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

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# CHAPTER 3

**Practitioner response to parental need in email consultation:**

**how do they match?**

**A content analysis**

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## Abstract

*Background.* Single session email consultations in web-based parenting support may be used for a variety of reasons. Parents may be looking for information on developmental needs of children, for suggestions to improve their parenting skills, or for referrals to helpful resources. The way the practitioner meets the needs of parents, choosing a short-term and text-based approach, has not been analyzed up till now. *Objective.* To determine if and how practitioner response in single session email consultation matches the need of parents. *Method.* A content analysis of single session email consultations (129 questions; 5,997 response sentences) was conducted. Three perspectives on the parent-practitioner communication were distinguished to assess the match between parenting questions and consultations, i.e., the expert oriented, parent oriented and context oriented perspective. *Results.* The parent oriented type is the dominant paradigm in requesting and providing email consultations, with which the other types may be combined. Most consultations showed a mixed perspective with the use of a limited amount of techniques within each perspective. Correlations between the practitioner's approach and parental expectancies were weak. *Conclusions.* Professionals have a broad approach to email consultation, offering advice of different perspectives, rather than restricting the advice in order to match a prevalent parental need. All proposed textual techniques were observed in email consultations, providing evidence of their feasibility. Since practice of email consultations is relatively new, practitioners may benefit from the proposed systematic approach to writing email consultations, identifying parental need and permitting the use of professional techniques.

**Keywords:** parent-practitioner communication; internet; parenting support; email consultation.

## Introduction

In recent years, professional systems of parenting support in European countries have developed rapidly (e.g., Bernacchi, 2007; Bradshaw, 2012; Molinuevo, 2012). ‘Good parenting’ is increasingly perceived as a way of not only improving individual wellbeing, but also stimulating citizen participation in society and preventing psychosocial problems and public cost (Hermanns, 2012). Also, current efforts in developing the Dutch youth care system are aimed to reduce the high and often unnecessary claim of families on specialists like psychologists, psychiatrists and physicians, and strengthen easily accessible and low intensity support for everyday parenting questions (Bot, Roos, Sadiraj, Keuzenkamp, van den Broek, & Kleijnen, 2013; Hermanns, 2009; RMO, 2012). Fitting this context, single session email consultation is a service which is frequently offered to support parents (Nieuwboer, Fukkink, & Hermanns, 2013a – chapter 1). However, since this online service typically consists of only one question and one reply, and therefore lacks interaction and direct feedback, the risk of a mismatch between parental need and professional response seems to be high.

### **Review of the Literature on Email Consultation**

Single session email consultation is a service in which parents can submit a parenting question through an online web-form or an email address of a professional community-based or private parenting support agency; consequently, they will receive a response via email within 5 days.

Unique features of email consultation include its accessibility, anonymity and efficiency. Contrary to telephone or face-to-face exchanges, the advice offered by email is asynchronous, which has advantages for both parent and practitioner (Suler, 2000). Questions may be sent at any convenient time, the parent may read the advice multiple times, options described can be explored one-by-one and in detail. Advantages for the

practitioner include ‘thinking time’ (Suler, 2008), the opportunity to provide tailored information (Nyström & Ohrling, 2006; 2008) and the possibility to refer to a number of other online resources through hyperlinks (Anand, Feldman, Geller, Bisbee, & Bauchner, 2005).

Typically, parents take the initiative to consult a professional online, but little is known about their needs and the topics they address. Some previous content analyses of email consultations suggested that parents, in their questions to parenting practitioners, express the need for expert advice (Anand et al., 2005; Borowitz & Wyatt, 1998; Herman, Mock, Blackwell, & Hulsey, 2005; Hudson, Elek, Westfall, Grabau, & Fleck, 1999). However, after the analysis of email consultations, Campbell-Grossman, Hudson, Keating-Lefler and Heusinkvelt (2009) stated that mothers may use email consultations with nurses to seek support for being a new mother. Mertensmeyer and Fine (2000) stressed the contextual functions of an email service to parents, providing access to resources and ‘supportive dialogue’. Thus, perceptions of the function of email consultations seem to vary; it may be an appropriate way to ask for expert advice, or to get suggestions how to improve parenting skills, or it may be an instrument to find resources for support. Since the diversity of needs of parents in email consultations has not been systematically investigated in previous studies, it is hard to say whether practitioners can match those needs.

