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# **An independent process evaluation of Mellow Dads**

Report for Mellow Parenting, 7 March 2014

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Mellow Dads is an adaptation of Mellow Parenting, which is a group-based intervention originally for mothers of children aged 0-5. It is primarily focused on improving father-child attachment in circumstances where family relationships are very difficult, children are considered to be at risk of harm and fathers themselves have psycho-social vulnerabilities. This report presents findings from a qualitative independent process evaluation of Mellow Dads in a local authority in central Scotland.

The process evaluation considered the following aspects of Mellow Dads, all of which are presented in the report: what is its theoretical basis?; how is the programme received by the fathers?; and how does theory translate into practice? Mellow Dads could be seen as an example of cultural adaptation, insofar as it is a mothers' group adapted for fathers. This raises the interesting question of whether the same gains can be achieved with fathers as with mothers. The report therefore also includes some discussion of masculinity and the challenges of working with men as non-traditional clients of parenting services. Before explaining the evaluation methods and then presenting findings, an overview will now be given of existing research on Mellow Parenting.

## **Background**

### **What is Mellow Parenting?**

Mellow Parenting is a parenting programme for families where the children (0-5 years) are either on the child protection register or the extent and nature of associated risk factors for child development give significant concern that child protection might become an issue ([www.mellowparenting.org](http://www.mellowparenting.org)). It was developed for families where there were severe relationship problems and around 25% of participating families had a child on the Child Protection Register (Puckering et al., 1994; 1996). Seventy four per cent of mothers entering the Mellow Parenting programme reported at least one hostile or indifferent parent figure in their childhood and sixty per cent reported no current confiding friend or family member was available for them (Puckering et al., 1999).

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 reflect on their own behaviour and the response of their children. While time-consuming and demanding, structured observations of mother-child interaction have been shown to distinguish problem dyads (Mills, Puckering, Pound, & Cox, 1985; Puckering, Pickles, Skuse, Heptinstall, Dowdney, & Zur Spiro, 1994). Mellow Parenting runs for one day a week over a period of fourteen consecutive weeks, combining both support for parents and direct parenting work including modelling positive play and encouraging positive interaction. Most sessions are discussion- or activity-based, placing low demands on the parents' literacy skills.

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## **How is Mellow Parenting Different from Other Parenting Programmes?**

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 to successfully engage parents 'at the extreme end of the spectrum' (Puckering, nd). Part of the rationale for the Mellow Parenting approach is that some other major parenting programmes such as the 'Incredible Years' programmes devised by Carolyn Webster-Stratton (Webster-Stratton & Herbert, 1994) and the 'Triple P' programme devised by Matt Sanders and colleagues (Sanders & Dadds, 1993) may, despite their effectiveness when delivered fully, actually be failing to engage the most needy families (Puckering, 2004). Many current parenting programmes focus on managing children's behaviour, as this is often the key concern for parents (and other practitioners). Managing behaviour is however only one element of parenting and is applicable more particularly to children older than about two. For younger children the core concepts are about sensitivity and responsiveness. Those families most in need of support for managing their child's behaviour are often not ready to consider and implement the suggested strategies because of their own issues, and so continue to fail to follow behavioural programmes. Mellow Parenting aims to reach these parents by providing a more nurturing context in which to develop their own relationships and their own skills alongside applying those to the relationships with their child.

Currently, the Triple P programme is probably the best option for children over the age of three with milder behavioural problems where families are literate and strongly motivated (Sanders, Markie-Dadds, & Turner, 2003; however, see recent systematic review by Wilson et al., 2012). For families with additional needs (e.g., poor literacy, personality disorders, severe parental depression), what has been shown to be effective are more intensive interventions, including those that harness the power of video feedback to parents (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2003). The Mellow Parenting Programme may be a more applicable and useful intervention for more entrenched difficulties. However, further evaluation work is needed (Wilson, Minnis, Puckering, & Bryce, 2007).

