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

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# CONCLUSIONS

## **Online Parenting Support**

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

In this final part of the dissertation, issues that were raised in the previous chapters are discussed, in order to provide suggestions to advance both web-based services for parents, especially email consultation, and research in this rapidly developing field.

In *chapter 1*, we described studies which evaluated or analyzed empirical online services for parents, identifying resource and user characteristics and assessing methodological characteristics of the evaluation studies. Our research suggests that scholarly interest in the subject of online parenting programs is growing.

Many of these studies have analyzed the contents of postings and messages from parents, finding that well-known benefits of traditional peer support (e.g., Belsky & Rovine, 1984) are intensified and made much more accessible through web-based media (e.g., McKenna, 2008; Nieuwboer & Fukkink, 2014, *in press*).

Also, consistent with reports on other internet interventions, online programs for parents were increasingly interactive, offering multi-layered and multi-component types of online communication (Barak & Suler, 2008; Ritterband et al., 2009)

Furthermore, we found that first initiatives to provide web-based resources were specifically aimed to improve accessibility to (health) care and support for parents in isolated areas or challenging circumstances (e.g., Huws, Jones, & Ingledew, 2001; Scharer, Colon, Moneyham, Hussey, Tavakoli, & Shugart, 2009), and were directed mainly at parents of young children. However, since the Internet has become a popular and widely used medium, the focus point of studies shifted gradually towards general parenting portals and supportive practices to improve parenting. Topics included social networking for new parents, information on youth mental health, and parent skills or conflict training.

Compared to the vast amount of online resources for parents, the number of rigorous scientific evaluations is still small, and the characteristics of parenting websites show a high degree of diversity, which makes it hard to generalize claims about the efficiency and effectiveness of online parenting support.

In conclusion, we found interesting and inspiring examples of web-based services for parents, following technological trends, varying from discussion boards for peer support to hand-held devices with tailored information. With the development of new easy-to-use devices, it is to be expected that Internet-based interventions and programs can be made more and more available for a larger part of the population, supplementing existing services.

In *chapter 2*, we focused on the evidence for effectiveness of online parenting programs, using a combination of a narrative review and meta-analysis in order to identify the factors and design characteristics which contribute to reported effects.

We found positive outcomes for both parents and children after participation in a short web-based intervention.

Unguided modules, i.e. e-learning sessions without any personal involvement of practitioners, showed promising results to enhance knowledge and can be further optimized by offering inter-session progress assessments. Other services involve interactive guidance of practitioners, for instance through conversations, video-conferencing, chat or email consultation. If the purpose of a program is to improve other aspects of parental competencies than knowledge, like behavioral aspects (e.g., responsive and disciplinary skills) and attitudinal aspects (e.g., self-confidence and satisfaction about the parenting role), we have learned that guided elements of online programs were associated with better outcomes than unguided online programs. For instance, online sessions were started with a face to face session ('blended' help-giving) or reviewed through a video-conference with parents at home ('multi-layered'

help-giving). Also, programs with a training-like set-up with multiple sessions were more successful than programs without such structured content, like an online portal which offers information.

Interestingly, although they may be inspiring and attractive, positive effects of more complex (multi-media) programs have not yet been convincingly demonstrated, as we have seen in the mixed results of the set of studies which provided three or more channels of communication, such as video, tests, animated characters. Comparing several studies which reported mostly positive outcomes, we found that the adaptation of well-known evidence-based programs (like Problem Solving Skills Training and Triple P) for online dissemination does not guarantee success. Finally, the most successful programs were targeted at specific groups of parents, addressing a limited topic.

Focusing on one of the types of online parenting support, single session email consultation is a very brief supportive service, convenient and easily accessible for parents, but methods, protocols and procedures for parenting practitioners were lacking.

In *chapter 3*, we hypothesized that a match between parental need and professional response would enhance the quality of online consultation, following empirical evidence in other parenting support studies (Dempsey & Keen, 2008; Fordham, Gibson, & Bowes, 2011; Raghavendra, Murchland, Bentley, Wake-Dyster, & Lyons, 2007; Van Riper, 1999). On the basis of previous literature (Dunst et al., 2002; Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000), we developed a coding system, distinguishing between expert oriented, parent oriented and context oriented perspectives on help-giving. We collected email questions and advices and questionnaires on parental empowerment in a primary care setting in the Netherlands.

