



The ParentingWell Practice Approach Within U.S. Adult Mental-Health Services

Luci Swinford · March 2025

Introduction

In the United States, there is pervasive stigma associated with parents with mental illness. The stigma includes negative assumptions about parenting ability, or lack thereof (Powell et al., 2020). In addition, within behavioral-health practice, there is a lack of attention to family circumstances; this can lead to inadequate support and have a negative impact on the parent. The ParentingWell Practice Approach is an approach for behavioral-health practitioners that incorporates conversations about parenting and family experiences when the practitioners are working with adults with mental illness (Nicholson & English, 2021).

This Study

This study focuses on the adaptation and implementation of the ParentingWell Practice Approach in Massachusetts. This approach was adapted from an intervention called Let's Talk about Children (LTC). The adapted ParentingWell Practice Approach contains four main elements: (1) engage; (2) explore; (3) plan; and (4) access and advocate. It reflects four principles: (1) trauma-informed; (2) strengths-based; (3) family focus; and (4) culturally sensitive.

The ParentingWell Practice Profile contains information and resources for providing family-focused support that builds on practitioners' existing skills. The training component of ParentingWell, called the ParentingWell Learning Collaborative (PWLC), includes an orientation session for staff from each participating agency; training sessions; debriefs; and access to an online project hub.



ParentingWell PRACTICE PROFILE

Figure 1. ParentingWell Practice Profile

This study explored considerations regarding the implementation of the ParentingWell Practice Approach in Massachusetts. The study asked the following two questions:

- (1) What themes emerged during coaching sessions for practitioners?
- (2) In what ways are coaching sessions useful to the practitioners as they implement the ParentingWell Practice Approach?

Methods

Adapting LTC into the ParentingWell approach in Massachusetts occurred between 2015 and 2019 and involved:

- (1) working with the creator of LTC to identify main elements and theories;
- (2) consulting with key stakeholders, including providers, working in Massachusetts behavioral-health services;

- (3) pre-testing initial materials; and
- (4) making changes and revisions as the materials were tested and implemented.

Participants consisted of behavioral-health practitioners in Massachusetts. In addition to participating in coaching and debriefing sessions, participants completed background and feedback surveys following coaching sessions. Coaching sessions were also recorded and analyzed. An exploratory qualitative-research design was used in the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Findings

During coaching sessions, participants shared the following:

- Participants identified and shared concrete approaches to supporting parents.
 - Example: One participant started “tracking joy” with one parent client.
 - Example: A concrete plan in case of hospitalization was developed for one parent.
- Participants reflected on parents’ needs and related support, advocacy, problem-solving, and parenting skills.
 - Example: There was a focus on rapport-building, and parents’ strengths were incorporated.
- Participants reflected on their own personal experiences.
- Participants recognized the importance of self-care strategies for themselves and for parents served.

In evaluating the usefulness of the coaching sessions, participants:

- expressed high levels of satisfaction with the coaching sessions;
- reported learning how to incorporate parenting issues into everyday practices;
- reported receiving helpful feedback for improving writing skills through discussions; and
- reported ways to improve the coaching sessions, such as meeting in-person.

Conclusion

To adequately address the needs of parents with mental illness, behavioral-health services must routinely incorporate conversations and support around family and parenting life. This study provides insight into the implementation of ParentingWell for behavioral-health professionals in Massachusetts. The findings suggest that ParentingWell was a beneficial approach for participants. Future research should investigate implementation of ParentingWell in more diverse contexts. Future research should also explore the experiences and reactions from clients and their families about the implementation of ParentingWell.

Credit

Adapted by Luci Swinford from Heyman, Nicholson, & English (2024).

References

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.

Heyman, M., Nicholson, J., & English, K. (2024). The ParentingWell Practice Approach: Facilitating implementation in U.S. adult mental health services. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2024.1377088>




Nicholson, J., & English, K. (2021). The ParentingWell Practice Profile. *National Research Center for Parents with Disabilities*. <https://heller.brandeis.edu/parents-with-disabilities/work/parenting-well.html>

Powell, R. M., Parish, S. L., Mitra, M., & Nicholson, J. (2020). Responding to the legal needs of parents with psychiatric disabilities: Insights from parent interviews. *Law & Inequality*, 38(1), 69–114.

How to Cite This Brief

National Research Center for Parents with Disabilities. (2025). The ParentingWell Practice Approach Within U.S. Adult Mental-Health Services. Brandeis University, Waltham, MA.

Contact Us

 heller.brandeis.edu/parents-with-disabilities
 <https://linktr.ee/lurieinstitute>
 centerforparents@brandeis.edu