Studies report on changes in the *availability* of practitioner-parent communication through internet technology in the last decades (e.g., Anand et al., 2005; Borowitz & Wyatt, 1998; Campbell-Grossman et al., 2009), providing better access and distance support. However, little is known about the *methods* practitioners may use to write email consultations. Rochlen, Zack and Speyer (2004) stated that the overall professional experience to use text-based technology is low. Several studies report that counselors experience difficulties in providing emotional support and conveying empathy in

text-based communication (Bambling, King, Reid, & Wegner, 2008; Danby, Butler, & Emmison, 2009; Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen, & Day 2005; Oravec, 2000). In reports of evaluations of web-based support programs for parents professional guidelines to provide text-based support and the description of specific writing techniques were lacking (Nieuwboer et al., 2013a – chapter 1). Also, the *content* of email consultations, including both the parenting question and the practitioner’s advice, was not investigated before. As a consequence, the practice and methods of single session email consultation remain unclear.

A recent survey about online parenting support in the Netherlands showed that 64.3% of the providing organizations agreed that matching the need of the parent should be a leading principle in email consultations (Nieuwboer, 2011). The internet is a consumer oriented environment, in which it is important that the communication of a professional matches the need of the parent (D’Alessandro & Dosa, 2001; Suler, 2000). This is in line with extant scholarly literature on parenting support programs. In a review of studies on family-based services, Hoagwood (2005) found that family choice and preference are perceived as increasingly important in service delivery. Furthermore, Edwards and Gillies (2004), overviewing research and theory on online mental health resources for adolescents, stressed that, instead of providing all-round supportive help, a match with parental need, based on parental perceptions on the issue of who to turn to with different kinds of questions, is more important. Also, Dempsey and Keen (2008), based on an extensive literature review, revealed that a match between parental need and service delivery processes leads to more satisfaction, which improves parent outcomes directly (e.g., self-efficacy) and indirectly (e.g., coping with stress, empowerment). However, evaluation studies which distinguish specific types of parenting questions and types of practitioner’s advices are lacking, which makes it hard to determine whether there is a match between parental need and professional response.

## Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of content analysis of single session email consultations, and in order to identify a match between types of questions and types of advice, we developed a classification system, based on scholarly literature on parenting support.

The parent-practitioner relationship has been described in both previous and recent research literature on parenting support (e.g., Rodrigo, Almeida, Spiel, & Koops, 2012; Shepard & Rose, 1995; Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000). Capturing this broad field, three perspectives on parent-practitioner communication can be distinguished: the focus is on expert knowledge and solutions (see D'Alessandro, D'Alessandro, & Colbert, 2000), on family competence and strengths (e.g., Dunst, Boyd, Trivette, & Hamby, 2002; Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 2007), or on contextual resources (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Turnbull et al., 2000).

The first perspective implies that knowledge and solutions must be provided by experts. In this perspective, the expert defines the problem, and provides directives on how to handle a difficult situation (for examples of empirical studies, see Barbour, 2005; D'Alessandro et al., 2000; Dornan & Oermann, 2006; Sim et al., 2007). Thus, the *expert oriented perspective* places a strong emphasis on professional diagnosis and intervention. Email consultations may contain sentences in which the practitioner defines or diagnoses the problem, stresses the need for professional intervention, and directs the parent what to do.

Parental strengths are the core of the second perspective, meaning that parents are involved in decision-making and problem-solving. The professional is one of the resources, contributing to these tasks, respecting and mobilizing competencies within the family (e.g., Nyström, & Ohrling, 2008; Schinke, Fang, & Cole, 2009). This *parent oriented perspective* has three major assumptions (see Turnbull et al., 2000), including the centrality of the family, family choices as the basis of decision making and family strengths and capabilities. Email consultations may, for example, contain sentences in

which several family perspectives are described (parental intentions, developmental needs of children), family strengths are emphasized (giving compliments, stimulating decision making), and capabilities are strengthened (encouraging the use of certain knowledge or skills, providing a variety of handling options).

