

Stigma and Shame in Support Groups for Children – Professionals’ Experiences and Strategies

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Children exposed to parents’ substance misuse, mental-health problems or domestic violence constitutes a vulnerable group. Providing interventions to prevent negative development during childhood is crucial and at the core of social work. One type of such preventive program is support groups for children organized by local child protection. However, stigma and shame is in a high degree related to those parental problems, omnipresent in child protection and act as barriers for children to participate in support groups. This article draft aims to examine support group leaders experiences of stigma and shame related to children’s participation in support groups, and to outline the strategies that are used to handle the issues.

The empirical data is based on 5 group interviews with 16 professional support group leaders. The study design was exploratory qualitative with a purposive sample of interviewees from different municipalities in Sweden.

Result confirms the omnipresence of stigma and shame in children support group activities, particularly during the process of recruitment, acting as barriers to participation, but also while groups are ongoing. Professionals placed parental problems on a “scale of shame” ranging from conflict during divorce as less shameful, to domestic violence as particularly shameful. A number of strategies used to lower barriers and enhance the means of recruitment were outlined. The result has an applied value for social work practice as it provides an advanced knowledge of challenges on an individual level, interpersonal level and organizational level, intrinsic to support groups for children.