



## Relevance of the intervention module “Coping with stress and unhelpful emotions” for parents living in multi-ethnic deprived neighborhoods



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### ABSTRACT

To achieve optimal satisfaction and impact of interventions in diverse populations, it is important to be sensitive to the needs and stressors of ethnic minority and low-income groups. This study examines the relevance of the intervention module ‘Coping with stress and unhelpful emotions’. The module, addressing parenting stress, was integrated in Group Triple P and delivered to parents living in multi-ethnic deprived neighborhoods in the Netherlands.

To enable in-depth understanding of parents' and providers' experiences, a multi-informant qualitative methodology was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four providers and fourteen participants, observations were made during the performance of the module, and process evaluation forms were filled in by providers. A thematic analysis was conducted to interpret the results.

Three overarching themes were identified: appreciation of sharing experiences, acceptability of the module's content, and the appropriateness of program materials. The module was considered relevant by both participants and providers. Feelings related to homesickness and stress were discussed in detail. Although sharing anecdotes was valued, they took up some of the limited time available for individual behavior practice. Participants were positive about the use of video fragments, whereas providers questioned the appropriateness and the ethnic/religious diversity of the material.

These findings support the relevance of the intervention module on ‘Coping with stress and unhelpful emotions’ for parents living in multi-ethnic deprived neighborhoods. The module might be improved by allowing more time for and variety in behavior practice, including attention for positive emotions, and adjusting program materials for use among parents with, for example, limited language proficiency.

### 1. Introduction

Although parenting can be stressful for many parents, ethnic minority parents are particularly vulnerable to the experience of parenting stress (Emmen et al., 2013; Nomaguchi & House, 2013). Parenting stress is defined as feelings of anxiety that arise when the demands of the childrearing process are perceived to be greater than the personal and social resources (Abidin, 1995; Mulrow, Caldera, Pursley, Reifman, & Huston, 2002). Whether a person is resilient or vulnerable to the experience of parenting stress is influenced by three domains: characteristics of the parent, characteristics of the child, and contexts surrounding the parent providing stressors and resources (e.g. family income, social support) (Belsky, 1984; Emmen et al., 2013). In most countries, ethnic minority families are overrepresented in the lower socioeconomic status groups, subjecting them to different contextual

stressors (Crul & Doornik, 2003; Emmen et al., 2013). They not only experience heightened stress related to economic difficulties, but also experience stressors and structural disadvantages specific to their ethnic minority status, including discrimination, acculturation stress, and low social support (Emmen et al., 2013; Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2010; Martinez, 2006; Nomaguchi & House, 2013). These contextual stressors make parents vulnerable to the experience of parenting stress and have been linked to less-than-optimal parenting (Deater-Deckard & Panneton, 2017; Kotchick, Dorsey, & Heller, 2005; White, Roosa, Weaver, & Nair, 2009).

Parenting stress has a long-lasting effect on the wellbeing of parents and children due to the direct influence on parenting practices and family dynamics (BeLue, Halgunseth, Abiero, & Bediako, 2015; Deater-Deckard, 2004; White, Liu, Nair, & Tein, 2015). It increases levels of mental distress, non-optimal parenting (e.g. harsh parenting), and child

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problem behaviors (Anthony et al., 2005; Mesman, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012; Mistry, Stevens, Sareen, De Vogli, & Halfon, 2007; Rousseau et al., 2013). Research among parents living in multi-ethnic deprived neighborhoods confirmed the influence of contextual stressors, such as acculturation stress, discrimination and lack of social support, on parenting stress and parenting behavior (van Mourik, Crone, Pels, & Reis, 2016). Being a good parent was perceived as a challenge when feeling overwhelmed by unhelpful emotions (e.g. insecurity, distress) resulting from parenting stress.

Several studies have tested the effectiveness of parent training interventions to prevent parenting problems, showing that such interventions have a positive influence on parenting skills and child behavior (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003; Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008). In addition, parenting interventions can lower parenting stress due to an increase of effective parenting strategies and a decrease of child conduct problems (Barlow, Smailagic, Huband, Roloff, & Bennett, 2014; DeGarmo, Patterson, & Forgatch, 2004; Hutchings, Appleton, Smith, Lane, & Nash, 2002). However, a systematic comparison of existing interventions indicated that attention for coping strategies to handle stress is generally not present in parenting interventions, while this could be beneficial to assist ethnic minority parents at risk for high levels of parenting stress (van Mourik et al., forthcoming). Interventions can be improved by offering coping strategies to deal with stressors in addition to the attention paid to effective parenting strategies (BeLue et al., 2015; Castel et al., 2016; Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Rayan & Ahmad, 2017). This is supported by BeLue et al. (2015) who reported that promoting coping strategies would offer important benefits for ethnic minority families considering the impact of parenting stress on parenting behavior and child development. Coping strategies enable a person to successfully adapt to stressors, and these strategies are related to the way a person manages their emotions, regulates and directs their behavior, and acts to decrease sources of stress (Compas et al., 2001). Interventions that target coping behavior in parents with high levels of parenting stress (e.g. parents of children born pre-term, or of children with disabilities) have shown promise (Castel et al., 2016; Rayan & Ahmad, 2017). Although extensive research has focused on predictors and consequences of parenting stress in ethnic groups (BeLue et al., 2015; Cardoso, Padilla, & Sampson, 2010; Huang, Costeines, Ayala, & Kaufman, 2014; Nomaguchi & House, 2013), to our knowledge no studies have examined the potential of interventions that target parenting stress by focusing on *coping strategies* for these parents.

