Family Relationship Influences on Children's Mental Health: New Research, Emerging Themes, Future Opportunities

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Introduction and Overview

• The Andrew and Virginia Rudd Centre for Adoption Research and Practice
  o Overview and Introduction
  o What we are, what we do, who we are

• Some examples of Sussex Rudd Centre research, practice and policy impacts
  o Highlighting how family relationships impact child mental health: Revisiting the developmental interface between nature and nurture
  o Promoting improved support for adoptive parents and children: The importance of programme evaluation
  o Informing policy and practice: Translating research into real-world applications

• Future opportunities and next steps
  o Opportunity to transform front line services for vulnerable youth and families through evidence-led practice, training and capacity building
Sussex Rudd Centre

- **Central Mission (Scientific Research)**
  - To establish a research intensive Centre aimed at improving outcomes for children, parents, families
  - To implement a programme of research that will look at the major challenges facing children and families in transition, with a focus on the specific challenges faced by adoptive parents, children and families

- **Interdisciplinary Model (Practice Applications)**
  - To promote and engage the strengths of an interdisciplinary science and practice model
    - Psychology, psychiatry, neuroscience, genetics, medicine, social work, law, education, prevention science, and other disciplines
  - To engage and develop world-leading data resources to address questions of relevance to families, parents, children, practitioners, policy makers

- **Bottom Line Objectives (Family Impacts)**
  - To improve outcomes and life chances for youth of all ages in the UK and internationally
  - To transform front line services aimed at supporting vulnerable youth and families through evidence-led practice, training and capacity building
Sussex Rudd Centre Staff

• Core Centre Staff
  o Prof. Gordon Harold (Director)
  o Mrs. Carmel Stevenson (C. Admin.)
  o Dr. Ruth Sellers (ESRC Future Leaders Research Fellow)

• Research Staff and Students
  o Dr. Maja Rodic (ESRC Research Associate)
  o Miss Amelia Smith (PhD)
  o Miss Victoria Simcock (PhD)

• National/International Partners
  o Researchers (UK, US, NZ, others)
  o Practitioners (nat./intl.)
  o Policy makers (nat./intl.)
  o Rudd Centre Amherst

• Steering and Advisory Group
  o MR, AT, NM, JS, MB, LL [policy]

• University of Sussex
  o ESW, BSMS, (Law, MPS, Centres)
Sussex Rudd Centre Activities (2014+)

• Research Grant Awards (>£700k)
  o ESRC, DfE, DWP, EIF, Welsh Government, Barnardos, HRC NZ
  o ESRC Future Leaders Fellow

• Academic/Scientific Publications
  o 30+ publications (international)
    • Child Development, JCPP, JAMA Psych, Prevention Science, others
  o 2 books and 3 book chapters
    • Practice and policy focus

• National/international knowledge exchange and impacts
  o 50+ local, national and international presentations, seminars, workshops, keynotes, training workshops (e.g. social work)
  o DWP, DfE, DoH, PM office, Welsh Govt., Scotland, Ireland [AFG+]
Some Examples of Sussex Rudd Centre Research, Practice and Policy Impacts
Family Influences on Child Mental Health

- Mental health (UK and international)
  - Depression (internalising)
  - Conduct problems (externalising)
  - Social competence
  - Academic attainment
  - Physical health
  - High risk groups (in-care, transition)

- Medical/social care/production
  - England: £105.2 billion; Scotland: £8.6 billion; N. Ireland: £2.8 billion; Wales: 7.2 billion
  - Overall prevalence similar in England and Scotland, 25% higher Wales/NI

- What family factors affect children
  - Family stress (poverty/econ press)
  - Adult/parent mental health
  - Parenting behaviour/practices
  - Inter-parental conflict, DV
  - Family transitions (Sep-divorce, children/families in transition, e.g. adoption, foster care, others)
Challenges to Past Research

• Salience of the family environment?
  – Predominantly conducted with biologically related parents and children
  – Limited examination of maternal AND paternal influences on outcomes

• What if it is all in the genes?
  – Associations between parental behaviour (e.g. parenting) and child behaviour is BECAUSE children share genes with their parents??

