



Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime



Parental Mental Health & the Impact on Children

Report – May 2025

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Introduction

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. 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 worse wellbeing and future opportunities.

If we want to improve children and young people's mental health across the country, a firm commitment made under this new Government, addressing the negative impact of parental mental health must be a priority. Whole 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 Amarach Research to carry out a nationally representative survey of 390 parents across the country. This was carried out in March 2025. Additionally, we carried out 10 detailed one to one interviews with parents facing mental health issues supported in Barnardos services between November 2024 and February 2025. Finally, we spoke to staff across our services to get their views on parental mental health and wellbeing issues facing the families we support.

Parental mental health and wellbeing

Parental mental health is a wide-ranging issue. This report is focused on the impact it has on children and young people, covering the full spectrum of mental health issues from diagnosable mental illness to struggles around persistent anxiety and feeling constantly overwhelmed.

In Ireland, it is estimated that 20% of adults suffer from a mental health illness and almost a quarter of all families (23%) have at least one parent who has, or had, a mental health illness.

However, most research only accounts for parents who have engaged with mental health services or have received a formal diagnosis of a mental health illness, therefore, not fully representing the spectrum of mental health issues that all parents experience.

Results from the Amarach survey show that one in ten parents (10%) said they were currently experiencing poor mental health. Additionally, 39% of parents said at some point in the past, since having children, their mental health was poor. Therefore, almost half (49%) of all parents reported experiencing poor mental health currently or in the past since becoming parents. Fifty five percent reported moderate current mental health and one in three (35%) stated good mental health.

One in five parents (19%) said they felt overwhelmed most of the time, with a similar number reporting feeling burned out/exhausted (22%) and anxious (most of the time). Only one quarter of parents said they never felt burned out, with a similar number never being overwhelmed and one in 6 never being anxious (16%). Almost one in ten reported feeling depressed most of the time, with a further half of parents (48%) saying they felt depressed some of the time.

It's important to note that mothers were twice more likely to feel anxious and overwhelmed most of the time than fathers and twice as many parents with children under 5 (30%) reported feeling burned out most of the time compared to those with children aged 13–17.

How often do you feel:	Most of the time	Some of the time	Never
Overwhelmed	19%	60%	25%
Anxious	17%	68%	16%
Depressed	8%	48%	43%
Burned out/exhausted	22%	57%	25%

Almost four in ten parents said they had experience of depression/anxiety and or panic attacks with more than one in ten (12%) saying they had had a diagnosed mental health condition. Three quarters of parents (75%) said they had been affected by at least one of the below.

Has your mental health been affected by the following issue

Depression/anxiety/panic attacks	38%
Diagnosed mental health condition	12%
Bereavement/grief	38%
Family break up/separation	19%
Other condition/circumstance	22%



Impact on Parenting

Research demonstrates that the potential impact of poor mental health on parenting can be significant, and 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 functioning.

Almost seven in ten parents who completed the survey (69%) who experienced poor mental health or were affected by mental health difficulties said it negatively impacted their parenting. Almost one in three said it had little to no impact (30%).

Half of the seven in ten parents (49%) said it led to them being less emotionally available to their children with two thirds (63%) saying they were more impatient and less tolerant with them (62%). Over half said it negatively impacted their ability to enforce routines (54%), with two thirds (62%) saying it led to lack of energy to perform parenting tasks. 45% stated that they were likely to spend less social time with children as a result of their poor mental health and almost two thirds (65%) said it made them feel more guilty about their levels of parenting.

Impact on Parenting	
Less emotionally available/more emotionally detached	49%
Less day to day attention on children	41%
Decrease in social time with children	45%
Less able to enforce routines	54%
Increased feelings of guilt around poor parenting	65%
Increased difficulty in making parenting decisions	51%
More impatient/reduce tolerance with children	63%
Less empathetic	41%
Lack of energy to perform parenting tasks	62%

Impact on children

The consequences of 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 problems,

lower self-esteem, reduced academic attainment and lower future developmental outcomes. Results from our survey further reinforce these findings.

Worryingly, one in six parents completing the survey (16%) who said they had poor mental health or were negatively affected by mental health issues said it significantly negatively impacted their children, with a further half (54%) reporting it had a moderate negative impact. Less than one third (30%) said it had little to no impact.

More than half of parents with poor mental health who took part in the survey said it (52%) had led to increased anxiety and mental health issues among their children and 60% agreed it had led their children to struggle to regulate their emotions.

