

Receive Information. Reduce Stigma. Reflect on Strategies: The Caregiver Series

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ABSTRACT

The Caregiver Series, an initiative started in 2013 by the Quality Improvement and Education Team within Children, Youth, and Families, Addiction and Mental Health, Alberta Health Services, aims to provide caregivers and individuals with information about mental health and addiction issues within childhood and adolescence. Knowledge mobilization, collaborating and partnering with schools, taking into account adult learning principles when creating sessions, focusing on high quality content delivered by mental health professionals, decreasing barriers when possible, and incorporating feedback for ongoing quality improvement, are the characteristics that have been a large contributor to the success of the series.

Keywords: children's mental health, adolescent mental health, quality improvement, caregiver knowledge mobilization

RÉSUMÉ

La série des aides familiaux résidents, une initiative lancée en 2013 par l'amélioration de la qualité et l'équipe de l'éducation au sein des enfants, les jeunes et les familles, la toxicomanie et de santé mentale, les services de santé de l'Alberta vise à fournir les aidants naturels et les personnes avec des informations sur les questions de santé mentale et de toxicomanie au sein de l'enfance et de l'adolescence. La mobilisation des connaissances, la collaboration et le partenariat avec les écoles, en tenant les principes d'apprentissage compte des adultes lors de la création des sessions portant sur le contenu de haute qualité dispensé par des professionnels de la santé mentale, la diminution des obstacles lorsque cela est possible, et en incorporant

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The authors wish to acknowledge the support of Melissa Hartrick, Janice McCullough, Shaffina Jiwa and Danielle Forth for contributing to the development and implementation of the Caregiver Series.

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la rétroaction pour l'amélioration continue de la qualité, sont les caractéristiques qui ont été un grand contributeur à la réussite de ces séries.

Mots clés : santé mentale des enfants, santé mentale des adolescents, amélioration de la qualité, mobilisation des connaissances des aidants naturels

Receive Information. Reduce Stigma. Reflect on Strategies. This is the foundation that the Caregiver Series has been built upon. The Caregiver Series is an initiative spearheaded by the Quality Improvement and Education Team within Children, Youth, and Families, Addiction and Mental Health, Alberta Health Services in collaboration with the Edmonton Public School Board and Edmonton Catholic School District. This project was prompted by a perceived need for building caregiver capacity in childhood/adolescent addiction and mental health concerns. Ninety minute sessions have been carefully developed for presentation to caregivers about various topics relating to child and youth mental health and addiction with an emphasis on knowledge mobilization. The series was initially piloted in 2013, and because of continued and persistent success, the series has evolved to where it is today. Additionally, the presentations are in line with the Addiction & Mental Health Principles of Care which guide clinical practice and are reflective of a commitment to provide services that are recovery oriented, welcoming and engaging, inclusive, accountable and transparent, and which practice excellence. Contributors to this article include original team members whose innovation and perseverance helped develop the Caregiver Series in addition to staff who are recent arrivals.

RATIONALE

Canadian research estimates that 14% of children living in Canada experience mental health difficulties (roughly 800,000), and less than 25% of those children receive treatment (Waddell, McEwan, Shepherd, Offord, & Hua, 2005). According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, the total annual cost of mental health challenges and related care in Canada is \$50 billion annually (MHCC, 2013). It is suggested that prevention and promotion need to be the priority of Canada's public health strategy if improvements are to be made to the mental health outcomes of Canadian children and youth (Waddell et al. 2005). The Caregiver Series is a clinician-facilitated, parent education group. Parent education groups, which are deemed effective, are described as those that help build parenting skills, support positive child behaviour, reach families during times of transition, focus on child development, and those that are facilitated by well trained, professional, engaging, and respectful staff (Samuelson, 2010). These criteria are intentionally used when selecting presenters for the Caregiver Sessions. Facilitators of the Caregiver Sessions have consistently received positive feedback about their ability to engage with the audience. They utilize knowledge mobilization to share practice experiences and research-based evidence.

Knowledge mobilization is a relatively innovative concept in that it is in the process of being defined and explored, and as being distinct from traditional methods of the dissemination of information. Knowledge mobilization is not a one way transfer of information, but rather is a method of engaging and empowering parents to utilize knowledge provided to help address problems and strengthen the mental health of children and youth. Essentially, knowledge mobilization is about initiating change within individuals and organizations,

something which the Caregiver Series appears to have accomplished. Knowledge mobilization and the Caregiver Series empower people to collaborate, co-operate, reduce stigma and share knowledge about an area of common interest, in this case, child and youth mental health (Knowledge Mobilization Toolkit, 2014).