• Disentangling genetic factors from rearing environment factors
  – A challenge of research design
  – Twin (CoT), Sibling, Adoption, others
Disentangling Early Influences on Development

- Biological Mother
- Biological Father
- Adoptive Mother
- Adoptive Father
- Child

Prenatal influences
Genetic influences
Postnatal (rearing) influences
Early Growth and Development Study (Adoption at Birth Design)

Sample
- 561 sets of adopted children, adoptive parents, and birth parents
  - Sample retention: Adoptive family = 90% Birth parent = 92%
  - Families assessed at child age 9-, 18-, 27-months of age; ongoing assessments at 4.5 years, 6 years, 7 years, 8 years, 9 years
  - Present sample included 341 linked families assessed at 27 months, 4.5 years, and 6 years
- Nationally-representative sample of families who made domestic infant adoption placements in the United States between 2003-2009

Method
- Videotaped Observation – adoptive families
  - Child temperament, parent-child interactions, marital interactions video recorded in the home during 3-hour home visits at each wave. Coding for these tasks is on-going
- Questionnaire – adoptive parents
  - Couple relationship, parent-child relationship, symptoms of depression and anxiety, family economic conditions, styles of family interaction, parenting style, children’s emotional and behavioural well-being, child sleep problems
- Questionnaire – birth parents
  - Couple relationship, diagnosis and symptoms of psychopathology, drug use, economic conditions, life stress, temperament
Cardiff In Vitro Fertilization Study (An Adoption at Conception Design)

- Children born through *in-vitro* fertilisation (IVF)
  - 20 fertility centres within the UK (1 in US)
    - 888 families
      - Homologous IVF  N = 444
      - Sperm donation  N = 210
      - Egg donation  N = 175
      - Embryo donation N=36
      - Gestational surrogacy  N=23

- Families who had a live birth (1994 – 2002)
  - Children aged between 4 – 10 years (mean = 6.80 yrs, SD=1.23)
  - Demographics (family income, parent education, ethnicity)
  - Present sample included children aged 5-8 years old (m = 6.49, sd = .85)

- Genetically related versus unrelated groups
  - Genetically Related
    - Mothers (N=546): Homologous, sperm donation, surrogacy
    - Fathers (N=531): Homologous, egg donation, surrogacy
  - Genetically Unrelated
    - Mothers (N=160): Egg and embryo donation
    - Fathers (N=173): Sperm and embryo donation
How Family Relationship Influences on Children’s Mental Health

Highlighting the Role of the Inter-Parental and Parent-Child Relationships on Child Development/Mental Health

UK IVF and US Adoption Study

• Inter-parental Conflict
  o Self report of hostility towards spouse
    • IVF & EGDS: Behaviour Affect Rating Scale (mothers, $\alpha=.89/.88$; fathers, $\alpha=.91/.90$, Melby et al., 1993)

• Parent-Child Relations (Hostile Parenting)
  o Mother & Father report of hostility toward child
    • IVF & EGDS: IYFP Ratings Scales (mother, $\alpha=.70/82$; father, $\alpha=.75/.80$, Melby et al., 1993).

• Child Conduct Problems
  o Mother & Father report of child externalizing behaviour
    • Cardiff IVF: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (mother, $\alpha=.80$; father, $\alpha=.78$)
    • EGDS: Externalizing subscale, Child Behaviour Check List, (mother, $\alpha=.88$; father, $\alpha=.90$)
Rearing Environment (Nurture) and Child Genetic Susceptibility (Nature) (Rhoades, Leve, Harold, Neiderheiser)

Birth Mother ASB (biological risk)

Inter-Par. Hostility T1

Adoptive Mother Parenting

Adoptive Father Parenting

Child Anger T2

Wellbeing

A. Inherited sensitivity

B. Differential susceptibility

Social environment

favorable

adverse

health

illness
Summary and Considerations

• **Family relationship influences on children**
  
  o Inter-parental conflict affects children’s behaviour problems through disrupted mother-child and father-child relationships
    
    • Confound of passive rGE controlled
    
    • Inter-parental conflict as context may have greater disruptive influence on father-child compared to mother-child relationship
    
    • Children at high genetic risk may be more susceptible to negative rearing environments; ALSO more responsive to positive rearing environments
    
    • Adoption, IVF, foster-care, step-parent (professional roles)

• **Implications for intervention**
  
  o Supporting adults/parents early in ‘transition’ (e.g. becoming a family) significant and sustained outcomes for children (inter-parental, mother, father engagement, child outcomes)
  
  o Utilising research evidence to inform ‘targeted’ interventions
  
  o Promoting and improving service and support for parents and children in an adoption context
The AdOPt Parenting Programme