More than one in two parents experiencing poor mental health (51%) said it had made their children less confident, with a similar number suggesting it made them more insecure (49%) and one in three (36%) reporting it made them more withdrawn. For many parents (37%) it has been the cause of their children struggling with friendships.

Half of parents (50%) experiencing mental health difficulties led to problems with their children following routines and one in three (36%) said it led to problems engaging with school. More than two in five (41%) of these parents said that it led to more attention seeking behaviour among their children.


Poor parental mental health/difficulties impact on children	
Poor parental mental health/difficulties	Agreed
Increased anxiety and mental health difficulties	52%
Poor routines	50%
More insecure	49%
Struggle to regulate their emotions	60%
Difficulties engaging in school	36%
Struggling with friendships	37%
Less confident	51%
More withdrawn	36%
Increased attention seeking	41%
Becoming hyper alert	40%

Support Needed

Parents with poor mental health completing the survey were asked if they were receiving the support they needed. Almost half (43%) said they haven't received support they need, with one third (32%) saying they had received some support. Only one in four (25%) said they had received the support they needed. Parents were then asked what support they would find helpful

What support would be helpful?

Practical help with their children	54%
Help and support around their emotions so they can patient and present with their children	43%
Support for their children around their emotions and to help them understand the situation	47%
Help introduce better routines	40%
Counselling for you as a parent	56%
Counselling for children	44%
Emotional support for you as a parent	43%

It is clear that parents want more counselling support for themselves dealing with their own issues but also for their children. Additionally they want help in making sure their children can deal with their parent's mental health issue and to help them stay focused on their children. 



Views and Experiences of Parents we Support

We interviewed ten parents who we support in services across the country with experience of poor mental health. Below we outline the findings regarding how they felt it affected their parenting and their children.

Parenting problems

1. Lack of energy and struggles with routines.

Parents we interviewed said they felt they had less energy to enforce routines or challenge their children and more likely to give in to their demands.

“ I would find myself sitting in the car not wanting to enter my home. I would let the children watch more TV or play games into the night rather than enforce routines’.

2. More irritable and less likely to engage

For a significant proportion of parents we spoke to it, their poor mental health made parenting less enjoyable than it should otherwise have been, making them less likely to spend as much quality time with them. Some felt this was a result of parenting causing them increased stress and more feelings of not being able to cope, while others suggested it was because it took their focus away from their children.

“ Feelings of anxiety and low mood will impact my ability to be in the moment with my children, to have fun with them and to give them new experiences.

3. Feeling too overwhelmed to make decisions

Parents we interviewed spoke about how hard decisions could become that they would otherwise in the past have found straightforward when they had more positive mental health. This made parenting far more difficult for them and could worsen their mental health issues.

“ Nearly like you're stuck and can't make decisions because you're so overwhelmed and then you feel worse because you can't be the parent you need to be it's a horrible feeling

4. Emotionally unavailable.

Parents involved in interviews said they became less available to their children, particularly emotionally. This could be due to being burned out and not having the energy but also as a coping mechanism, fears that dealing with their children's emotional issues would trigger their own.

“ After a traumatic event, I was emotionally unavailable for children and the medication numbed my feelings and energy levels.

“ Children can feel my withdrawal from them emotionally and that compounds guilt, like a cycle.

5. Impatience

Parents reported being more likely to losing their temper more quickly with children, being shorter and sharper with them. Alongside this many suggested they would give into their demands more quickly and more frequently, despite knowing this wasn't in their best interests, as they struggled to cope with the increased anxiety and stress that arguing with their children brought.

“ I find that I am much more impatient even when I try not to be. I end up giving out to my child for things that really don't matter or aren't her fault and then in turn this makes me feel guilty after which doesn't help my mental health either

“ Feel unable to complete caring tasks. Allow extended screen time, less patience to interact, not playful.

7. Parental Guilt about being a good parent

Nearly every parent we spoke to said their poor mental health made them feel guiltier about not being a good enough parent. This in itself could lead to them overcompensating and actually worsening their mental health.

“ It's difficult to always be on when you're not feeling yourself, feeling of being a bad parent and overcompensating with love or affection but not able to translate that into being able to cook healthy meals, attend activities or do new things with the kids. Feeling like a failure and that you're letting them down.

Issues for Children

It's important to note that all parents said they tried to prevent their poor mental health from negatively affecting their families. However, they all appreciated that over time this was almost impossible, particularly when there was no support available. The most common issues outlined by parents are set out below.

