



Working with fathers of at-risk children: Insights from a qualitative process evaluation of an intensive group-based intervention



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ABSTRACT

This article is based on qualitative research with fathers who attended Mellow Dads, an intensive 'dads only' group-based intervention underpinned by attachment theory for fathers of at-risk children. Specifically the article draws on data from a process evaluation of the programme in order to explore the challenges of engaging men in effective family work. The methods used to undertake the process evaluation included participant observation of one complete Mellow Dads course, interviews with fathers and facilitators, interviews with the intervention author and a study of programme documentation. The article focuses on the theoretical underpinning of the programme, its acceptability to the fathers and the challenges faced by facilitators in delivering the programme as intended. The fathers appreciated the efforts of facilitators to make the group work, valued the advice on play and parenting style as well as the opportunity to meet other fathers in similar circumstances. However, there were obstacles that impacted on the effectiveness of the programme. These included the considerable time required to get the men to attend in the first place and then to keep them coming, the lack of practice of parenting skills when fathers were not living with their children, and the difficulties of sharing personal information. The challenges identified raise questions about how much change can be expected from vulnerable fathers and whether programmes designed for mothers can be applied to fathers with little adaptation. The article aims to contribute to ongoing dialogue about the best way to successfully engage fathers in children's well-being, and raises the question as to whether working with fathers requires different skill-sets and approaches from the more familiar social work territory of working with mothers.

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1. Introduction

Engaging fathers in parenting programmes is a relatively recent phenomenon. There has been an increasing recognition that social work services for children and families at risk have conventionally focussed on women and (their) children, on mothers rather than parents (Featherstone, 2004; Scourfield, 2003), and an increased awareness of the need to develop services and interventions that can support men as parents in vulnerable families, including those subject to child protection processes. The research on fathers involved in child welfare cases remains limited, although recent research has shown that some fathers do want 'to be listened to, believed, and given the chance to prove themselves' (Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey, & McMaugh, 2014: 92). In attempting to shift these established practices, some family workers have encouraged men to join in with parenting courses alongside mothers. Others have offered parenting groups or other interventions

specifically for fathers (see Dolan, 2013; Ewart-Boyle, Manktelow, & McColgan, 2015). This article draws on a qualitative process evaluation of an intensive attachment-based programme for fathers, in order to explore the effectiveness of and challenges to engaging fathers of at-risk children in meaningful family work.

The programme discussed in the article – Mellow Dads – is distinct from some other interventions in a number of ways. It is a highly intensive programme, which is focused on a particularly challenging client group and is based on an attachment rather than behavioural approach. It is an approach which has previously been used exclusively with mothers and has relatively recently been adapted for use with fathers. This provides the opportunity to consider a particular case study of wider efforts to engage men, as non-traditional clients, in programmes and interventions designed to support parents in at-risk families.

The study was a process evaluation, which sought to explore context, implementation and mechanisms (Moore et al., 2015). The research questions addressed are these:

- RQ1: What are the theoretical underpinnings of Mellow Dads?
- RQ2: How was the programme received by fathers?

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- RQ3: What does the implementation of Mellow Dads tell us about the practical reality of working with fathers whose children are at risk?

In terms of the purposes of process evaluation (Moore et al., 2015), RQ1 is primarily focused on mechanisms and RQs 2 and 3 on implementation and context.

In the next section of this article we provide a brief overview of the development of parenting programmes for fathers, before describing the Mellow Parenting programme approach, its theoretical underpinnings and known effectiveness. The article then moves on to describe the methods used to undertake a process evaluation of the fathers' programme, before offering insights regarding what the evaluation tells us about engaging fathers in parenting support and how this differs from working with mothers.

1.1. Parenting programmes for fathers

In practice, most parenting programmes are largely attended by women. For example, Lindsay et al. (2011) found that of the 6095 parents attending certain evidence-based parenting programmes in England in their study, 13% were men. There are many possible reasons for this gendered pattern, including men's reluctance – based on a traditional gendered model of family life – to see child care as a shared responsibility (Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012) and the fact that settings such as family centres tend to be women-friendly spaces that are not well suited to recruiting men as clients (Ghate, Shaw, & Hazel, 2000). Because men are a small minority of those attending such programmes, and the sample sizes of studies are often relatively small, there is very little evidence on the effectiveness of parenting programmes for fathers specifically (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). What evidence does exist suggests that parent education attended by both parents is more effective than programmes attended by mothers alone (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008) but that the effects of attending programmes are less favourable for fathers than for mothers (Sanders, Kirby, Tellegen, & Day, 2014).

