

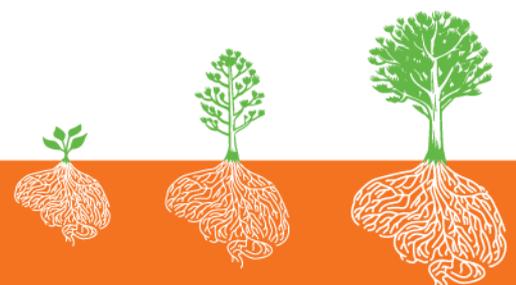
Submission to the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction. From: Brainwave Trust Aotearoa

Executive Summary – Key Points

- Many vulnerable parents and children are included in those groups of people who have drug/alcohol addiction and/or mental health needs.
- For every individual who lives with poor mental health and/or addiction, there are numerous others affected. Brainwave Trust is particularly interested in, and concerned about, the effect on babies (both pre and post-natal) and young children, of being cared for by parents/care-givers with addiction and/or mental health issues.
- While poor mental health or addiction in itself does not necessarily constitute a protective concern, there is increased risk throughout the life course for children whose parents are affected by mental illness and addiction.
- Attachment relationships in the early years are critical in creating brain architecture, whether healthy and constructive or otherwise. Healthy development relies on at least one available and responsive adult caregiver in the early years. This is often lacking when the parent/caregiver is under the influence of alcohol or drugs, depressed, stressed, unwell, or otherwise unable to be there emotionally for the child.
- The effects of a poor start on babies and young children are not usually short-lived. They can last a lifetime. And they are not solely 'emotional'. There is plenty of evidence a poor start can adversely affect physical health in a lifelong way as well, such as having a higher risk of developing heart disease, lung cancer and auto-immune disease as an adult.
- In the highly-regarded ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) study conducted by Kaiser-Permanente and the CDC, having a family member affected by addiction or poor mental health are both included in the ten experiences considered 'adverse'.
- There is often a cascade of effects in a whānau where mental illness and addiction are issues. Other risk factors for babies and young children are often present alongside them, such as poverty, stress, isolation, neglect and criminal offending. As these risk factors 'mount up', children are cumulatively affected and become at high risk of adverse lifelong outcomes. It matters not whether addiction or illness is the cause or the result of such adversity. What matters is that the children are at risk.
- Wider whānau may or may not be 'filling the gaps'. Individuals affected by addiction and mental health issues often have already strained and damaged relationships with others in their whānau/ friend circle, who may otherwise have been there to support them and their babies. For example, grandparents, aunts, uncles and close friends. Again, this can impact in a toxic way on the child.

Brainwave Trust Aotearoa
PO Box 55206, Eastridge,
Auckland 1146, New Zealand.

Telephone: 09 528 3981
Email: info@brainwave.org.nz



- Every effort should be made to support mothers, fathers and care-givers to become as effective as parents as possible, thus preventing the widespread inter-generational sequelae of addiction and poor mental health. This should include anything that can be shown to support attachment and to assist and support parents in a healthy pregnancy and in offering warm, consistent, loving care to their infants and young children.
- While Brainwave Trust supports, of course, compassionate, non-judgmental and effective care for individual patients affected, this is not our area of expertise. We wish instead to comment on the critical importance of recognising the increased risk to babies and young children who may be in their care. While the “point-of-contact” with the caring community may be the addiction services or psychiatric services for individuals, the need to be sure the whole whānau is being supported is of paramount importance.
- Taking care of the children in affected whānau may well prevent them developing their own poor mental health, addiction, and other issues.

Note

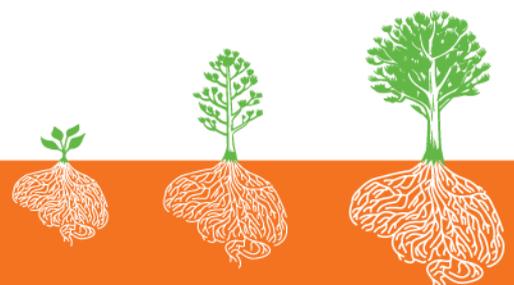
There is an issue here, which needs to be stated clearly. Including factors about caregivers' behaviour that may constitute 'risk' factors to babies in our thinking puts us at high risk of becoming 'judgmental' or being perceived as such. And it is not helpful to leave parents feeling any guiltier than they already do.

Of course we must avoid making automatic 'judgments' and 'assumptions' about parents who seek help of any kind. They may be wonderful parents in many ways, in some ways or in very few ways, just like all parents. They will all, almost always, want what is best for their child. And they must not feel they are being 'judged', or they will not seek help. Instead they must feel supported and assisted.

We must recognise, however, that many parents with mental health and addiction issues are in survival mode themselves and often have a cascade of problems which make their lives chaotic and stressful. This in turn will often lead to chaotic and stressful lives for their children, who are more vulnerable the younger they are. As parents, many will need support. Wider whānau may or may not be providing that support. We ignore this at our peril.

This is a fine balance. And it takes courage and sensitivity. We recognise this.

Kia toa, kia kaha, kia manawa-nui.



Who is Brainwave Trust Aotearoa?

- Brainwave Trust was formed as a response to evidence that experiences in the early years play a critical role in the brain development of children, with life-long consequences. Brainwave's mission over the last twenty years has been to ensure that the children of Aotearoa get the best start in life
- Our by-line reads *Whakamana i te tamaiti*.
- One of the strengths of Brainwave Trust is the mixture of people involved. Our Board of Trustees is listed below. Our board and our paid staff include a culturally diverse mix of legal, paediatric, psychology, communications, business and education professionals, some with 'lived experience' of childhood adversity and disadvantage. We are constantly learning from one another, as well as constantly up-dating our knowledge from a wide variety of disciplines.
- For the purposes of this submission, we have not provided references or evidence. However, we can provide both should the Inquiry wish. We are a strictly evidence-informed organisation.

Board of Trustees, Brainwave Trust

Casey Plunket (Chair) BCA/LLB(Hons), LLM (Michigan)

Anthea Springford (Treasurer) BA, MBA(Dist)

Dr Simon Rowley MBChB, FRACP(Paed)

Judy Bailey ONZM, DipJourn

Lope Ginnen LLB

Jeanine Tamati-Elliffe BMD Dip Te Pīnakitanga ki te Reo Kairangi

Dr Julia Ioane BSC (Hons), PGDipSci, DClinPsych

Dr Johan Morreau MBChB, FRACP(Paed)

Sue Younger MA(Hons) MCW (Hons) DipTchg, DipProfEth

Brainwave Trust Aotearoa
PO Box 55206, Eastridge,
Auckland 1146, New Zealand.

Telephone: 09 528 3981
Email: info@brainwave.org.nz

