

An intervention for parents with severe personality difficulties whose children have mental health problems: a feasibility RCT

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Declared competing interests of authors: Crispin Day is the lead developer of two parenting programmes used in this report: Helping Families Programme (HFP) and Empowering Parents Empowering Communities. Mike J Crawford has previously received research grant funding from the National Institute for Health Research. Lucy Harris is a co-developer of the Helping Families Programme. Mary McMurran was an author of the Psychoeducation plus Problems Solving (PEPS) intervention for adults with personality disorder. PEPS helped to inform the modified HFP. Paul Moran reports personal fees from a talk given at the fourth Bergen International Conference on Forensic Psychiatry, 2016, outside the submitted work. He led the development of the Standardised Assessment of Personality – Abbreviated Scale (SAPAS), the personality disorder screen used in this study.

Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

Published March 2020

DOI: 10.3310/hta24140

Plain English summary

Intervention for parents with severe personality difficulties

Health Technology Assessment 2020; Vol. 24: No. 14

DOI: 10.3310/hta24140

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Parents affected by personality difficulties experience strong, overwhelming emotions and struggle in their personal and social relationships. These difficulties can interfere with their ability to provide stable, safe and warm parenting, which increases the risk of their children developing mental health problems.

This research developed the Helping Families Programme-Modified, a new parenting intervention designed to help parents with severe personality difficulties who have children with mental health problems. Parents received 16 home-based appointments to learn new parenting skills and improve their children's difficulties. The research assessed how the Helping Families Programme-Modified worked in practice and the viability of evaluation methods.

A short questionnaire assessing personality difficulties, rather than a lengthy diagnostic interview, was more effective and acceptable for identifying parents who may benefit from the Helping Families Programme-Modified. Parents taking part had high levels of personal, family and social problems. This slowed the rate at which parents agreed to take part in the evaluation and lengthened the intervention period.

The research tested parent agreement to being randomly allocated to receive either the Helping Families Programme-Modified or usual care plus a specially designed parenting appointment. Although this random allocation was feasible, parents were disappointed when they did not receive the Helping Families Programme-Modified. They often felt overwhelmed by family difficulties and lacked other suitable services. These parents were less likely to take up the additional parenting appointment available or to provide subsequent research information, which affected the certainty of the research findings.

Parents receiving the Helping Families Programme-Modified or usual care reported improvements, with a potentially greater impact on parents and children, and better acceptability, for the new intervention. Parents generally supported the tailored, home-based approach of the Helping Families Programme-Modified, and they valued its content, therapist skills and persistence. It was uncertain whether the new intervention increased or reduced service costs.

These results will be used to plan the most suitable methods for a large-scale evaluation of the Helping Families Programme-Modified.

ISSN 1366-5278 (Print)

ISSN 2046-4924 (Online)

Impact factor: 3.819

Health Technology Assessment is indexed in MEDLINE, CINAHL, EMBASE, The Cochrane Library and the Clarivate Analytics Science Citation Index.

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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HTA programme as project number 12/194/01. The contractual start date was in June 2014. The draft report began editorial review in June 2018 and was accepted for publication in February 2019. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HTA editors and publisher have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HTA programme or the Department of Health and Social Care. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HTA programme or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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