their lives. Large bodies of research also indicate that these children are at a very high risk of developing the same illness as their parent(s) or another serious mental disorder. Hosman, C.M.H, et al. (2009) 'Prevention of emotional problems and psychiatric risks in children of parents with a mental illness in the Netherlands: The scientific basis to a comprehensive approach.' *Advances in Mental Health*, 8(3), 250-263. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5172/jamh.8.3.250>

¹¹ Cherry, 2023



8% of those who did not have a diagnosed mental health condition. Over half (51%) of parents who had experienced depression or other symptoms such as panic attacks said their mental health had significantly or moderately negatively impacted their children compared to only 19% of those who didn't.

The results show that a significant proportion of parents across the country believe that their mental health has had a negative impact on their children. Despite parents often trying their utmost, those with greater mental health issues, are substantially more likely to believe their mental health had significantly negatively impacted their children.

Parents were asked during their time as a parent or guardian of children under 18, has the mental health and wellbeing of another adult in the household ever negatively impacted their children/family, and 10% said significant and a further 31% said moderate.

Parents in one-parent households were twice as likely to say at some point their mental health (14% compared to 7%) had significantly negatively impacted their children compared to parents in two-parent household.

Multiple adversities

Poor parental mental health should not be viewed in isolation to other parental adversities, challenges and disadvantages. When poor mental health is combined with one or more additional adversities, it can lead to a significantly greater likelihood of negatively impacting children and suggest a greater need for additional targeted supports.

For example, almost one in five parents (18%) who had issues with substance misuse said that their mental health had a significant negative impact on their children compared to just one in twenty (5%) of parents who said they'd never had an issue with substances. Similarly, 15% of parents who had separated said their mental health had significantly negatively impacted their children compared to just 6% of those who had not separated.



Of the 44% of parents who said their mental health had moderately or significantly negatively impacted their children:

- 55% said it led to increased struggles in their children regulating emotions
- 50% said it increased anxiety within their children
- 46% stated their children became less confident and a similar number (45%) less secure
- 42% witnessed increased high need behaviour among children
- 42% saw their children becoming more withdrawn
- 39% believed it increased children's struggles with friendships/relationships
- 39% becoming more emotionally detached from parents.
- 35% increased difficulties engaging in schools

Views and experiences of parents Barnardos supports

We spoke to parents we support in services across the country who have experience of poor mental health to get their views as to the specific impact it had on their children.

The main concern parents discussed was that their own mental health issues were leading to increased mental health issues, such as anxiety, among their children. They felt that children could pick up on their own mental health difficulties.

"When I am particularly anxious, everything becomes a huge issue, even though a part of my brain is telling the anxious part that it's not a big deal, I tend to snap at my children which I then feel guilty about."

"Anger issues which caused me to lose control and low moods impacting on how I treated my child"

Parents we spoke to were worried that their own struggles to control their emotions meant they had failed to teach their children coping mechanisms and tools for regulating their feelings and therefore their behaviour, which could play out when engaging with friends and within school.

"I have low tolerance and would shout a lot, instead of just pausing and taking a breath and modelling good behaviour, I would find I'm very dis regulated and the consequences is that I fear my child is now not able to regulate."

Parents said that they could be more detached from their children and more distant more frequently, and were concerned about the emotional impact this had



on their children and their emotional development. Children could feel less secure in their relationships with their parent, which in turn made them less secure around others, and could lead to them being more withdrawn and lead to difficulties developing and maintaining friendships.

"Be anxious or overwhelmed makes me less present and able to cope with their own emotional necessities."

"I find it difficult to be fully present and engaged with them. I convince myself I'm failing them as a mother."

"During times of overwhelm and anxiety I tend to retreat into myself and not be fully available to my child."

"Sometimes I feel so tired, and I have the feeling that I can't give my daughter the quality attention she deserves. It takes a huge effort for me to overcome that feeling sometimes."

Similarly, parents repeatedly discussed concerns about being less patient with their children and being more likely to lose their temper. At times parents saw this lead to changes in children's behaviour, they may act out or become more withdrawn.

"Feeling overwhelmed and having no patience, getting impatient with normal children carry on. Children can feel overlooked and act out or go too quiet."

Parents spoke about being more tired and less able to enforce routines and set boundaries, leading to children potentially struggling with rules outside of the home. Parents we interviewed were concerned about the impact that poor routines had on their children, in particular around engagement with school.

"Struggle to get out of bed every morning. I am never awake when my daughter goes to school and my son often plays computer games or watches TV beside me until I wake up. This makes me feel really guilty and ashamed. I'm always tired."

