Innovations in the Assessment and Treatment of Families with Parental Substance Misuse: Implications for Child Protection

Children living in families with parental substance misuse face considerable adversity and are at high risk of poor outcomes that include emotional and behavioural problems, poor school attainment and early use of alcohol and drugs. However, parental substance misuse typically co-occurs with other complex difficulties (see Bromfield et al., 2010), including mental health problems, experiences relating to parents' own childhood and current financial disadvantage. These families are often marginalised, sole-parent households living in impoverished neighbourhoods characterised by criminal activity (Dawe et al., 2006).

Given the complexities and risks present when these problems coalesce, it is not surprising that research consistently shows that children exposed to the adversities associated with parental addiction are at heightened risk of child maltreatment (e.g. Chaffin et al., 1996; Kelleher et al., 1994). When parents are misusing substances, the family is more likely to become involved with the child welfare system, children are more likely to be removed from the home and they are less likely to be reunified (Canfield et al., 2017). Moreover, although many parents avoid seeking treatment because they fear losing custody of their children, sustained engagement in substance use treatment, particularly family-oriented substance use treatment, may decrease the probability of removal and increase the probability of reunification if children must be removed (e.g. Green et al., 2007; Grella et al., 2009). The complexity of the problems for families involved in the child protection system because of parental substance misuse has been documented repeatedly, across cultures, for more than 20 years in a range of reviews, reports and inquiries (e.g. Dawe et al., 2006). Sadly, the problems are often chronic in nature and engagement in substance use treatment and child protection systems is often recurrent.

The issues surrounding the assessment and provision of support for families are equally as complex as the families themselves. Simple approaches targeting single
domains of family functioning in isolation, such as parenting skills, are unlikely to improve family functioning and divert children from the child protection system. Creative and innovative approaches drawing from models of child development and adult psychopathology are needed to inform the development of effective assessment processes and family support systems; and there is growing evidence that they may be more effective than traditional approaches to intervention where substance use treatment, family support and child welfare services are offered in different ways and in different locations with poor coordination (for a review, see Niccols et al., 2012). Importantly, the identification and tailoring of interventions need to extend well beyond the traditional approach of targeting families once they have been flagged within the child protection system (for a discussion, see McMahon and Luthar, 1998). This special issue provides an opportunity to consider innovative and creative approaches to supporting families with parental substance misuse in ways that are inclusive, give serious consideration to the issues associated with marginalisation and provide thoughtful suggestions for service and policy development.

In the first of the four papers highlighted in this special issue, Judith Harwin and colleagues (2018) provide an analysis based on observations of court proceedings in English Family Drug and Alcohol Court. The authors draw from relational theory which emphasises the 'co-construction of meaning' to enhance the development of a partnership approach to construct a semi-structured observational schedule. This was then used to code the extent to which Family Drug and Alcohol Court judges adopted an approach consistent with the principles of relational theory across 154 hearings in ten different care proceeding courts (2009–16). Forty-two parent interviews were also conducted and subsequently analysed thematically to determine the fit with the proposed model of cooperative problem-solving and relational practice. There was persuasive evidence that the judiciary adopted a relational approach across nine problem-solving practices, for example, talking directly to parents, expressing interest in progress, and inviting parents' views. Parents consistently reported that the court process was helpful and markedly different from previous experiences of care proceedings. The study adds further support for a model of practice that moves from adversarial to one that is embedded within the principles of therapeutic jurisprudence.

The second of these papers draws attention to the complex issues around fatherhood, substance use and treatment support. Despite many years of discussion and debate about the importance of acknowledging fatherhood within traditional drug treatment settings (McMahon and Rounsaville, 2002), there has been relatively little focus on the relationship between substance abuse, fatherhood and parenting at either a practice or research level. Carla Stover and colleagues have been one of few research groups that have tackled this issue in a series of papers describing the development of an intervention for fathers (Stover, 2013, 2015). The current paper (Stover et al., 2018) adds to these by highlighting the importance of addressing both interpersonal violence and hostile aggressive parenting within a residential substance abuse treatment facility. Importantly, the authors argue that addressing poor emotional regulation will result in reduced substance use relapse, intimate partner violence and child maltreatment. The key to engagement of fathers is the ongoing and active acknowledgement of their parenting role. This pilot study provides encouraging data on retention, acceptability and attitudinal

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change. More than anything else, this paper highlights the extent to which fathers have been neglected in discussions about links between parental addiction, related problems and child welfare intervention, despite repeated calls across cultures for a better understanding of their needs and effective intervention that addresses these needs from within the substance use treatment and child welfare systems (e.g. McMahon and Rounsaville, 2002; Zanoni et al., 2014).

While there is often a focus in child protection assessments on parental substance misuse, the reality is that this rarely occurs in isolation but is one of many interrelated problems that may be both risk factors for and consequences of substance misuse. In the third paper in this special issue, a key question raised by Margaret Lloyd (2018) sought to determine the relative contribution that these problems may have (both as individual risk factors and as a cumulative socioeconomic risk score) on the time to and likelihood of reunification in a sample of parents who were engaged in a substance abuse treatment programme and whose children were involved in the child protection system. Her findings underscore the importance of conducting a comprehensive socioeconomic assessment of the family's needs as well as having a detailed analysis of specific problems such as parental substance abuse.

In the last paper in this special issue, Silke Meyer and Elizabeth Eggins (2018) acknowledge the complexity of risk within families affected by parental addiction, and they provide a much-needed analysis of formal and informal forms of help-seeking behaviour within a representative sample of parents reporting the misuse of alcohol. Defining a range of sociodemographic characteristics, developmental experiences, concurrent problems, psychological characteristics as parents and social influences, the authors sought to identify key correlates of formal and informal forms of help-seeking for parenting concerns. As might be expected, the rate of help-seeking among parents experiencing difficulty with the use of alcohol was relatively low, but the authors identified some important correlates of the different forms of help-seeking. The results have important implications for the development of community-based strategies to engage parents having difficulty with substances before there is a need for intervention by the child welfare system.

Finally, Lauren Harding (2018) reviews the second edition of a text developed by Joy Barlow et al. (2016) for professionals who work with families affected by addiction. When considered as a complement to the four research papers, the review of this text highlights the needs of managers, educators and professionals within the service delivery system for practical techniques and materials to better meet the needs of children affected by their parents' addiction. According to Harding, the text is a very practical, very useful resource for professionals interested in responding to children struggling with the alcohol and drug use of their parents.

Despite many years of concern about the impact of alcohol and drug addiction on family systems, a significant proportion of children across cultures live in a household with a parent who is struggling with a substance use disorder (Dawe et al., 2006; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Another less visible, but equally significant, proportion of children live away from a parent with a substance use disorder. Many of these children are at risk for involvement with the child welfare system.
Although parental substance use is often identified as the primary problem within these families, decades of research clearly indicate that substance use is typically just one dimension in a matrix of problems that represent a threat to the wellbeing of parents and children. The papers in this special issue highlight four important themes in the complex process whereby parental addiction brings families into contact with substance use treatment and child welfare systems. Our hope is that they will contribute to ongoing efforts to expand thinking about the complex nature of the problem so that policymakers, administrators, healthcare providers and child welfare workers might be better able to support parents struggling with addiction and minimise the harm to children exposed to the complex array of problems arising from the addiction of their parents.

References