1. Increased mental health difficulties

Many parents we spoke to said they were worried that it was a direct cause of their children developing mental health issues or certainly worsened their children's mental health.

- “ My insecurities and anxiety have rubbed off on them.
- “ My depression and anxiety seem to have been passed on to her.

2. Regulating emotions

Parents we spoke to were worried that because they struggled to control their own emotions they had failed to teach their children coping mechanisms and tools for regulating their feelings and therefore their behaviour.

- “ They also have a hard time regulating or expressing their feelings in a positive way, because my struggles with my mental health.

3. Insecurity

Most parents suggested that their children became less confident and secure due to their parent's mental health issues. Children felt 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 bringing about struggle developing and maintaining friendships.

- “ They're very shy in new situations and around people they are not used to and I have seen them being uncomfortable with family members they wouldn't see often.

4. Routines and school engagement

Parents we interviewed were concerned about the impact of poor routines had on their children, in particular around engagement with school.

- “ My child refuses to complete homework or go to bed at a reasonable time. I give in, then is too tired for school in the morning resulting in constantly being late or not attending at all.

5. Attention Seeking

Parents spoke about becoming more distant and less focused on their children, and as a result their children becoming more attention seeking. This could take the form of more disruptive behaviour or children trying to overly please parents and other people on a regular basis.

“ My youngest is the most impacted and keeps demanding attention which resulted in problems at school because even bad attention is still attention

Support Needed

Parents we spoke to said they want help that is holistic, dealing with practicalities but also helping them to improve their parenting skills when there are periods of poor mental health. They also expressed wanting support that involved and helped all of their family. One parent currently engaged with mental health services outlined the lack of interest their mental health professional had in their children.

“ Psychologist looking after me actually suggested my children would be affected but never offered any support or guidance on how to help me or them. Community health care worker who understood the situation may have been able to help me

Additional adversities

It is important that parental mental health is not viewed in isolation to other parental adversities, challenges and disadvantages. Parents are often dealing with considerable complexities and facing numerous additional challenges and adversities simultaneously to their parental mental health issues.

These additional adversities are often the cause of or certainly compounded their mental health and mental wellbeing. For example, they survey results found that twice as many parents who reported being affected by mental health difficulties said they either occasionally or frequently experienced challenges with substance issues they felt difficult to manage compared to parents who did not have mental health difficulties (23% compared to 9%).

For many parents, the combination of their mental health issues alongside additional adversities mean that their children are more likely to be negatively affected and therefore are in greater need for targeted support. For example, 50% more parents with poor mental health who had also separated from their child's other parent said their mental health significantly impacted their children compared to those who had not separated (25% compared to 16%).

Support provided by Barnardos

Barnardos works in 50 sites across the country, supporting thousands of children and their parents annually. Our internal statistics show that in approximately one in seven families we support there are parental mental health 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 put parents in 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, because childhood lasts a lifetime.

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.



Policy Context

Over the past five years there have been repeated promises by government leaders to make Ireland one of the best country's to be a child alongside numerous national strategies to improve child and youth overall wellbeing.

For example, the recently published Programme for Government firmly commits to do more to ensure children can 'achieve their full potential'. Similarly, 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.

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 well-being and quality of life, acknowledging that early prevention and intervention will strengthen children and young people and improve their emotional resilience.

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 this wellbeing and future development. Within the recently published Child and Youth Mental Health Action plan there is a positive action 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, this is 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 an adults wellbeing has on the family around them, and in particular children. There needs to be wider adoption of a whole family approach so that the outcomes of all are prioritised together, nowhere is this needed more than in regards mental health.

At the moment, too frequently once the outcomes of children are raised within certain Government Departments responsibility for supporting those children is almost immediately deferred to the Department of Children and/or Tusla. As a result the funding for those support services is inadequate when compared to levels of need.

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.

Recommendations

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 these 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. Early intervention and prevention.

Currently, the level of need for whole family support services for families affected by parental mental health 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 issue among children across Ireland. Funding for intensive family support services working with parents facing mental health issues must be increased.

2. 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 a referral to sufficiently funded local family support services.

3. Stigma and public awareness.

The issue of parental mental health and its impact on children can be substantial. As a society, we have made huge progress in making 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.



About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960s, 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.



Barnardos, Christchurch Square, Dublin 8.
Tel: +353 1 453 0355 Email: info@barnardos.ie
www.barnardos.ie