

Formative Evaluation of a Father-Infant Relationship Support Group

Masters or PhD project

PhD project. Co-Supervisors: Dr Dawson Cooke (+ others)
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Represented Partners: Curtin University, The Fathering Project, Ngala, Playgroup WA, FamilyWorks, Mother-Baby Nurture.

Background: Evidence suggests that fathers are becoming more involved in early parenting and their involvement is influential for positive developmental outcomes for children. However, there are limited resources and services available to support father-infant relationships. Also, the means of supporting fathers with infants is not well understood by many service providers and there is limited evidence of what works to help fathers build stronger bonds with their child. Therefore, this research project proposes to ask fathers with infants about their needs and preferences for support, and to consider the adaptation of a mother-infant support group to meet the needs of fathers and their infants. Possible target groups include Aboriginal fathers, fathers involved with Department of Communities or Department of Corrective Services, separated fathers, Fly-In-Fly-Out fathers, fathers of children with a disability, and fathers who have partners with a disability or mental health difficulties.

Aim: Create a means of supporting father-infant relationships – which depending on results may be informed by the existing model of Mother-Baby Nurture (MBN).

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Objectives

- To identify community attitudes and interest in supporting fathers-infant relationships
- To explore new fathers' wants, needs and preferred formats of support for relationship with their infant
- To improve the **parenting confidence** of fathers with infants
- To improve the **parental reflective functioning** (mentalizing) of fathers in respect to themselves and their infants
- To reduce the **depression, anxiety and stress** of fathers with infants

Method (stages 1-2 would be suitable for a Masters project, or complete projects as a PhD.

1. Conduct a survey to identify attitudes and interest regarding a relationship support group for fathers and babies, and/or other sources of support. This survey could include past MBN partners and MBN referral sources.
2. Run focus group(s) with fathers of infants to explore their wants, needs and preferred formats of support for their relationship with their infant.
3. As indicated by results of the survey and focus group, modify the MBN model (or alternative strategies) to be suitable for fathers and infants.
4. Trial this new model with fathers and infants.
5. Evaluate how well this program meets the intended objectives.

Description of MBN Group

Mother-Baby Nurture is a targeted support group intervention for infants (age 0-6 months) and mothers struggling to care for and connect with their baby, including mothers with symptoms of postnatal depression and/or anxiety. It is a relationship-focussed programme that meets for two hours each week over a 10-week period and typically consists of six mother-infant dyads and two facilitators. The group meets in a private room at a local community centre, with a circle of cushions on the floor for mothers and facilitators, with the babies in arms or on the play mat in the centre so they too can engage in the group process.

In addition to a facilitated group discussion, each week there is silent space dedicated to infant observation followed by reflection, where the mother is supported to wonder about her baby's behaviour and experiences, considering the mind of her infant, as distinct from her own. Time is taken to move between each member of the group, babies included, delighting in shared interests as well as differences, honouring the unique internal world of the other.

Mother-Baby Nurture offers a safe containing space for the distressed dyad that supports reflective conversations on the new relationships that are in formation. Challenging themes from Stern's Motherhood Constellation (Stern, 1995) are enlivened and explored, and in-the-moment interactions are used to guide group reflections. The aim of the intervention is to enhance the mother's mentalizing capacity to enable her to more sensitively respond to her infant. It also supports the establishment of a strong peer support network that can continue beyond the end of the group.

Mother-Baby Nurture is informed by attachment theory and the overlapping fields of psychoanalytic parent-infant therapy and mentalization-based treatment (Fonagy, Bateman, & Luyten, 2012; Luyten, Mayes, Blatt, Fonagy, & Target, 2017). To the novice observer, the multi-layered exchanges between mothers and infants, mothers and mothers, facilitator and facilitator, and between facilitators and mothers and infants may appear chaotic. However, there is a dynamic dance in the session, much like the exchange one might witness around the dinner table of a large intergenerational family. Foulkes (Weinberg & Toder, 2004) aptly suggested good groups function like a "hall of mirrors" which offers some reassurance when the facilitator may be feeling drawn in different directions. When one mirrored exchange is missed, another angle of the same image is likely to present soon after.

Pre and post assessments have shown significant improvements in mothers' report of depression (EPDS), anxiety (PASS), confidence (Karitane), and attachment (MPAS).

Fonagy, P., Bateman, A., W., & Luyten, P. (2012). Introduction and overview. In A. Bateman & P. Fonagy (Eds.), *Handbook of mentalizing in mental health practice* (pp. 3-42). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.

Luyten, P., Mayes, L. C., Blatt, S. J., Fonagy, P., & Target, M. (2017). *Handbook of psychodynamic approaches to psychopathology*: Guilford Publications.

Stern, D. N. (1995). The motherhood constellation. *A unified view of parent-infant psychotherapy*.

Weinberg, H., & Toder, M. (2004). The Hall of Mirrors in Small, Large and Virtual Groups. *Group Analysis*, 37(4), 492-507. doi:10.1177/0533316404047782