In the third perspective, a parenting practitioner will contextualize the needs of parents in an ecological approach to find resources and solutions in their social environment, informal as well as professional, in the neighborhood as well as in society (e.g., Mertensmeyer, & Fine, 2000). Thus, the *context oriented perspective* includes access to resources, participation and changing community ecology as the key assumptions (based on Turnbull et al., 2000). An email consultation may contain sentences in which the parenting practitioner stresses partnership and dialogue in finding solutions, shows opportunities for all family members to participate in problem-solving, or refers to resources.

As a consequence of these different perspectives, parental need and practitioner's response can be a match, but they can also be a mismatch (see Table 1). Previous literature suggests that a match will lead to better outcomes (e.g., Edward and Gillies, 2004; Dempsey and Keen, 2008).

### **Goal of the Study**

The objective of this study is to determine if and how professional response in single session email consultation matches the need of parents. Email exchanges between parents and professionals were collected and analyzed using a newly developed coding system, based on a theoretically grounded categorization of three perspectives on parental need and practitioner response.



## Method

### Participants and Sample

**Practitioners.** In 2011, Dutch organizations which offered free-of-charge single session email consultations to parents were contacted. Working in thirteen community-based practices and nine private practices, forty-five parenting practitioners throughout the Netherlands showed interest in participation in the study. Individual professionals gave their consent by completing an online questionnaire with questions about their previous experience in providing email consultations and their profession, resulting in a 89% participation rate (40 practitioners). Parenting practitioners were also asked to report any previous contact with the parent and the length of writing time per advice. Amongst the professionals who agreed to participate, different disciplines were represented, like developmental psychologists (42.6%), nurses (15.5%), psychotherapists (11.6%), social workers (10.1%), coach/counselors (4.7%), pediatricians (0.8%) and other (14.7%). Their experience with writing email consultations varied: 31% had no experience at all, 22.5% had written 1-5 consultations prior to the research, 14.7% had written 6-10 consultations, and 5.4% had written 10-25 consultations. A quarter of the practitioners had more experience (26.4%,  $\geq 26$  email consultations).

**Parents.** During the research period, March 1 to June 1, 2012 participating professionals offered single session email consultation to parents as part of their regular services. Parents were enabled to choose freely any participating professional and discuss any topic within the area of parenting. Two hundred and eight parents submitted a parenting question. Practitioners were not aware if a parent participated in the study or not, and all questions were answered within 2-5 days. Parents received information about the research project and an online consent form hyperlink through email. Because of Dutch law on research participation, parents had to confirm that they were 18 years of age or older.

**Emails.** We requested the parenting practitioner to send both question and advice for content analysis, but of consenting parents only. After data collection all elements with which parents, families or practitioners could be identified (e.g., email addresses, letter heads/logo's, names of family members, people involved, referrals to local organizations) were removed from the records. Also, layout was converted to a basic format, so that no question or advice could be traced back to specific persons. Descriptive data on the parenting questions were collected, using an index of five topics, following a classification for parenting questions of Dutch community-based agencies (ROTS): parental competencies and four areas of child development (emotional, physical, social, cognitive development). Each question was labeled with one main topic. If provided, the child's age was noted.

Forty practitioners provided email advices to 208 parents in total. Of these parents, 135 agreed to participate (65%) and, subsequently, 129 email communications (both question and advice), written by 40 practitioners, were retrieved for content analysis (mean: 2.84 per practitioner, min.-max.: 1-8; in total 5,997 response sentences).

