Practitioners' Experiences of Delivering Online and Face-to-Face Group-based Parenting Interventions: A Qualitative Investigation

Afraa Din, Michael Lovell, Raquib Ibrahim





Background and Aims

Despite their novelty, research suggests online parenting interventions are well received by parents and lead to positive outcomes in both parents and children. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, many parenting interventions adapted to online delivery, this included Mellow Parenting (MP). MP programmes are group-based interventions intended to support expectant parents and parents of infants/children. MP programmes have been shown to improve parental wellbeing, reduce child difficulties and improve the quality of perceived parent-child relationship. Recent findings suggest that online MP programmes lead to positive parent and child outcomes. Nevertheless, practitioners' experiences of delivering online MP is yet to be studied. It is pertinent to explore practitioners' experiences as their insights can reveal the important aspects of parenting interventions and the benefits and drawbacks of online and face-to-face delivery.

Method and Participants

Semi-structured online interviews lasting ~30 minutes were conducted by the first author. Interview transcripts were analysed by the first and second author using an inductive approach to reflexive thematic analysis, with the aid of NVivo software. Participants =15 MP Practitioners. Inclusion criteria: Delivered ≥1 online MP programme.



73% UK-Based



Online-Only Practitioners (N=5)
2 had delivered >1 Online Group



Dual Practitioners (N=10)

4 had delivered >1 Online Group | 5 had delivered ≥10 Face-to-Face Groups

Identified Themes (3) and Subthemes (14)

Parent Preferences

"With some mums you just can't convince them but actually, getting them to like a youth centre or children's centre to do the course, I don't know whether that would be even more difficult"

"It was a barrier for a lot of the mums coming on to the course -we had a few that were just not confident being online."

Cost

"We'll never go back to face to face because we can't, we don't have any premises, we don't have any funding to do it that way, so - it's very cheap!"

Comfort and Ease

"It's much easier if you're pregnant- to turn your camera on than to get into your car and drive."

"They need to leave their babies if it's not online. So, it's easier for participants to arrange themselves, to their conditions."

Informal Setting

"Those kind of slightly less formal parts of the programme I think are hugely supportive to mums, particularly socially isolated mums – I just don't think you get that online."

"It's a more relaxed, comfortable setting because you're kind of sharing the coffee breaks, you're sharing mealtimes- there's opportunities for parents to maybe stay behind if they've got something that they want to ask."

Initial Contact

"I think that initial contact with the women is very, very beneficial because you're introducing them to the programme, you're taking away those fears and anxieties for them."

Online Engagement

"I think a big play needs to be made during training of how to engage when you're not face to face." "Some people felt uncomfortable online."

Geographical Reach

"Some people have come to Mellow Bumps online that would never have come to the group - a) because of where they lived, and they weren't in a Surestart area..."

Parent-Child Interactions

Depth

Group Cohesion

and Engagement

Picking Up Cues

not with them in the same room."

"It's quite difficult to pick up on cues, I think, on

camera – it's probably easier to hide that when you're

"The online it's quite difficult to build up the same relationship with the parent and the child because you aren't sharing the space with them. It's quite difficult to get a proper idea of the interactions."

Sensitive Topics

"If we discuss sensitive topics [in Online group] and if they get really down, it's harder to handle because you are not together with them but still- getting into the deeper and sensitive topics makes the group closer."

Co-Facilitation

"I just think if we had had the opportunity to cofacilitate with someone more experienced it would have been better."

Showing Support

"I just think it's really hard to just show that you care and you're, that you support them – via a video."

Continued Contact "We've realised the ve

"We've realised the value of- having a WhatsApp group between the participants which the facilitators are part of, that then is used as a channel-just a good way for kind of communicating and creating that link with participants in between the group and then hopefully that- group goes on."

"I encourage them to meet up at the end because it's nice for us all to get together, everyone's a little bit nervous because they've only met on video."

Group Size

"I find the Mellow, because it was smaller numbers, it was so intimate and personal and I have to say I really enjoyed it from that end."

Conclusions

The low cost and relative ease of running online interventions were highlighted as reasons to why online was often more suitable than face-to-face delivery. Practitioners also acknowledged parents preferences and how it can be difficult to gauge if they would prefer one delivery format over the other. There were also concerns that online MP lacked depth, contributing factors included difficulty in showing support, limited display of parent-child interactions and discomfort in discussing sensitive topics. Nevertheless, practitioners shared that initial and continued contact with the online group helped with building closeness and ultimately achieved positive outcomes.

References

1. Spencer, C. M., Topham, G. L., & King, E. L. (2020). Do online parenting programs create change?: A meta-analysis. Journal of Family Psychology, 34(3), 364–374. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000605

2. MacBeth, A., Law, J., McGowan, I., Norrie, J., Thompson, L., & Wilson, P. (2015). Mellow Parenting: systematic review and meta-analysis of an intervention to promote sensitive parenting. Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology, 57(12), 1119–1128. https://doi.org/10.1111/dmcn.12864

3. Raouna, A., Malcolm, R., Ibrahim, R., & MacBeth, A. (2021) Promoting sensitive parenting in 'at-risk' mothers and fathers: A UK outcome study of Mellow Babies, a group-based early intervention program for parents and their babies. PLoS ONE 16(2): e0245226. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.024522