The decision was made to develop a module on coping resources following a qualitative research among ethnic minority and low socioeconomic status parents ( $n = 61$ ) (van Mourik et al., 2016). When asked what would support them in their parental role, parents emphasized the importance of managing parents' emotional reactions to stressors to minimize its effect on parenting behavior and the child's development. They believed that coping with stress and unhelpful emotions in an effective manner would minimize the impact of (contextual) stressors and emotions on the child and their own parenting behavior (van Mourik et al., forthcoming). Although parenting interventions generally assist parents in acquiring various parenting skills to handle their child's undesirable behavior and stimulate desirable behavior, attention for coping strategies to handle stress and unhelpful emotions is not a standard component in parenting interventions (van Mourik et al., forthcoming). This resulted in the development of the module 'Coping with stress and unhelpful emotions' to be integrated in an existing parenting intervention.

This study examines the relevance of the module 'Coping with stress and unhelpful emotions' provided to parents living in multi-ethnic deprived neighborhoods in the Netherlands. The module forms part of a systematic approach to increase the sociocultural fit of an existing evidence-based intervention by paying attention to the needs and stressors of parents living in multi-ethnic deprived neighborhoods (van

Mourik et al., forthcoming). The module 'Coping with stress and unhelpful emotions' was developed to make existing interventions sensitive to the experience of parenting stress among ethnic minority and low socioeconomic status parents. This can be considered a "built-in" adaptation to enhance program fit, without compromising the core components of the existing intervention (Castro, Barrera Jr, & Martinez Jr, 2004). The module was integrated in the Triple P Program. This is a multilevel evidence-based program which uses a structured curriculum to prevent child emotional and behavioral problems by enhancing parents' knowledge, skills and confidence in managing a child's problem behavior (Sanders, 2012). Former studies indicate that it causes positive changes in parenting skills, child problem behavior and parental well-being (de Graaf, Speetjens, Smit, de Wolff, & Tavecchio, 2008; Nowak & Heinrichs, 2008; Sanders, Kirby, Tellegen, & Day, 2014). In addition, Triple P is found to be acceptable for parents from culturally diverse backgrounds and for parents in urban, low-income settings (Matsumoto, Sofronoff, & Sanders, 2010; Mejia, Leijten, Lachman, & Parra-Cardona, 2016; Turner, Richards, & Sanders, 2007).

The evaluation aimed to provide insight in the relevance of the module 'Coping with stress and unhelpful emotions' for a culturally diverse group of parents from deprived areas. The objective of the process evaluation was to examine: i) the appreciation of the module by participants and providers, ii) the elements that were considered relevant, and iii) suggestions to improve the module and program materials. A multi-informant approach based on semi-structured interviews, observations and process evaluation forms was used for data collection to create a thorough understanding of parents' and providers' perspectives regarding the module's relevance.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Intervention module

The module 'Coping with stress and unhelpful emotions' takes into consideration the experience of stress and unhelpful emotions and its influence on parenting. The aim of the module was to enable parents to i) recognize sources of stress, ii) recognize how stress influences parenting behavior, and iii) develop coping strategies to handle stress and unhelpful emotions. The module involves informing parents about the impact of stress and unhelpful emotions on the mind, the body, and (parenting) behavior. For example: an exercise stimulates parents to document a situation in which they experienced stress or unhelpful emotions, and report how this influenced their thoughts and bodily responses to increase self-awareness. Parents are taught three coping strategies to deal with stress and unhelpful emotions, enabling them to use the strategy that best fits their situation and preferences; these include i) the planning of pleasant activities, ii) the use of relaxation exercises, and iii) the development of personal coping statements to counteract negative thoughts. Parents were taught the coping strategies to deal with stress and unhelpful emotions via alternating individual or group exercises, watching video footage of parenting situations, and discussing parents' responses to the footage.

The 'Coping with stress and unhelpful emotions' module is delivered during a single 2.5-h session in a group format, with two facilitators using a structured manual.

### 2.2. Triple P Extra

The module was integrated in Group Triple P. Group Triple P is delivered over eight weeks to parents of children up to 12 years old who are interested in learning a variety of parenting skills. Parents learn about the causes of child behavioral problems, setting specific goals, and using strategies to promote child development, manage misbehavior and plan for high-risk situations. The program is delivered by accredited Triple P professionals and, during the delivery of the intervention, a parent handbook and DVD footage is used. The program

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