**Ethical considerations on recruitment.** In the Netherlands it is allowed to provide non-medical and informative email consultation, as long as certain privacy measures are taken. By signing the research consent form which contained information on these rules, participating practitioners took full responsibility for the acquisition of parenting questions, for the provision of single session email consultations as part of their service to parents, and also for storing and archiving data in a responsible manner (see Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005, for ethical considerations). This study adheres to the legal requirements of the Netherlands and all data are available in Dutch and accounted for (first author). The research procedure was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam (reg.nr. 2013-EXT-2811).

## **Coding Design**

We followed recommendations of Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter (2000) on text analysis, to first define a system of categories, with clear operational, explicit, mutually exclusive and complete codes. On the basis of the theoretical framework (see Introduction), we took the chapter of Turnbull et al. (2000) on the evolution of family-professional partnerships as a starting point to develop the coding system. We marked every sentence which was typical for each of the three perspectives on parent-practitioner communication (categories), resulting in 21 codes to analyze advices (See Table 3). Because of the concrete nature of the codes, indicating what the practitioner actually does in his writing, we will refer to these as (textual) techniques.

The 3 categories and underlying 21 codes are, as Titscher et al. (2000) prescribe, derived from the research question and suitable to analyze texts on a sentence level. In two coder-training sessions the three researchers (see below) tested the coding system by using textual material which was similar to the sample in this study (other email consultations) to clarify interpretations and define the exclusiveness of all codes.

Subsequently, we identified corresponding indicators for the type of parental need. Parents may ask for an expert opinion or solution; they may convey a need for options and suggestions on how to resolve the situation themselves; or they may express the need for support and guidance towards suitable resources.

Thus, the same three categories were used to determine the type of question and the type of advice. All questions and advices were randomly assigned to the three coders, i.e. two Master students and the first author. A stepwise pattern ensured that a researcher never coded a paired question and advice.

## Measures

The coding system consisted of three categories; the *expert oriented perspective*, for which we will use the abbreviation (E) for the questions and (e) for the advices; the *parent oriented perspective*, which we will refer to as (P) for the questions and (p) for the replies; and the *context oriented perspective*, referred to by (C) for the questions and (c) for the responses.

For the questions, multiple needs may be communicated in one email and at different levels of intensity. As a consequence, parental need was coded by using a scale from 0-5 (0 = not expressed, 3 = explicitly expressed, 5 = strongly expressed) for each type of need. Subsequently, parental need was characterized as prevalent with 3 as the cut-off score. It was possible that in one question multiple prevalent needs could be conveyed, for instance P+C or even E+P+C (see Table 1).

Inter-coder reliability was estimated by determining Cohen's kappa for a random sample of 20% of the parenting questions. Reliability proved satisfactory to excellent for all types ( $\kappa$  for type E = .74; type P = 1; type C = .83;  $\kappa$  mean for all types = .86). In the case of divergent codes, final codes were established by discussion.

For the advices, the expert oriented perspective was characterized by 3 codes, and both the parent and the context oriented perspective were characterized by 9 codes, resulting in a refined coding system of 21 variables (See Table 2). Using the coding system, each email advice was first analysed at sentence level, providing descriptive data on the frequency of codes (or: techniques). Of all sentences 51.1% were assigned a code (3,068 sentences), which means that in these sentences one of the 21 techniques was observed. The other sentences contained information which was conditional, like greetings, information on opening hours, offers of other services which were not related to the question, structuring elements, and meta-communication.

Table 1

*Examples of match and mismatch between parental need and professional response*

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*Expert oriented perspective*

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A father asks “My five-year old child sleeps only six hours per night, should I worry about that?” and an expert oriented practitioner may respond with an indication of hours suitable for that sleeping at that age, for example “I advise you to visit your GP, because a child of that age should sleep approximately for eleven or twelve hours every night”.

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*Parent oriented perspective*

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Parents may ask: “My child has difficulties falling asleep and climbs out of bed numerous times every evening. How can I help my child go to sleep?” and a practitioner could reply: “It’s great that you both want to help your child and there are several options for bedtime rituals you may consider, depending on your preference and possibilities:...”.

