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Chapter Six Parental factors affecting the vulnerability of children

The well-being of families may be affected by a number of social and circumstantial factors that affect their ability to cope and provide adequately for their children. It should be acknowledged that some of these factors are short term and more easily resolved with help and support, whilst others are longer term and more significantly damaging for children at the time, and as they become adults.

The stresses that parents face when bringing up children can have a negative effect on a child's health, development and well-being. The stresses that a mother may experience when pregnant as well as her ability to parent effectively, especially to respond to a baby's needs may also add to the vulnerability of her baby. This is exacerbated if there is no other supportive adult on hand to help.

Factors affecting vulnerability are taken into account when making an assessment of risk that a child may be, or is likely to, suffer significant harm. These factors include:

- Social exclusion.
- Domestic violence.
- Mental illness.
- Drug and alcohol abuse.
- Parental learning disability.

Where one or more of these apply to families the likelihood or risk to children increases but it is not inevitable. There are protective factors which may mitigate against risk, such as:

- Positive regard by the parent(s) of the child.
- A positive relationship with a professional that is working with the family.
- A strong family and supportive friendship network.
- Access to community resources.
- Improvement of the physical and material living conditions.
- Opportunity, support and ability to address problems.

What the early years provider should do

Support to families is crucial especially where post natal depression is identified. An early years place may ease the pressure for the parent to enable them to seek treatment such as group therapy or counselling. It also provides a source of support for the parent, as well as their partner, in knowing they will receive a caring and non-judgemental response. Sometimes early years practitioners may be the first to notice that a parent seems depressed and unable to cope, or that they are saying or doing bizarre things. Making a referral to get help for the parent could be crucial in ensuring the well-being of the child and the family.

Parental problem use of drugs

Typically of most concern are parents who are users of crack cocaine and heroin; these may constitute less than 1% of the population. Due to the illegality of illicit drug use, it is hard to define exact numbers affected, but at least 1% of births each year are to women with problem drug use and 2 to 3% of children under 16 have parents with problem drug use. Almost twice as many mothers with problem drug use than fathers live with their children; children can also be affected by the drug use of a parent's new partner, a sibling or other person in the household. Experts on drug misuse warn against making assumptions on its impact on children for the following reasons:

- Different drugs vary in their effects.
- The same drug may have a different effect on different people.
- Personality factors influence the effects of the drug, such as existing mental illness or stressed state.
- Physiological factors may affect drug tolerance.

There are some parents whose drug misuse can be managed so as to reduce impact on families, and there are those who can also stop taking drugs and live well balanced lives. Many children with parents who misuse drugs do not have long term problems. Each case has to be viewed on its own standing, taking into consideration the parent's coping ability and effects of the misuse on the child or children.

When a parent's misuse of drugs leads to a chaotic lifestyle, where the priorities both financially and emotionally are turned towards the obtaining and taking of the drug, it can be expected that children may experience degrees of neglect and emotional abuse. Families may move house suddenly or frequently to get away from debt or may be subject to crime against them at worst or, at least, stigmatising by neighbours. A parent's mental capacity may be affected by the drug and when under the influence may be unresponsive, lack awareness of what is going on around them or lose consciousness altogether. A child may lack food and clothing, may be inadequately supervised or exposed to danger.