Although parent education groups are not a novel concept, the Caregiver Series is innovative in the way that it builds partnerships, utilizes knowledge mobilization and collaborates with the school boards. These sessions are intentionally held in schools in the greater Edmonton area, and funding for the Caregiver Sessions is allocated through the Regional Collaborative Service Delivery which is a partnership between Alberta Health Services and the school boards in the Edmonton area. As a result of the series, it appears that stronger relationships are being built between invested parties, as caregivers, schools, and health care have now been provided with an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with each other. This is in line with international recommendations that health promotion and education establish a partnership to better meet the needs of children and families by collaborating with parents and the community (International Union for Health Promotion and Education, 2007). With many teachers and community agency staff also attending these sessions, teachers and parents report that they often walk away from the Caregiver Session with a better understanding of the “other side” as well as learning practical strategies to start implementing at home or at school.

IMPLEMENTATION

When designing these educational presentation sessions, careful consideration is given to principles of adult learning and how to maximize engagement from parents who are assumed to have challenges and barriers to accessing services. This project gives considerable thought to how to best meet the needs of parents who work full time, rely on public transportation, and have limited resources for child minding while they attend the caregiver session. When scheduling and planning these sessions, the team is careful to ensure that sessions are being held in every quadrant of the city. The staff work evenings to reach those parents who work all day and the sessions are free of charge. As much as possible, the strategies and information given is practical, research-based and evidence-informed (consistent with knowledge mobilization). Videos and case studies are used to help entrench learning, and stories and personal experiences are interwoven throughout to add depth and richness to the sessions. Although these presentations are not meant to be diagnostic, but rather supportive, it is clear through the feedback received that parents and caregivers want a safe space to talk about their concerns. Spaces for dialogue between presenters and caregivers are intentionally given so personal concerns and successful strategies can be shared, thereby helping to increase a sense of community among the participants. This fits in with the notion that “it takes a village to raise a child.”

Topics of presentation vary by time of year, with presentations like “Transitioning Into Junior High” occurring later in the spring, when such concerns become more apparent for children and parents. Other presentations are offered almost all year and topics include anxiety, parenting teens in the 21st century, technology, test anxiety, supporting self regulation, increasing executive functioning skills, depression and self injury, ADHD, ways to increase social skills, positive mental health, eating disorders, caring for the caregiver, and substance awareness. Participants are encouraged to suggest other topics of interest as well, and these suggestions are taken into consideration when designing new presentations.

EVALUATION

Feedback and evaluative data are integral to ensuring the quality and usefulness of the sessions. Participants complete a feedback form at the end of the session and this data is tracked and provided to the hosting school. Almost 100% of the results reported state the sessions relating to content, material, and method are either very helpful or helpful. Since April 2014, the Caregiver Series has delivered 166 presentations to 2,877 participants. These numbers speak to the impact and usefulness of the sessions. It also speaks to the necessity of these types of interventions in the community, and how much they will continue to be needed as mental health issues appear to be on the rise within our population. With such positive feedback and interest, the project team is even more dedicated to improving the quality and delivery of the sessions.

To further improve quality, focus groups are utilized as a means to acquire evaluative information about the ease of booking a session for a school, quality of communication, and topics of future interest among other things. It is the perspective of the project that continuous improvement of the service is vital and feedback should be taken seriously. For example, a presentation titled Anxiety and the High Achieving Child was developed soon after receiving feedback that this was an important concern for many families. Future considerations for improving these promising results include utilizing even more caregiver focus groups to gain better and deeper feedback about what is needed. Many parents have expressed an interest in joining a parent support group, all of which will be kept in mind as we go forward and explore further how we can increase our reach.

As we consider the future, it becomes increasingly obvious that knowledge mobilization centred on child and youth mental health and addiction is essential to the healthy development of children and youth. Thankfully the success of the Caregiver Series has demonstrated that partnerships between health and education can help reduce stigma affecting mental health and promote resilience. In addition, the Caregiver Series is exploring partnerships with community organizations. To date, collaborations between the Primary Care Networks and the YMCA have been established to further connect and motivate families to be active participants in their, and their child's, mental health and wellness. Psychosocial challenges facing our communities will unfortunately continue to be pervasive and with such potentially huge costs to society, it becomes apparent that it is important to plan strategies to increase positive mental health and addiction outcomes of our children. Keeping this forecast in mind, exploring ways to engage children and youth in the promotion and development of their own mental health is the next focus of the Caregiver Series.

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