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*Context oriented perspective*

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A parent may submit a question like: “My child is going through a difficult sleeping phase and as a single mum, I’m very tired and my work is suffering. Do you have any suggestions to help me and my child getting through this?” The practitioner may involve the teacher of the child to make sure there is not a stimulant overload for the child during the day, and the mum’s boss to negotiate some kind of temporary shift in tasks.

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*Mismatch*

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If the context oriented mother in the example receives an expert oriented response, (in this case, “your child should sleep twelve hours per night”) she will not feel supported. Another example of a mismatch is the parent oriented couple reading a context oriented advice (for example “I invite you to our office to talk about it”). Finally, if the expert oriented father in the example receives a parent oriented reply (in this case, all kinds of options for bedtime rituals) he will not be aware of the urgent advice to visit his GP.

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On the level of the total score for each of the three types of orientation (thus correcting for large differences in the number of sentences per advice) inter-coder reliability was estimated by determining the intra-class correlation (*ICC*, two-way random, absolute agreement) of a sample of 20% of the email advices. Reliability proved satisfactory to excellent for all variables (*ICC* for type (e) = 1; type (p) = .70; type (c) = .87; *ICC* mean for all types = .86).

Subsequently, an email advice was categorized as a prevalent type if more than half of the techniques of the perspective were found, as to create robust categories

with clear-cut examples; in the expert oriented category, the application of only one technique would not be distinctive enough, so we took two techniques as the threshold; in the parent and context oriented categories, the application of only one or two out of nine techniques would show a weak distinctiveness of the perspective, whereas five or more techniques would show a high prevalence of the category. Similar to a question, an advice could also show more than one prevalent type of orientation.

Consequently, prevalent types of questions and prevalent types of advices were used as a measure for analysis.

## Results

### The Characteristics of Email Consultations with Parents

Issues concerning parental competence appeared a dominant theme in the parenting questions, including issues like punishment, rules, and arguments (40.6%). Most other questions were related to aspects of child development. Typical themes in questions about emotional development were tantrums, insolence, temperament, and claiming-behavior (21.1%). Examples of themes in questions about physical development were sleeping and nutrition (18.8%). Most questions on social development involved bullying (12.5%). The other questions concerned the cognitive development of children and several other issues (7%). The age of children concerned varied from 0 to 21 years (mean 8.2 years,  $sd = 5.1$ , 18% missing values).

Parenting practitioners reported that no previous contact or relationship between parent and practitioner had been established. Average time spent on writing an email advice was 31-60 minutes; twelve advices were written in less than 15 minutes, eleven consultations took more than 90 minutes. Email advices varied widely in length from 3 through 81 sentences (mean 23.8,  $sd = 16.4$  sentences).

The analysis of length of questions and replies in word count also showed large

differences (Questions: min-max 9-1,227, mean 232,  $sd = 206$  words; Advices: min-max 115-1993, mean 698,  $sd = 344$  words). On total average, advices were more than three times longer than questions (90,075 vs. 27,583 words, respectively).

### **Types of Parental Need in Questions**

An email with a parenting question was categorized as belonging to a specific type of parent-practitioner communication if a need was prevalent (see Method and Table 1). Half of the questions showed a sole dominance of the parent oriented perspective, showing a need for suggestions, options and the strengthening of family skills and knowledge. Only a minor part of the questions was exclusively expert oriented, whereas an exclusive need for a focus on the context was also weak. However, parents expressed a combination of needs in most emails. Analysis of the emails with these combined needs showed that almost all parenting questions contained the need for a parent oriented approach. Both the need for an expert oriented approach and the need for a context oriented approach were found in almost a fifth of all parenting questions, combined with the parent focused approach. The combination of an expert- and a context oriented approach was seldom reported. In a small part of the questions, the parent expressed a prevalent need for all perspectives.

### **Types of Professional Response in Advices**

Descriptive analysis showed that every one of the 21 codes was observed in email advices, but there were vast differences in frequency, as shown in Table 2. The total maximum amount of techniques in one advice was 15 (out of 21).

Frequencies of techniques belonging to the expert oriented category of the parent-practitioner communication were relatively low; practitioners did not often define the problem, stress the need for professional intervention or direct the parent what to do.

