

# BUILDING CONNECTIONS: EXPERIENCES OF PARENTING WHILE LIVING WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

## A NATIONAL SURVEY

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Final Report April 2025



## Acknowledgements

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- All the stakeholders involved in the research working group in particular the parents who volunteered their time and expertise so willingly.
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- Tusla Parent Participation Funding which enabled us to bring on board the expertise of Mary Immaculate College Researchers.
- All of the agencies and individuals who circulated the survey to parents nationwide.
- Most importantly all the parents who shared their experiences and valuable insights in the survey.

## Research Team

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## BACKGROUND

This research was conducted in response to a call for funding by Clarecare, Tusla, and the HSE, to investigate the lived experiences of people parenting with mental health challenges. The collaborative research group for this project included various stakeholders, namely Tusla, HSE, Clarecare and Mary Immaculate College (MIC), and notably parents themselves who have lived experiences of mental health challenges. Note that 'mental health challenges' is the term agreed by all stakeholders for the target participants of the study to be inclusive of both diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health experiences. The research was very much in the ethos of research 'with' parents rather than research 'on' parents.

The online survey questions used in this study were developed by the MIC researchers in collaboration with the above stakeholders including parents and were informed by transcripts from previous focus groups with parents who were experiencing, or had experienced, mental health challenges. The final report was also written collaboratively with parents with lived experience. The aim of the survey was to explore the types of challenges faced by participants, to assess what existing support services were working well, and to further enhance the support services available for parents experiencing mental health challenges.

Previous research suggests that approximately 23% of families in Ireland have at least one parent who has experienced a mental health disorder (Mulligan et al., 2021), with adults in Ireland having the third highest incidence of mental health illness across 36 European countries (OECD, 2021). The most recent OECD report describes an increase in mental health disorders over the last decade, while also acknowledging the difficulty in establishing exactly how many people experience poor mental health. It is recognised that this increase in mental health disorders has meant there is a growing demand for services in a time when existing access to services is becoming progressively more difficult (OECD, 2023).

Recent Irish research from a large nationally representative cohort study, concluded that any level of poverty trajectory from early to late childhood, was linked with poorer psychopathology for both Irish children and their mothers (O'Driscoll et al., 2024). In Barnardos (2024) report 60% of parents interviewed perceived their own mental health challenges had a moderate or considerable negative impact on their children's own mental health. Research shows that having a parent with a mental illness increases the lifetime risk by 41% to 77% of the child also developing a mental illness (see Mulligan et al., 2021). Considering these risks and challenges, supporting parents and considering the well-being of the whole family is essential in protecting and supporting children and their future mental health (Campbell & Poon, 2020).

For additional information on the background to the research, along with further details of the method and findings please see the full report.

## **ABOUT THE SURVEY**

To provide a high level of anonymity to participants in this study, given the sensitive nature of the topic and the demonstrated concerns around stigma in the existing literature, an online anonymous survey was developed. All stakeholders from Clarecare, Tusla, the HSE, MIC, and parents, met to draft, edit and revise the survey questions in line with the aims of the study. Parents were invited to respond to questions about their mental health challenges, parenting challenges and how these challenges interacted. Additionally, other questions asked about factors that acted as supports or barriers to seeking help with their parenting challenges.

The survey was launched on October 10<sup>th</sup> 2024 on World Mental Health Day, and closed on November 30<sup>th</sup> 2024. During this period the survey was advertised to parents through social media, print media, radio interviews and through direct contact with various organisations including primary schools, secondary schools, early years settings, libraries, GPs, family resources centres and sports clubs. All survey questions and data collection procedures were approved by the Mary Immaculate College and Tusla Ethics Committees.

## **ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS**

The online survey was completed by 243 parents in Ireland (89% mothers; 11% fathers). Parents from all four provinces in Ireland took part in the survey. Thirteen people were excluded from the analysis as they had identified as being from outside the Republic of Ireland or did not have mental health challenges and consequently did not meet the research inclusion criteria, resulting in a final sample of 230 parents included in the analysis.

Family sizes ranged between 1 and 7 children, with 75% of parents indicating they were co-parenting while 19% were parenting alone. For 51% of parents their mental health challenge was current, but for 41% it was in the past. In relation to a formal diagnosis for their mental health challenge, 56% indicated they had a formal diagnosis, while 41% indicated they did not.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

Findings highlighted the difficulties many parents face when parenting with a mental health challenge. Parent's descriptions of their experiences (see final page for examples) also indicated considerable individual differences in what may be helpful, or unhelpful, for their family in seeking support.