"When I was feeling burnt out and overwhelmed, I struggled to be present and active - more letting them be 'free range'."



Support provided by Barnardos

Barnardos works in 56 service locations across the country, supporting thousands of children and their parents annually. Our services statistics show that in approximately one in six families we support, parental mental health and wellbeing issues are present, making it one of the main issues families we support currently face.

Through our family support services, we offer a range of support for those parents experiencing mental health and wellbeing issues. Our aim is to support parents into a better place to allow them to focus on their parenting skills, improve household environments and relationships for families and generally give children living in those homes better opportunities to thrive.

Our intensive, home-based, one-to-one parenting support programme for parents has been proven to improve parent-child relationships; parent's confidence and reduced anxiety; parent-child communication; parental understanding of, and ability to manage, their child's behaviour; social development of the child; consistent routines; parental involvement in the child's education.

Recommendations

"I believe some very simple support would have made a huge difference, just to know that I wasn't the only person feeling a certain way, feeling overwhelmed, not knowing if you were doing it right, questioning every decision that you made."

"I just don't know what to do and don't have anyone to talk to. Having someone to talk to who understood. It would have to be easily attainable without judgment."

Although there is clear policy commitment to improve the wellbeing of children and young people; there is limited acknowledgement, despite substantial



research, of the important role that parental mental health and wellbeing plays on children's future development in general¹²¹³.

There have been some recent policy improvements, such as within the Child and Youth Mental Health Action Plan to increase access to evidence-based parenting and family support programmes aimed at enhancing children and young people's social and emotional skills, parental practices and parental mental health. Unfortunately, these have been framed as a long-term action with no further detail as to how this will be achieved. All too often child related strategies fail to adequately mention the role parents and their wellbeing plays in their children's wellbeing and future outcomes. Similarly, too often adult strategies and services fail to take into account the impact a parent's wellbeing has on the family around them, and in particular children¹⁴.

As our survey results show, a substantial proportion of parents across the country are dealing with poor mental health or have done in the past. Tens of thousands of children and young people living with their parents are at elevated risk of developing mental health issues, struggling to engage in school and finding it difficult to build relationships. The Government can reduce the likelihood of the risks of poorer outcomes for children living in households where poor parental mental health is present, whilst also mitigating potential harm these children may face by:

1. Stigma and public awareness.

The issue of parental mental health and its impact on children can be substantial.

¹² Within Young Ireland, the government's child policy framework, a key objective is improving children and young people's physical and mental health and wellbeing with an aim to address barriers to achieving better outcomes for children and young people.

¹³ Sharing the Vision, Ireland's national mental health policy, sets out a commitment to improve promotion, prevention and early intervention around mental health. It promises there will be a focus in childhood and adolescence on positive mental health and the protective factors for enhancing wellbeing and quality of life, acknowledging that early prevention and intervention will strengthen children and young people and improve their emotional resilience

¹⁴ It's important to recognise that the National Supporting Parents Strategy sets out to try to address this, aiming to achieve greater access to parenting support services through an improved partnership approach across departments, as does the work of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Office.



As a society, we have made huge progress in helping children and young people feel ok and comfortable talking about their mental health. We now need to make progress helping parents feel comfortable discussing and talking about mental health in the context of being a parent. The government should develop a campaign, raising the awareness of parental mental health, the impact on children, and local parenting support services.

2. Early intervention and prevention.

Currently, the level of need for whole family support services for families affected by parental mental health, particularly those dealing with multiple adversities, far outstrips what is available in local communities. The earlier families can access these services the greater the likelihood of preventing poor parental mental health from negatively affecting children. This has the potential to help reduce the level of mild to moderate mental health issues among children across Ireland.

The Government must act on commitments to increase access to evidence-based parenting and family support programmes, that will enhance children and young people's wellbeing and parental mental health, by increasing funding for intensive family support services working with parents facing poor mental health.

3. Adult mental health services.

Adult mental health services are too often unaware whether or not their patients are parents, resulting in tens of thousands of potentially vulnerable children remaining hidden from possible support services. The parenting status of all adults engaged with mental health services should be recorded and a referral offer made to all families with children under 18, to sufficiently funded local family support services.

About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960's, Barnardos works with vulnerable children and families to provide practical, social and emotional support.

Barnardos supports children and families all across Ireland who have been affected by traumatic life events such as abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction.

Our core purpose remains the same; 'to help the most vulnerable children in society achieve their full potential – regardless of their family circumstances, their gender, race or disability' – **Because Childhood Lasts a Lifetime.**



Because childhood lasts a lifetime

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