Practitioners often chose the use of several techniques which belong to the parent

oriented type of parent-practitioner communication. Through acknowledging parent's intentions and describing the needs of all involved, the practitioner aimed to mobilize family members' competence. Through offering a variety of options to the parent and encouraging the use of knowledge or skills, parental competency was strengthened. However, decision making was not frequently encouraged. Rephrasing the main question was found in almost all email consultations.

The techniques which belong to the context orientation showed a wide variety in frequencies. It was relatively common to refer to family members who were already mentioned by the parent as participants in the situation. However, the opportunity to involve other family members, friends or parents from befriended school children was not often recommended. In almost two third of the email consultations we found a referral to helpful resources like websites or organizations. Relating the parenting question to the broader level of society (laws, rights) was scarcely found and practitioners rarely discussed laws, policies, rights or obligations in their advice. Finally, although many practitioners offered their assistance, explicitly stressing partnership and dialogue was less frequently observed.

Table 2

*Prevalence of types of communication in parental need and in professional advice*

Type of parent-practitioner communication	Parental need	Professional advice
E/e. expert oriented	3.1%	.8%
P/p. parent oriented	51.2%	31%
C/c. context oriented	2.3%	.8%
- no prevalent type	0%	44.2%
- combination of E+P / e+p	20.9%	3.9%
- combination of P+C / p+c	19.4%	18.6%
- combination of E+C / e+c	.8%	0%
- combination of E+P+C / e+p+c	2.3%	.8%



An email advice was categorized in a specific prevalent type of parent-practitioner communication if more than half of the techniques of the type were found (see Table 2). Analysis showed that 44.2% of the sample could not be categorized into one of the three types. In these advices, a few techniques of every type of communication were found and no distinctive approach to the relationship with the parent was chosen. In almost a third of the advices the support of parental strengths was the dominant type; in almost a fifth the practitioner combined this approach with the context orientation. Finally, in only a very small amount of responses, expert intervention was the leading orientation in help giving.

In conclusion, parenting questions often showed a combination of dominant needs (multiple types are strongly expressed), whereas email advices often consisted of a combination of non-prevalent approaches (a few techniques of every type).

### **The Match between Parental Need and Professional Response**

The association between types of questions (Expert, Parent, Context) and the type of advice (expert, parent, context) was tested using the contingency coefficient measure for nominal codes. Analysis showed that there were no significant associations ( $CC$  for E-e = .06,  $p = .45$ ;  $CC$  for P-p = .12,  $p = .14$ ; and  $CC$  for C-c = .01,  $p = .89$ ). Furthermore, the questions which conveyed a single type (i.e., no combinations of questions), which might incite a straightforward response of the same type by the practitioner, also showed a poor association with the types of advice ( $CC$  for  $E_{\text{single}}$ -e = .04,  $p = .62$ ;  $CC$  for  $P_{\text{single}}$ -p = .09,  $p = .26$ ; and  $CC$  for  $C_{\text{single}}$ -c = .07,  $p = .37$ ).

Subsequently, in order to verify if single particular techniques were associated with type of parental need, associations were tested between types of questions (E, P, C) and the occurrence of 21 techniques (e1-3; p1-9; c1-9, see Table 3) using the contingency coefficient measure for nominal codes. Results showed statistically

Table 3

*Frequencies and occurrence of 21 techniques in practitioner-to-parent emails (n=129)*