Key findings for parents in the survey indicated that:

- 66% of parents had more than one mental health challenge (e.g., anxiety and depression).
- 83% of parents indicated their parenting challenges were sometimes or always more difficult because of their mental health challenges.

- 67% of parents had taken medication at some stage for their mental health challenge, but many of these parents (54%) said their role as a parent was not included in discussions around their medication.
- 46% of parents indicated they did not know where to access parenting supports.
- 61% of parents had not been able to meet and talk to other parents who had experienced mental health challenges.
- Common barriers preventing parents from accessing parenting supports included stigma and fear of judgement, along with practical issues like childcare, travel and money.
- 35% of parents indicated their child knew about the parent's mental health challenge, while 24% indicated that their child might know.
- 41% of parents indicated their child did not know about the mental health challenge. Parents gave a variety of reasons about why this was the case (e.g., fear of the child judging them; fear of the child worrying about them or overburdening the child; child too young to understand).
- A number of parents explicitly highlighted the need for the survey and welcomed the opportunity to tell their story and have their voice heard on this important topic.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study is unique in its parent informed and inter agency collaborative approach. Findings from the survey indicate that many parents who are experiencing mental health challenges find parenting challenges more difficult and would welcome specific supports. However, many have not accessed parenting supports to date, do not know where to access them and face a number of barriers to access. The findings highlight the need for a menu of available supports and will hopefully guide improvements to existing services as well as to the development of new and more effective interventions to help parents feel more supported in their role as parents while living with a mental health challenge.

It is important that organisations and services offering supports to those with mental health challenges identify if the individual seeking support is a parent, and if so that additional supports related to parenting are also offered. Supports should be tailored to individual experiences, their mental health challenges and parenting challenges, with the aim of supporting the whole family through difficult times.

It is also important that organisations and services offering parenting supports speak openly about parental mental health and encourage parents to consider and be open about their mental health and any challenges they are experiencing. There is clearly still a lot of fear, shame and guilt for parents in talking about their mental health challenges and we need to encourage open discussion and dialogue around these issues to combat the associated stereotypes and stigma.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Ultimately, while progress is being made, ongoing dialogue and cooperation between services, policymakers, and grassroots groups are essential to building a mental health system that is both inclusive and effective for parents with MH challenges, and others in wider communities.

On the basis of the survey findings, and in light of existing research, we offer the following recommendations:

### Raise awareness

- A variety of sources for parenting support, such as schools and GPs should all be employed to highlight the importance of parental mental health and signpost to appropriate support services.
- A variety of mediums (e.g. posters, social media, radio ads, word of mouth) should be employed to advertise parenting supports and recognise parenting as an ongoing process throughout a child's lifecycle.
- Parent education and general awareness campaigns need to address stigma at a societal level to challenge stereotypes around mental health, medication and help seeking behaviours, and to address fears around judgement about parental competency and confidentiality of support services.

### Staff training

- Staff training is important around the screening process for both parenting and mental health challenges, particularly around the importance of a sensitive non-judgemental think parent/think family approach.
- Parental status, and caregiving responsibilities within the family, should be considered in all discussions relating to supporting the individual with their mental health and their parenting (e.g., in relation to medication, side effects, scheduling of appointments).
- Information about additional supports for the children and wider family should also be offered when supporting a parent with mental health challenges.

### Engagement with parents

- Parents need to be validated for seeking help and for this to be seen as a strength as opposed to a negative.
- Need for a diverse range of support services to address the diverse needs of different parents, including both individual and group options.
- Need to work with the parent regarding communication with their children about their mental health and explore their concerns. We must respect parent wishes in relation to this and work at the individual parents' pace.

Further work is needed on the basis of these findings in relation to research, practice and policy, to determine how best to support those who are parenting with a mental health challenge.

*The most difficult part for me was when I entered the mental health services, I was told if we believe that you or your children are at risk we have the right to report it and at the time I was having suicide ideation, that line drove my anxiety through the roof and I shut down in fear of losing my children and bottled it and wasn't honest, which didn't help me get better. That sentence should not be said or if it is needed to be said explain it.*

*I felt so bad because I thought as a parent I should be the stable person. the person with answers, the person who could control their emotions, I'll never forget the look on my daughters face on the day I broke down*

*When parents cry out for help they should be urgently engaged with and not in my experience enormous efforts to blame parent and ignore what parent cry for help. I was told go home and get back to your routine*

*I get overwhelmed easily, especially parenting alone it feels like a battle between my child and my mental health. I'm trying to teach my son the importance of regulating feelings in a safe way and for him to talk. But I feel like a hypocrite because I am unable to do those things when I am overwhelmed.*