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### Online parenting support: Guiding parents towards empowerment through single session email consultation

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# INTRODUCTION

**Online Parenting Support**

**Guiding parents towards empowerment  
through single session email consultation**

The way we search for information, share support and consult professionals has radically changed over the last twenty years under the influence of web-based technologies. Not so long ago, the symbols <http://www> would have meant nothing to us. Referring to the well-known metaphor of the ‘industrial revolution’ it is said that we are currently experiencing the ‘Internet revolution’ (e.g., Baron, 2008, p. x; Kaufman, 2012) and, being in the process of it, nobody can really foresee its total impact on our individual lives and on society (Barak & Suler, 2008; Oravec, 2000). Parents are frequent users of online resources for information and make use of easy access to organizations (Plantin & Daneback, 2009). Following these developments, parenting support professionals are beginning to employ the many opportunities that Internet technology has to offer (Ritterband & Palermo, 2009).

### **The rise of the Internet**

Internet World Stats (2013) reports a penetration of Internet access by 34.3% of the worldwide population and 63.2% of the European population in June 2012; access ranged from 15.6% in Africa through 78.6% in North America to 92.9% in the Netherlands. According to the Pew Research Center (Zickuhr, 2013), as of May 2013, 85% of American adults ages 18 and older use the Internet. In the last few years, mobile devices like smartphones and tablet computers are gaining in popularity all over the world, intensifying the trend that information and support is available through web-based media.

The research for this dissertation is situated in the full flow of these rapid technological developments, which bring us not only new devices and easy access to resources, but which also urge the need for new skills, design guidelines and pose legal and ethical dilemmas for practitioners. In recent years, researchers in the broader domain of Internet interventions for mental health and counseling are trying to channel the way studies are designed, establishing guidelines for development (LaMendola &

Krysiak, 2008; Ritterband, Thorndike, Cox, Kovatchev, & Gonder-Frederick, 2009), research (Proudfoot et al., 2011), and ethics (e.g., Nijland, van Gemert-Pijnen, Boer, Steehouder, & Seydel, 2008). Useful and balanced overviews are available, like - for the Dutch context - Kennissynthese Online Preventie (Crutzen, Kohl, & de Vries, 2013) and Kennissynthese Preventie & eMental-health (Riper, Ballegooijen, Kooistra, de Wit, & Donker, 2013).

Although the potential of online resources for parents has been long acknowledged and some trends have been described (Long, 2004; Plantin & Daneback, 2009; Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005), a systematic overview of web-based support and interventions explicitly for parents was lacking at the start of this dissertation project, whereas knowledge about effective design of web-based services and effective online communication could boost and guide innovations in this multi-disciplinary domain. With this dissertation we aim to contribute our part to this knowledge.

### **Online parenting support**

For parents, a wide array of online services is available. A rapid and cursory search on the Internet reveals that the English word ‘parenting’ is found in more than one billion websites and the Dutch synonym ‘opvoeden’ yields more than 800.000 hits (www.google.nl, January 2014). A popular website in the Netherlands is ouders.nl, provided by Ouders Online, with 300.000 unique visitors per month. Also, on the site opvoeden.nl parents can find validated information about all kinds of parenting issues, provided by Stichting Opvoeden, in which almost all 400 Dutch municipalities participate. Parenting websites include all kinds of information and services. The user can, for example, find suggestions for typical parenting questions, discuss issues with other parents or consult a counselor through chat.

Part of the Dutch online services is provided by parenting support organizations. Practitioners of several disciplines are involved in providing parental advice, such as psychologists, counselors, pediatricians, nurses, therapists, and social workers. They offer opportunities for reading information and communication with peers or with professionals through moderated discussion boards, (confidential) chat, and email consultation. More recently, microblogging, webcam-chat, training modules and apps to disclose all such features have been added. Thus, technological innovations challenge professionals in the field of parenting support to exploit the opportunities this era has to offer, providing new or adapted services and interventions to support parents.

A relatively small group of researchers is investigating this domain, aiming to develop and evaluate web-based programs to help parents with their sometimes challenging task of parenting, scrutinizing readily made claims about all kinds of benefits that are attributed to Internet interventions. Driven by the speed of technological innovations, both research opportunities and challenges are many. The Internet, with its active users and detailed profiles, offers endless amounts of data to be analyzed. However, although profile and user data are frequently analyzed for marketing purposes, the content of online communications like chat and emails between parents and professionals has not been analyzed systematically. As a consequence, we know little about the quality of these exchanges or about their effects.

Overviewing international studies, email consultation was the most common feature of online communication between parents and professionals, and this was confirmed by a survey amongst Dutch professional parenting support organizations (Nieuwboer, 2011). Mostly, single session email consultation is initiated by offering a button or a form on the organization website, through which parents can easily ask a question and then receive an answer through email.

However, our knowledge about this practice of online counseling for parents is limited: what are the topics for which parents use email consultation? What type

of questions do they submit to forms on an internet website? Also, the methods practitioners use to provide an online advice have not been analyzed and no previous studies on this subject were available at the onset of this dissertation study (2009). Furthermore, in addition to the lack of knowledge about the method of single session email consultation, we also know little about the assumptions and theoretical framework for this new means of communication.

## **Empowerment**

Empowerment is a central concept in professional parenting support which has been elaborated on in many studies, and substantial effort has been undertaken to pinpoint its value (see for instance the works of Dunst and Trivette, 1988-2009). Parenting support gradually seems to shift from a deficit-based paradigm to a philosophy which is focused on resilience and competence (e.g., Graves & Shelton, 2007). Recently, in the Netherlands, the debate on empowerment has revived because of a change in Dutch governmental policy, which emphasizes the need for participation of citizens in society, rather than providing a welfare state. This transition in policy requires professional methods to support families with a strong focus on family strengths. One may argue that, rooted in a tradition of some decades of empowerment oriented parenting support, this would be a process of little effort. However, since the adoption of empowerment principles is more than simply stating the importance of strengths in a brochure or on a website (Dunst, 2009), the adherence and application of an empowerment oriented help-giving style is a concern.