Practitioner's techniques in three different orientations on the parent-practitioner communication	Frequency	Occurrence in % of emails
Type e: Expert oriented		
e-1 define/diagnose the problem	22	11.6
e-2 stress the need for professional intervention	16	10
e-3 direct the parent what to do	11	6.2
Type p: Parent oriented		
p-1 repeat parent's perspective	31	19.4
p-2 describe needs (of several family members)	233	58.9
p-3 acknowledge emotions	95	46.5
p-4 repeat the main question	203	93
p-5 encourage decision making	15	8.5
p-6 compliment on parent's intentions	112	58.1
p-7 build on parent's or family's strengths and opportunities	45	24
p-8 identify and encourage the use of knowledge or skills	643	88.4
p-9 provide a variety of options the parent can choose to act on	993	76
Type c: Context oriented		
c-1 stress partnership and dialogue in finding solutions	85	48
c-2 identify and refer to resources in the informal network	23	17
c-3 identify and refer to resources in the professional context	193	62
c-4 repeat parent's or family's goals and needs	56	21.7
c-5 show opportunities for all family members to participate in problem-solving	97	42.6
c-6 invite to participate in any further helping process	103	71.3
c-7 identify opportunities within multiple levels	65	41
c-8 discuss laws, policies, rights, obligations	2	1.5
c-9 encourage to mobilize the informal network	25	13.2

significant, but still modest associations for Question Type E-Technique p-8  $CC = .21$ ,  $p = .01$  and for Question Type C-Technique p-1  $CC = .19$ ,  $p = .02$ . All expert oriented responses were associated with context oriented questions (for Question Type C- Technique e1  $CC = .26$ ,  $p = .00$ ; Question Type C- Technique e2  $CC = .28$ ,  $p = .00$ ; Question Type C- Technique e3  $CC = .17$ ,  $p = .04$ ).

Thus, although associations between type of questions and separate techniques were generally weak, a link was found between context oriented questions and expert oriented responses.

## **Discussion**

In single session email consultations parenting practitioners offer support to parents with questions concerning child development and parental functioning with the use of textual communication only. Limited in both time and means, the parenting practitioner is challenged to choose a suitable approach to communicate with the parent. Email consultations offer the unique opportunity to evaluate the characteristics and interactions between parents and practitioners in great detail through content analysis.

The literature reports several examples where specific target groups were reached through email consultation, such as single, minority or teenage mothers (Campbell-Grossman et al., 2009; Herman et al., 2005; Hudson et al., 1999) or specific topics were treated, such as pregnancy (Kouri, Turunen, Tossavainen, & Saarikoski, 2006), children with cancer (Ewing, Long, Rotondi, Howe, Bill, & Marsland, 2009) or perinatal grief (Capitulo, 2004). In contrast, our study included all parents with all parenting questions, showing that parents in primary or preventative care may use email consultations for a wide variety of topics. Questions were mostly related to parental competencies, emotional and physical development of relatively young children. Given its accessibility and convenience, email consultations can be the medium of choice to consult a professional about everyday parenting questions. Most questions conveyed a combination of needs for different kinds of support: professional diagnosis and intervention (expert oriented needs), suggestions to enhance family strengths and capabilities (parent oriented needs) and access to helpful resources (context oriented needs).

Advices mostly contained parent oriented content, sometimes combined with context oriented suggestions, whereas expert oriented support was found to be rare. The practitioners' email advices consisted of a few techniques of every type and in almost half of the consultations no prevalent approach was found. Internal consistency of the types proved to be poor, indicating that practitioners favored a limited amount of techniques within a specific orientation. Nonetheless, though varying in frequencies, all techniques were represented. Findings in our study confirm that it was feasible for all techniques and all three perspectives on the parent-practitioner relationship (i.e., expert, parent and context oriented) to be implemented in single session email consultation.

Our analysis also suggests that the match between type of parental need and type of advice was weak, indicating a low agreement between the perspective of the parent and the practitioner's response in our sample. Instead, practitioners seemed to make the choice to offer a broad perspective on the parenting question.

Previous claims of the literature that a matching parent-practitioner communication is the most desirable one (e.g., Edwards & Gillies, 2004; Dempsey & Keen, 2008; Hoagwood, 2005) were not made in the context of brief online textual communication like email consultation. Instead it can be argued that offering a broad approach in this particular context may be useful; in doing so, misinterpretations of the parental expectation, which is only conveyed through a short text, may be avoided. Also, a parenting practitioner may choose to offer a different perspective on the parenting question than the parent explicitly asked for, in order to open up new opportunities in solving the issue.