- Supporting adoptive parents and children
  - AdOpt programme (UK trial)
    - Post Legal-Order
    - Child age 3-8 years
  - KEEP Foster care programme
    - University of Oregon (Fisher et al.)
  - Focus on post legal-order
    - ‘Becoming a Family’/Transition relevance
  - National Implementation Service (NIS), DfE Innovation Programme funding

- Theory based programme
  - Social learning theory, neuroscience
  - Specifically adapted from KEEP for adoption context application

An evaluation of the AdOpt parenting programme

Research report
December 2016

Professor Gordon Harold, Professor Gillian Hampden-Thompson, Dr Maja Rodic and Dr Ruth Sellers
Andrew and Virginia Rudd Centre for Adoption Research and Practice
School of Psychology/School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex
AdOpt Parenting Programme

Theory of Change Underpinning AdOpt Parenting Programme

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Parent Outcomes</th>
<th>Child Outcomes</th>
<th>Longer Term</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AdOpt Programme Delivered</td>
<td>AdOpt Programme Delivered for 16 Weeks by Trained Facilitators</td>
<td>Measureable Increase in Parenting Efficacy</td>
<td>Reduction in Problem Behaviour</td>
<td>Adoptive Parenting mediates the Impact of Early Child Adversity</td>
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<td>Parents Attend 16 Week Group</td>
<td>Measureable Increase in Parenting Competence</td>
<td>Improved Behavioural and Emotional Wellbeing</td>
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<td>Parenting Skills Learnt and Practiced</td>
<td>Measureable Reduction in Parental Stress</td>
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<td>Parenting Skills are Incorporated into Family Life</td>
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Translating research into Practice

Promoting Evidence-Led Policy Decision Making

Sussex Rudd Centre Contributions
Bridging the Research-Policy Interface

- Highlighting the role of family relationship influences on children’s mental health
  - Inter-parental relationship; Parent-child relationships
  - Utilising a complement of novel research designs

- Implications for practice and policy
  - Evidence-based guidance as to intervention focus
  - When do we target, who do we target, what do we target?
  - Salience of family relationship influences on children
    - Irrespective of genetic relatedness

- Practice and policy implications
  - Informing intervention targets through carefully designed research
  - Supporting children (and parents)
    - Emphasising the importance of the rearing environment (IPC+Par)
    - Promoting resilient children by promoting and supporting resilient parents (helping children by helping parents)
    - Early prevention versus late intervention (cost benefits)
    - Interrupting intergenerational cycles (mental health, relationships)
Our assessment of programmes that aim to enhance the inter-parental relationship and improve outcomes for children shows that many of these need more testing.

The Early Intervention Foundation have carried out a review of ‘What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children’ for the Department for Work and Pensions.

The review has been led by Professor Gordon Harold, an expert on the role of the family in children’s psychological development, and Dr. Ruth Sellers from the Andrew and Virginia Rudd Centre for Adoption Research and Practice at the University of Sussex.

Key findings include:

» The quality of the inter-parental relationship, specifically how parents communicate and relate to each other, is increasingly recognised as a primary predictor of children’s outcomes.
The Challenge of Research Translation

• Recent reports on child and adolescent mental health
  o Depression and anxiety, Self-harm, Suicidality, others
  o Children in care (prevalence of mental health problems); Mental health ‘tsunami’
  o Symptoms and signals present BEFORE clinical disorder

• Importance of early identification
  o Building capacity among Front Line specialists/practitioners
  o Promoting evidence-led capacity to work with vulnerable youth, parents and families EARLY
    • GPs (medicine), Schools (Education), Practitioners (Social Work)
    • Psychology – (1) science/evidence (2) intervention/prevention models

• University of Sussex Children and Families Professional Development and Training Programme (“Training the Trainers”)
  o Building capacity through early front line training (adoption, foster care, ‘risk’)
  o Sussex Rudd Centre for Adoption Research and Practice/University of Sussex
    • 3 senior researcher/academic posts (child, youth, family focus)
  o Interdisciplinary programme (Psychology, Social work, Education, Medicine, Law)
    • Undergraduate/Postgraduate training, CPD, internships
    • Reliably/robustly/accurately assessing ‘risk’; referring for support; Policy
  o Promoting transformational change for children, parents and families in the UK (and internationally)
Sussex Rudd Centre – Next Steps