Almost half of the questions parents submitted online concerned parenting competencies, and the other half concerned child development. The age of the children

involved was diverse, but they were mainly young (pre-)school children and questions about adolescent children were rare. In line with our findings on online parenting support, which is often targeted at parents of young children (see chapter 1 and 2), this part of the dissertation shows the same pattern for parental self-selection.

Overall, the match between prevalent parental need and professional advice was found to be weak. Interestingly, parents often used this communication channel with multiple expectations. For instance, a question about an excess of children's computer gaming showed the need for sharing worries, seeking multiple options how to deal with the situation and looking for useful resources. In other words, most questions were parent- and context oriented and showed multiple prevalent needs. Practitioners showed an even higher preference to a broad approach to writing their advices, offering a few techniques of every perspective, rather than restricting the advice to one parental need, and they showed low levels of prevalence.

Although parental need requires professional consideration, we discussed the benefits of a broader approach, offering parents multiple perspectives. In doing so, misinterpretations of the parental expectation, which is only conveyed through a short text, can be avoided. However, we also concluded that practitioners may employ a greater variety of textual techniques than currently applied.

The literature on single session email consultation is scarce and the few studies reporting on the subject (Bagraith, Chardon, & King, 2010; Car & Sheikh, 2004a; 2004b; Chardon, Bagraith, & King, 2011; Harris, Danby, Butler, & Emmison, 2012; Nijland, van Gemert-Pijnen, Boer, Steehouder & Seydel, 2009) were not aimed at parents. Gains of this study include a better insight in the topics and types of questions submitted by parents online and knowledge about the way practitioners respond to them.

The characteristics of single session online communication appear to be in contrast with the way empowerment and empowerment oriented behavior are mostly perceived: as long term processes and interactions of some duration, building trust and rapport (e.g., Dunst et al., 2002; Popp & Wilcox, 2012). Although several overviews and checklists exist for parent-practitioner communication (Baumann, Kolko, Collins, & Herschel, 2006; St-Cyr Tribble et al., 2008; Trivette & Dunst, 2005; Verzaal, 2002), we found that the concept of empowerment in parenting support was not operationalized in a detailed enough manner, fit to enable a content analysis of texts.

In *chapter 4*, we developed a model on the basis of a conceptual explanation of the process towards more empowerment. Building upon the study of Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) and literature on empowerment in parenting support (Turnbull et al., 2000) we were able to relate some of the previously described textual techniques (see chapter 3) to this process, resulting in the Guiding the Empowerment Process model (GEP model). The model identifies how the practitioner can guide the parent in components of this process towards more empowerment which proved to be difficult, for instance defining a goal, taking action, reflecting on impact or mobilizing resources in the context. It involves ten techniques which can be used in email consultation, like ‘rephrasing family goals’, ‘providing a variety of options’, ‘describing the needs of involved family members’, and ‘show opportunities for family members to participate in problem-solving’ (see chapter 4, Figure 1).

By defining empowerment as a process with separate stages and relating it to the support a practitioner can provide, we have developed a practical instrument to measure the level of empowerment oriented content in single session email consultations.

We found good results for internal consistency and concurrent validity of the GEP model. Also, we observed all ten described techniques in the online advices, providing guidance in all four components of the empowerment process. Thus, feasibility of the GEP model for content analysis of email counseling from the perspective of

empowerment was demonstrated. This study is a first attempt to relate the practice of email consultation to the key concept of empowerment. In doing so, we suggest that usability of the concept for everyday parenting practice has increased.

This study advances the knowledge about the way parenting practitioners may guide parents towards more empowerment in situations for which they seek help or support, by analyzing its practical implications and also its concurrent validity with social support. The underlying hypothesis that parental empowerment is enhanced by guiding the empowerment process in this manner deserves further investigation.

Finally, in *chapter 5*, we investigated the improvement of parental empowerment after receiving an online advice, using an adapted version of the Family Empowerment Scale (Koren et al., 1992).

We designed an experiment, collecting email questions and advices and questionnaires on parental empowerment in a primary care setting in the Netherlands. Furthermore, we trained a group of parenting practitioners, teaching them to respond to parental questions through email consultations. Implicitly integrated in the training, all techniques of the Guiding the Empowerment Process model were present. The other group of professionals received no specific training, but were similarly educated, generally on a bachelor level in their discipline.