On the one hand, this content analysis suggests that matching the need of the parent, especially when it is dominant, requires additional professional consideration, so that a well-informed choice to use either a certain perspective or a broad approach can be made. On the other hand, this study, which only described and analyzed the texts

of parenting questions and email advices as they are, should be supplemented with research to empirically investigate the value of the matching hypothesis in this context. Different from the present study, the aim of such research should be to establish if a match would really be helpful and useful.

Interestingly, exclusive expert oriented advice was seldom requested by parents or provided by practitioners, although this kind of advice seems regularly to have been provided in combination with other responses to parents with context oriented needs. The expert type of email consultation is debatable, because of the fact that, despite differences, it bears a close resemblance to medical online consultation, which may be regarded as illegal or unethical in the absence of a patient-client relationship (for Dutch guidelines, see KNMG, 2014).

In fact, email consultation in itself is not beyond controversy, since the security of email systems is low, there is no way to verify the sender of an email, and email is transferred through multiple server channels before it reaches the correspondent, leaving confidentiality at risk (e.g., Rosen & Kwok, 2007; Thomas & Shaikh, 2007). However, informed consent is often enough to proceed with providing email consultations (see Method). Practitioners must fully understand and comply to the rules, laws and codes of ethics they are bound to, which are frequently changed and updated because of new insights and new technologies and which may differ between and within countries (for instance, HIPAA rules for the USA; Wet Bescherming Persoonsgegevens for the Netherlands).

Online counseling for parents is a relatively new discipline (e.g., Ritterband & Palermo, 2009) and evaluation tools are needed. Rochlen et al. (2004) found that practitioners seem to lack the knowledge and experience to handle email consultations in a systematic and methodological manner. Actually, several authors have stressed the

fact that it is vital to master the process of online communication, in order to employ email consultations as a means for professional support (Childress, 1999; Mallen et al., 2005; Stofle & Chechele, 2004). This study is one of the first to contribute to the understanding of communication dynamics in this context.

In this study, three types of the parent-practitioner communication have been distinguished, with satisfactory reliability, providing an analytical framework for the study of email consultations in parental support. This categorization is theoretically linked to concepts in the parenting support paradigm and enables a refined analysis of (textual) communication. Our findings suggest that, in addition to the current broad approach, practitioners may employ a greater variety of techniques than currently applied.

### **Limitations**

It should be noted that a content analysis of email consultations, using a coding system which breaks up the text and categorizes each sentence, may to some degree violate the intended meaning of the text and the way a reader interprets the advice. Also, many nuances in tone and warmth of the communication are lost in this approach to content analysis. Thus, conclusions of this article do not reflect the overall intentions or appreciations of email consultations, but are restricted to the specified measures.

For instance, the questions and email advices in this sample varied extremely in length, which was partly compensated in correlation analysis by ignoring the frequencies of techniques employed, and taking the occurrence of techniques as a starting point. For statistical analysis purposes this seemed a necessary decision; however this decision alienates the analysis from the way a parent may perceive an advice with, for example, multiple compliments or many options.

Furthermore, the coding of types of questions and types of advices, which was the basis of correlation analysis, differs; in parenting questions the expression of need was coded with 3 variables, and a scale of 1-5 for weaker or stronger expressions, whereas professional consultations were coded with 21 variables, adding up to 3 categories. Although both procedures yielded adequate inter-coder reliability, a difference in fine-tuning must be acknowledged and this may partly explain the fact that so many professional responses, being more rigorously investigated, did not show a prevalent approach, subsequently leading to weak associations with parental need. A closer look at the cut-off score for prevalence is warranted.

Finally, the sample of email consultations was the result of self-selection of both practitioners and parents and therefore, findings may not be fully representative.

Despite its shortcomings, finding a weak correlation between question and response types in common practice, this first study in its kind shows that email consultation offers opportunities for parenting support. In theory, a diversity of email consultation techniques may enable a responsive and professional approach. This study may help the parenting practitioners to improve their understanding of the online communication processes and their skills in text-based consultation.