As the ‘founding father’ of empowerment theory, Paolo Freire (2005/1974) has pointed out that community participation starts with individual autonomy. He proposed that it is the duty of teachers to enable pupils to reflect on their actions, in order to make choices towards the goals they value, and take responsibility in their lives, thus leading to participation. Since this can be extended to all social ‘helping’ relationships,

in this view, practitioners should try to facilitate the ‘construction’ of knowledge, rather than provide the ‘reproduction’ of knowledge (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). From this perspective, asking a question is the perfect starting point for a thinking process, rather than a failure or a weakness (Claessen, 1998).

Although parents may not explicitly ask for guidance in a thinking process, it can be argued that they would benefit more if they would understand why a specific suggestion would help them to achieve their goals and would have a positive impact on their children, rather than if they were simply offered information on parenting or solutions to parenting problems. In terms of empowerment, the ambition of practitioners is not only to support parental capability to make informed choices, but also to enable the capacity for autonomous thinking about the way they raise their children.

Thus, at the core of this debate, a fundamental issue is at stake: how do practitioners fulfil their role as help-givers? Do they disseminate valuable knowledge and insights to parents, do they guide parents towards understanding, or do they, maybe, combine these two roles?

Email consultations offer a unique opportunity to investigate the role of the practitioner, because of its text-based character, and they can be analyzed in a detailed manner. The supportive process towards more empowerment is often described as a process of some duration, in which the quality of the relationship between parents and practitioners is an important factor (e.g., Dunst, Boyd, Trivette, & Hamby, 2002; Popp & Wilcox, 2012). In contrast, single session email consultations consist of short textual communication only and are restricted to one question and one reply. This raises the issue whether it is a feasible medium to reach such an important goal like empowerment, and therefore also issues about the concept of empowerment itself, its operationalization and the way it can be measured in both the parental situation (in this case: in question texts of email consultations and reactions to questionnaires) and practitioners’ actions (in this case: in response texts of email consultations).

An expanding body of scholarly literature indicates that parenting practitioners, experts in their field and trained to support parents, are increasingly conscious of their helping role on the Internet. It is necessary to explore this topic and find answers in order to contribute to scholarly literature and to advance this field.

### **Outline of the dissertation**

The central theme of this dissertation is online parenting support. The aim of this research project is to deepen our insights in the subject in general and also to find out whether single session email consultation can be used as a professional method to guide parents in the process towards more empowerment.

To do so, we first identified the current knowledge by systematically examining the previous scholarly literature in this field. Second, we aimed to understand the function and the role of single session email consultation, by analyzing its content and evaluating its effect on parents.

In this dissertation five studies are reported. Data for the first two studies were collected by reviewing existing literature, and data of the latter three studies were collected in twenty-two community-based and private agencies which provided online parenting support.\*

In the first two chapters we aimed to identify the factors for successful online parenting support, by systematically interpreting findings from extant scholarly literature. We aimed to answer the following questions: What are the characteristics of online parenting resources studied, and what are the outcomes of different types of evaluation studies for online parenting websites? Data were collected by reviewing 75 previous studies, published between 1998 and 2010. We used a coding system to describe resource and user characteristics, to assess methodological characteristics of their evaluations and to



interpret outcomes (*chapter 1*). A more specific research question was the focus of the second study, i.e. what evidence do experimental studies show for the effectiveness of such online programs in terms of parental competencies and children's development? We analyzed 12 studies which evaluated online parent training interventions and which reported the first claims of evidence for effectiveness. We used a combination of meta-analysis and qualitative analysis in order to identify the factors and design characteristics related to the reported promising effects (*chapter 2*).

Email consultation was the most common type of online communication between parents and parenting practitioners and found in a third of all previous studies (see chapter 1). However, an in-depth analysis of this medium of parent support communication was lacking.

In *chapter 3* we analyzed email questions and advices and hypothesized that the response of the professional should match the need of the parent. To assess this claim, we developed a coding system, based on three separate categories in the literature on the orientation of parenting professionals: i.e., expert oriented, parent oriented and context oriented attitudes towards help-giving.

In addition to the lack of knowledge about the method of single session email consultation, we also know little about the assumptions on help-giving practices (see Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000) for this new means of communication. In *chapter 4* our research aimed to explore the feasibility to provide empowerment oriented support in single session email consultation. Based on previous literature on empowerment (e.g., Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Turnbull et al., 2000) we operationalized the concept of empowerment for email consultancy, resulting in the Guiding the Empowerment Process model. Based on a representative sample of email advices, this model was tested for consistency and concurrent validity with a model of social support, which is the predominant model for previous content analyses of online (mostly informal) support.

Finally, in *chapter 5*, we aimed to discover if parental empowerment improved after receiving an advice through email consultation, and also if the way practitioners succeeded in matching the need of the parent and using more empowerment oriented techniques influenced the outcome. In a randomized controlled design, we divided the group of parenting practitioners and trained one of the groups in order to recognize the need of the parents and use specific textual techniques in writing their advice. Parental empowerment was measured before and after receiving the email consultation.

In the *Conclusions*, we summarize findings and provide suggestions to advance both web-based services for parents and research in this rapidly developing field.

\* The same (parts of) datasets were used for different analyses in the studies reported in Chapter 1 & 2, and in Chapter 3, 4 & 5.