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**Challenges and Opportunities
in Children's Mental Health**
A View from Families and Youth

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is the nation's leading public policy center dedicated to promoting the economic security, health, and well-being of America's low-income families and children. Founded in 1989 as a division of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, NCCP is a nonpartisan, public interest research organization.

Challenges and Opportunities in Children's Mental Health: A View from Families and Youth

by Sarah Dababnah and Janice Cooper

This report documents critical issues in children's mental health policy and service delivery from the perspective of stakeholders in the family and youth movement. The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) convened the meeting that this report summarizes, Best Practices in Policy for Children's Mental Health Consultation Meeting with Stakeholders: Family and Youth Perspectives. It was designed to solicit guidance from families and youth involved in the child mental health field to support a research study entitled *Unclaimed Children Revisited*. Among the key findings of the meeting was that through a family and youth lens, many effective practices, some with supporting policy, have emerged but not been taken to scale. Another set of core findings was that family members and youth acknowledged the gains made in children's mental health but cited obstacles to improved outcomes for children and families, such as service limitations, provider attitudes and training, lack of services integration, fiscal constraints, a weak infrastructure, and a sparse array of services. The report describes participants' perspectives on the status of family and youth support and advocacy systems. It also highlights selected current innovative interventions directed or heavily influenced by parents, youth, and community advocates that strengthen family and youth influence in mental health policy and service planning and advance improved mental health outcomes for children, youth, and families.

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The ideal system would recognize that families and youth are the center of the system; ...decisions [would] be primarily based on the experiences and preferences of those being served...[and] reflect...knowledge about effective strategies, including practice-based evidence and evidence gathered through controlled studies.

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Overview

Children and youth with mental health problems and their families need the appropriate skills, tools, services, and supports to reach their full potential as productive, contributing citizens. Quality mental health services and supports can significantly improve their ability to attain school success, mental health, and social and emotional well-being, to maintain healthy relationships, to remain in stable living situations, and to stay out of jail and the juvenile justice system. This report, based on a meeting of youth and family members of children and youth who experience mental health problems, highlights how family-driven and youth-guided values and frameworks can improve research, policy, and practice and ultimately result in better care and healthier children and youth. Below we identify the challenges that the family members and youth reported as well as the policy, service, and research solutions that they proposed. The full report also includes examples of research, policy, and practice that involve families and youth as active partners.

The major take-home message is that a strong family-driven and youth-guided perspective in research, policy, and practice propels more effective, responsive service delivery systems. At the center of families' and youth's support for effective strategies rests their desire to see children and youth with mental health problems get better and lead productive lives. They called for an outcomes-focused delivery system that holds all stakeholders accountable, regardless of which service system the children and families are in.

Youth leaders, family, and community advocates also linked research with quality services. Today, too many children and youth with mental health problems and their families continue to encounter service delivery sys-

tems that struggle to meet their needs. Oftentimes, there are too few services, and many of those that exist rely on a deficit-based care model. Across the country, small numbers of children, youth, and their families *do* benefit from programs that focus on the individual strengths and needs. Thus, creating a policy framework that provides this kind of access to high-quality services for all children, youth, and families who need them is essential. Family members and youth recognize that they have a significant role to play in strengthening and expanding the array of quality mental health services and supports. For instance, increasingly family and youth:

- Serve as participatory researchers, system navigators for parents and youth, peer supporters, trainers, and service providers.
- Act as advocates for other parents.
- Help to address the workforce shortage, especially by increasing providers with linguistic and cultural competence.

Family members and youth also acknowledged the need for more widespread adoption of evidence-based practices and called for strategies that: (1) invest in research to determine the effectiveness of family/youth centered, and culturally and linguistically competent interventions that show promise in communities; (2) include family and youth engagement components; (3) embed strength-based and resilience principles and strategies; and (4) emphasize functional outcomes for children and youth in the home, school, and the community.

Finally, and importantly, family members and youth also considered themselves accountable as advocates. They called for the elimination of harmful policy practices such as custody relinquishment in exchange for services. This, they noted, conflicts with societal, family, and youth values and with the basic principles

of health care. Family members and youth also indicated the need to amend rules in the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program that serve as disincentives to work. They wanted a relaxation of SSI requirements that jeopardize youth health insurance or social supports. These and other urgent policy matters often first surface from children, youth, and families affected by mental health issues. Therefore, family members and youth strongly urged states to strengthen family and youth advocacy organizations in order to better serve mental health services users.

Recommendations

To strengthen family-driven and youth-guided research, policymakers should:

- Promote collaborative partnerships with families and youth in research.
- Increase the use of positive outcomes measures.
- Ensure the dissemination of outcomes data and research through user-friendly techniques and language.

To strengthen family and youth support in the context of *all* services, policymakers, researchers, and providers should:

- Make family and youth support a funded and essential component of service delivery.
- Provide family-driven, youth-guided, and responsive services and supports in settings that are readily accessible to children, youth, and their families.
- Take family-driven and youth-guided services to scale.
- Promote mental wellness and positive social and behavioral competencies by engaging children and youth in interesting and appropriate activities.

To take family-driven and youth-guided services to scale for *high-need youth*, policymakers and practitioners should:

- Provide family-driven, youth-guided, and responsive services and supports in settings that are readily accessible to children, youth and their families.
- Require cross-system accountability for improved outcomes as a condition of funding based upon developmentally appropriate, family-driven, and youth-guided practice.

- Require greater accountability for improved outcomes for children and youth as a condition for funding residential treatment providers.
- Foster adoption of family-driven and youth-guided evidence-based practice that works in community-based setting and with diverse populations.
- Infuse family-focused, culturally and linguistically competent, and developmentally appropriate principles across all mental health services, not just those delivered within the context of systems of care.

To address harmful practices and policies, state and federal-level policymakers should:

- Eliminate the practice of custody relinquishment in exchange for mental health services for children and youth.
- Amend rules governing Supplement Security Income to remove work disincentives for youth with mental health problems.
- Implement administrative practices that strengthen the family and youth voice.
- Support organizational and leadership development for family and youth advocacy organizations.

To strengthen the policy infrastructure to better support family and youth perspectives, policymakers and advocates should:

- Increase funding and other resources to support family meetings, including transportation, meals, and on-site specialized child care.
- Expand or create opportunities for policymakers and administrators to hear directly from families and youth.
- Build in policy requirements that give families and youth roles in policymaking bodies.
- Enhance networking capacity of parents, youth, and other family members.
- Invest in family and youth advocacy organizations and services directed by youth and families.
- Expand technical assistance offered by the federal government to states and communities that do not have formal systems of care grants.
- Promote and fund the development of a public health model that embraces a universal focus on children's mental health and addresses the needs of the most troubled children and youth.