

Problemparents, problemchildren?

A survey of literature about the intergenerational transmission of problems that (can) lead to measures for the protection of children

Summary

The Research and Documentation Centre (*Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek - en Documentatiecentrum*) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice has carried out a literature study, partly to prepare and support an empirical study into the intergenerational transmission of measures for the protection of children and of problems that (can) lead to such measures.

There is a strong feeling within the Dutch Child Protection Services (CPS) that the parents of children who are subject to a child protection measure often had a past history of child protection themselves.

Just as relevant as the question of whether there is a case for intergenerational transmission of child protection measures, is the question as to whether *problems* that (can) lead to child protection measures (henceforth referred to as CPS-problems) are transferred from generation to generation. Furthermore, it is important to find out which risk-enhancing and protective factors are (co-) determining whether or not such problems are passed on to a subsequent generation. Moreover, an attempt has been made to find an answer to the question of how such cycles can be broken by means of alterations in legislation, policy and/or implementation practice.

No research was found in the literature that specifically targets the intergenerational transmission of *child protection measures*. There is research describing the intergenerational transmission of *CPS-problems*. This literature study therefore places the accent on these problems, i.e., child abuse (physical or emotional), neglect (physical or emotional) and sexual abuse of children by the parents, and deviant or criminal behaviour in minors. Children with CPS-problems seem to have (grand)-parents who had such problems in their own childhood more often than a cross-section of the population. (Grand)-parents who had CPS-problems in their own childhood also seem to be more likely to have (grand)-children with such problems. However, the transmission percentages vary greatly. In many cases the intergenerational cycle of such problematic behaviour is interrupted.

CPS-problems do not necessarily demonstrate the same pattern in each generation. A certain type of maltreatment of children by parents or deviant/criminal behaviour on the part of children in one generation sometimes turns out to relate to an increased chance of a different form of either parental misbehaviour or deviant/criminal behaviour of the children in the next generation.

The risk-enhancing and protective factors mentioned in the literature give rise to the following suggestions for the prevention of and intervention in CPS-problems:

- Early intervention is extra urgent for children who are maltreated from a very young age on, and for children whose intelligence is below average. Children who have been severely and/or frequently maltreated also require special attention. This also applies to children for whom there is, with respect to deviant/criminal behaviour, a case of interplay between genetic risk factors and situational risk factors, especially if the intelligence of these children is below average.
- Because parental misconduct towards children is usually linked to other family problems, it is advisable that intervention involves the functioning of the family in general.
- Support for a child who is the victim of parental misconduct and for parents who were maltreated in their childhood can reduce the risk of transmission. This also applies to therapy in adolescents and young adults who were maltreated as children.

In view of the research results and their lacunas, a number of points of attention for future research are mentioned:

- The reliability of the transmission percentages to be calculated would be enhanced if all research made use as far as possible of the same, clearly-specified definitions with clear criteria, and if control groups were used.
- The relationship between other serious family problems, such as addiction or criminality on the part of the parents, and the intergenerational transmission of CPS-problems should be given extra attention in future research.
- *Prospective* research is preferred to *retrospective* research because the data from prospective research are probably more reliable. Moreover, prospective research probably leads more than retrospective research to insight into the way child abuse develops. As a result it could provide more practical and

theoretical basic principles for the benefit of prevention of and intervention in transferring problem behaviour.

- It is advisable to check not only whether *the same* forms of parental misconduct or problem behaviour of minors occur in the next generation as in the present one, but also whether there are cases of *other* forms of parental misconduct or juvenile problem behaviour.
- It is also possible that a former child-victim does not misbehave with respect to his or her children, but that his or her brothers and sisters do maltreat their own children. Research involving the siblings of former victims could throw more light upon this.
- The literature confirms that there is no strict contrast between "transmission or no transmission", but that many parents who were maltreated as children can be found in a grey-tinted no-man's-land, consciously try not to maltreat their children, sometimes lapse back into misconduct, but nevertheless continue, with a varying degree of success, in their attempts to be a good parent. In research such parents should be treated as a separate category.
- We did not find any research into *three* generations taking a look at whether transmission sometimes *skips* a generation, i.e., whether comparable problems occur in the first and third generations, whilst that is not the case in the second generation.

We did not find any research into the relationship between the *duration* of parental misconduct and the chance of transmission.

Probleemouders, probleemkinderen? Een literatuurstudie van transgeneratiele overdracht van problemen die tot kindbeschermingsmaatregelen (kunnen) leiden

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The Hague, WODC, 2001

Onderzoeksnotities, no. 2001/6