

Introduction

Mental health difficulties can affect people from all walks of life. Unfortunately, children who are in care are more likely to be affected (Ford *et al*, 2007). Social care professionals working within the child care system are doing a valuable yet challenging job of supporting society's most vulnerable children and their carers. The area of children's mental health can feel like a complex labyrinth. This guide translates the theoretical concepts and research about children's mental health into straightforward language with practical advice for social workers. This guide is designed for busy children's social workers and other professionals who are working within the children's care system.

While preparing this guide, we reflected upon the many consultations we have had with social care professionals concerned about a child's mental health. We found that social workers valued the opportunity to think about a child's mental health using a holistic and attachment-focused approach that sought to understand the child's background, and current events, rather than thinking only about diagnostic criteria and labels. Therefore, we focus on presenting frameworks that will aid a social worker's understanding of a child's distress and help to improve wellbeing, while still including relevant information about mental health diagnoses. This guide also aims to provide practical suggestions about what social workers can do to improve children's mental health and how to access additional support. It is organised into two parts: the first part gives a general overview and the second looks at particular mental health issues.

In Part 1, we define mental health and explain diagnosis and formulation approaches. We explore the reasons why mental health difficulties are more prevalent in looked after children, including the importance of attachment and trauma. We look at how children's difficulties can potentially affect carers. We then focus on how social workers can gather crucial information to aid with understanding a child's difficulties and planning how to help. We explain how to support children by following a three-stage process: initially, by creating physical and emotional safety for the child, and then leading into building skills, and ultimately helping children reflect upon and make sense of their experiences. We explain and explore how Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) operate. Finally, we look at relevant legislation and policy.

Part 2 focuses on common worrying behaviours and symptoms experienced by children and young people. We consider what social

workers, carers and schools can do to help and what may be provided by specialist services.

This is not an academic text and does not aim to provide a complete resource for child mental health. Readers who want more in-depth information about topics are invited to consult the references provided. We encourage workers to seek support and consultation from relevant mental health professionals and services when necessary.

Notes on terminology

Throughout the guide, we use the word “child” or “young person” to refer to children of all ages from 0 to 18. We use the term “carer” to describe the range of caregivers, including foster carers, adoptive parents and kinship carers, who provide an everyday parenting role for children.