The results of the evaluation showed that parental self-confidence was moderately enhanced after this short intervention, on which practitioners spent less than an hour on average. Single session email consultation therefore seems a feasible method to improve self-confidence of parents. Also, parents were very satisfied with the service of single session email consultation. A specific factor to explain the effect of single session email consultation could not be identified: neither the provision of a matching response, nor the application of techniques of the GEP model proved to contribute to the effects on the empowerment scale.



Thus, although finding no specific mediating factors, this first study into the effects of single session email consultation shows that some interesting improvements in the way parents perceive their family situation can be achieved.

To conclude, both the results and research methodology of these studies lead to a number of questions and issues which may direct future research.

Progress can be incited by both technological opportunities and evidence of effective programs or program components. It stands to reason that in the near future new devices and software will inspire new forms of online parenting support. Over the last few years, tablet computers, smart phones and apps have found their way into our daily lives, inspiring new innovations. Online services have the potential to reach a wide audience of parents and it would be useful to use the experiences and knowledge of previous scholarly literature as a way to upscale good practices. Also, the effects and quality of online public health programs, which are aimed at informing large groups of parents, for instance through a portal with information pages, should be investigated. Furthermore, in order to understand its dynamics and design imperatives, researchers should initiate more randomized controlled trials to find evidence for effectiveness of specific components and characteristics of online services, especially on parental attitude and behavior. Many research opportunities lay ahead, concerning design (multimedia, interaction, peer and professional support), and target groups (all parents, parents of adolescents, specific underprivileged groups).

In order to enhance our knowledge on the way online programs improve parenting more diverse approaches should be employed in addition to self-report by parents, for instance using more information sources (e.g., children, teachers), more methods (e.g., observation through webcam technology) and more tests (e.g., follow-up at three or six months). More programs on online parenting support should be evaluated

to substantiate firmer claims about their effectiveness. Within this field, researchers are especially challenged to make sense of all the different topics and target groups these services may encompass. In fact, although of important influence in family functioning, parenting and parenting support is a domain which is often neglected within the scope of studies on addiction, mental health and well-being. Parent participation in online services and the impact of internet interventions on parenting competencies are understudied subjects in the field of sociological and psychological research. Also, guidelines which clarify how online tools for counseling and supportive practices can be applied in a professional manner are lacking. Enhancements in this line of study could include the evaluation of protocols and manuals for online guidance, providing stronger evidence for what does and does not work in family services and raise the accountability of web-based or blended support.

More specifically, it remains a challenge to relate innovative online practices to previous knowledge about efficacy and theory in parenting support practice. We chose to relate our study to the key concept of ‘empowerment’, a term which in itself is not without controversy. Several authors have described how the meaning of the term is often diffused and lacking in consistency, because it is used in many different contexts and interpreted accordingly (e.g., Holmström & Röing, 2010; Woodall, Warwick-Booth, & Cross, 2012). However, the notion still seems compelling and much employed throughout social sciences and practice (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Turnbull et al., 2000). Using the term to describe a process which can be guided by practitioners, we chose to operationalize the concept in a practical manner. We also suggested that practitioners are capable of fulfilling their role as guides towards more empowerment in problematic parenting situations, enabling parental capacity for autonomous thinking. In our research we found that empowerment oriented techniques can indeed be observed in email advices. Further, in our sample, we found that not all available

empowerment oriented techniques we incorporated were used to their full potential. It would, therefore, be interesting to investigate the effect of consultations which are enriched by such content.

Further, we do not know if it would be feasible and efficient to match the advice to a specific component of the empowerment process (goals, actions, impact and context). In theory, the best way a practitioner could support parents is to differentiate to their needs, helping one to clarify goals, and the other with a reflection on the impact of his actions. This would implicate a fine-tuning of the interpretation of parental need in terms of one or more empowerment process components. In the limited time of our research, we were not able to investigate the parent-practitioner communication at this level of detail.

The studies from this dissertation suggest that after some forty years of adoption of empowerment principles in parenting support, the concept of empowerment still requires more exploration. More specifically, clarification and implementation of empowerment principles could be enhanced by practice-based or practice-led research, in which models for empowerment oriented guidance can be tested.

The results of sixteen years of scientific evaluation in this innovative domain of online services suggest that internet technologies offer ample opportunities to support parents, and it deserves a thorough approach to program design, professional competence and research.

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