

Clinical and cost-effectiveness of parenting intervention for mothers experiencing psychosocial stress: insights from the early closure of the Mellow Babies RCT

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Plain language summary

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Plain language summary

Why did we do this trial?

There are links between mothers' mental well-being, parenting behaviours and childhood mental health. Childhood social, emotional and development problems are connected to long-term health problems and other types of adversity, such as poverty and crime. We wanted to examine whether a group-based parenting intervention, 'Mellow Babies', would improve mothers' mental well-being and children's development and whether it represented value for money.

What did we do?

We aimed to recruit 212 women to take part. Women were eligible if they had a baby aged 6–18 months, lived in the Highland Council area (Scotland) and had moderate to high anxiety and/or depression symptoms. Half of the women were allocated randomly (like tossing a coin) to attend a 14-week Mellow Babies group alongside usual care, and the other half received usual care only (e.g. seeing their health visitor or attending a feeding clinic). Outcome data for mothers and babies were collected 8 months after recruitment and when babies were 30 months old. We interviewed mothers attending Mellow Babies groups and group facilitators. We had to pause recruitment for 20 months during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What did we find?

We were not able to recruit enough participants: 106 women took part. This means we could not compare the outcomes of mothers and babies who attended the Mellow Babies programme with those who did not or whether it was good value for money. Writing a letter to mothers was the most successful method of recruitment. Participants were generally more well-off than the local population (e.g. income, level of education) but they did experience significant mental ill health. A large proportion of participants stayed in the study until the final follow-up (75%). In interviews, participants highlighted barriers and facilitators of engagement with the intervention groups. Participants recruited before the pandemic were no different from those recruited afterwards.

What did this mean?

We cannot say definitively whether Mellow Babies is effective at improving mothers' mental well-being or children's developmental outcomes. A new larger trial is needed, building on The Mellow Babies Trial.

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