Most of the consideration of culturally adapting interventions focuses on adaptation for different ethnic and linguistic groups (e.g. Castro, Barrera, & Holleran Steiker, 2010). However, in the light of the gendered pattern of parenting programme attendance, some thought has been given to whether programmes need to be adapted for fathers. Meyers (1993), for example, has argued that in the light of the differences between fathers and mothers in terms of their observed parenting styles, adaptations are needed for parent education programmes so that they better meet the needs of fathers. Adapted structural aspects recommended by Meyers include active recruitment of men via traditionally masculine social spaces, proactively featuring images of men in advertising, providing other kinds of practical help of interest to men alongside parenting support, planning the timing of programmes to suit working hours, trying out alternative venues such as workplaces and family homes and targeting hard-to-reach groups of men. Meyers also recommends tailoring content to fathers. He argues fathers have a greater need for knowledge about child development and child care and a greater need for social support, in both cases because they are likely to have greater deficits in these areas than mothers. He further argues that fathers need to be encouraged through the programme to be more involved in the practical care of their child and that they need additional help with communication skills, both in relation to their partner and their child. All these content recommendations are made in the light of the reality of gendered patterns of parenting.

Adaptations such as these, and especially the structural aspects, were found in a recent survey in the UK (Scourfield, Cheung, & Macdonald, 2014), which aimed to find out what approaches were commonly being used with fathers. The survey found that a large majority of practitioners (85%) who responded to the survey were working with

fathers in mixed parenting programmes rather than in programmes for fathers only. These tended not to have adapted content but practitioners were trying out structural changes to make the programmes more attractive to fathers. Of those who were working with father-only programmes, most were using unique interventions with fathers. Only a minority were using named programmes which replicated approaches taken elsewhere, for example from programmes for mothers or 'parents'. The most popular intervention theories were cognitive and behavioural. As noted earlier, the particular intervention focused on in this article is primarily focused on attachment rather than behaviour.

1.2. Mellow parenting

Mellow Parenting is a parenting programme for families where young children (0–5 years) are either already identified as in need of protection, or where the extent and nature of associated risk factors for child development give significant concern that the child may soon come to be in need of protection (see www.mellowparenting.org). A Scottish-based charity with programmes delivered internationally, Mellow Parenting is underpinned by psychological approaches to understanding early parent-child relationships, most notably attachment theory. It was developed for families where there were deemed to be severe parent-child relationship problems. Mellow Parenting comprises several key components that aim to facilitate attendance and empower parents to reflect and learn from their own experience, including the use of video feedback as a means of encouraging parents to consider their own behaviour and the response of their children. The value of this method has been supported by research showing that positive video feedback is a powerful tool in changing behaviour (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van Ijzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003).

A programme originally designed for mothers, and drawing on structured observations of mother-child interaction where it has been possible to distinguish problem dyads (Puckering, Rogers, Mills, Cox, & Mattsson-Graff, 1994), Mellow Parenting runs for one day a week over a period of fourteen consecutive weeks, combining both support for parents (mothers) and direct parenting work including modelling positive play and encouraging positive interaction. The programme encourages reflection on the parents' own childhood as well as their current experiences. Most sessions are discussion- or activity-based, placing low demands on the parents' literacy skills. Typically the parents will gather for a morning session exploring their own issues while their children are looked after in a crèche. Parents and their children come together for lunch followed by a play or art and craft-based activity, giving an opportunity for observation and filming of realistic parent-child interactions. In the afternoon parents gather on their own again in order to watch and discuss excerpts from the lunchtime activities and to discuss other issues relating to parenting skills and capacity.

Mellow Parenting is considered as a 'preventative intervention', helping to prevent the risk of developing conduct disorders in children (Goldsack & Hall, 2010). The programme is thought successfully to engage parents, who are 'at the extreme end of the spectrum' (Puckering, 2004). Part of the rationale for the Mellow Parenting approach is that some other major parenting programmes such as the 'Incredible Years' programmes (Webster-Stratton & Herbert, 1994) and the 'Triple P' programme (Sanders & Dadds, 1993) may, despite their effectiveness when delivered fully, actually be failing to engage families that are the most vulnerable and in need (Puckering, 2004). The Triple P programme, for example, has been shown to be an effective intervention for children over the age of three with milder behavioural problems and where families are literate and strongly motivated (e.g., Sanders et al., 2014). For families with additional needs (for example low levels of literacy, personality disorders, severe parental depression), what has been shown to be more effective are more intensive interventions, including those that harness video feedback to parents (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al., 2003). Many parenting programmes

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