## **What is Known About the Effectiveness of Mellow Parenting?**

Sure Start Children's Centre Practice Guidelines for England (November, 2005) recommend Mellow Parenting as an effective evaluated programme. There is in fact, to date, limited evidence about Mellow Parenting from randomised controlled trials (RCT). Rather, the current empirical support for Mellow Parenting rests mostly on encouraging findings from several small-scale pre-post and quasi-experimental studies.

One small RCT has been conducted on Mellow Babies (Puckering et al., 2010). Despite a very small sample (n=17), significant differences were found between intervention group and waiting list control group in relation to maternal depression and positive mother-baby interactions. The ongoing Glasgow-based THRIVE trial will provide further RCT evidence on the Mellow Bumps programme for pregnant women.

Positive results for mothers, mother-child interaction, child behaviour and development have been found following participation in the Mellow Parenting programme (Puckering, Rogers, Mills, Cox, & Mattson-Graf, 1994; Puckering, Evans, Maddox, Mills, & Cox, 1996). A single case study and a small scale pilot study have been published, which claim the effectiveness of Mellow Parenting (Puckering et al., 1994; 1996). Puckering et al. (1996) report the success of the Mellow Parenting programme for one case study family with a history of marital violence. The mother's participation in the programme produced positive outcomes for her own mental health, state of mind, and her ability to cope with her son's behaviour, as well as for her relationship with her children. Puckering et al. (1994) carried out a four month pilot of the programme on 21 mothers (including 12 children on the Child Protection Register) experiencing severe parenting difficulties.

Considerable positive changes in the interactions the parents had with their children were found and negative interactions reduced considerably. Eighty per cent of the children who had originally had their names on the Child Protection Register had them removed post-intervention. Also, Renauld (1998) conducted a waiting-list-controlled study of a group of eight mothers participating in a Mellow Parenting programme in Fife, Scotland. There was an increase in positive affect from the mothers, a decrease in negative affect from the mothers, a decrease in mothers' depression and anxiety and child behaviour problems when compared with the waiting-list group.

An evaluation of the Mellow Parenting programme that was funded by the English Department of Health (Puckering, Mills, Cox, Maddox, & Evans, 1999) compared 54 mothers attending the Mellow Parenting programme at three family centres and a community centre in Scotland, with a control group of 28 mothers attending another Scottish family centre who were able to use the usual childcare, family counselling and support services. Compared to the control group, the Mellow Parenting group showed significant improvements in the mothers' mental state, the child's behaviour and observed mother-child interaction. At the follow-up a year later, the mothers who had benefited from the Mellow Parenting groups were significantly more likely than the controls to have maintained that improvement - but not where their partners had been hostile to their involvement in the group, suggesting the importance of involving fathers as well as mothers in parenting programmes.

Lastly, Penehira and Doherty (2013) carried out a study which provided qualitative support for the effectiveness and acceptability of a culturally adapted version of Mellow Parenting — Hoki ki te Rito (HKTR), delivered by Ohomairangi Trust, in community settings in South Auckland. The Māori mothers were from socially disadvantaged areas and relationship difficulties were present along with child behaviour difficulties. Some had Child Youth and Family Services involved with their families before commencing the programme, while others were at risk of losing custody of their children to the state welfare system. To date there has been no specific evaluation of Mellow programmes for fathers. Lynaire Doherty, a practitioner from New Zealand, is currently conducting a pre-post study with waiting list comparison.

## **Parenting Help for Fathers**

Contemporary fathering is complex and fathers are a very diverse group. In this report we do not distinguish between men in a parenting role according to biological connection to children, but use the term 'fathers' inclusively. Conscious attempts to engage fathers in parenting help are a relatively recent phenomenon. There has been recognition in the last couple of decades that traditionally, family services have focused almost exclusively on women (Featherstone, 2004; Scourfield, 2003). 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 activities specifically for fathers. A recent survey in the UK which aimed to find out what approaches were commonly being used with fathers (Scourfield, 2013) found that the majority of practitioners who responded to the survey were using unique interventions with fathers. Only a minority were using named programmes which were replicating approaches taken elsewhere. However, the most popular intervention theories were cognitive and behavioural, which would suggest that most practice is in line with mainstream approaches to behaviour-focused parenting support.

This process evaluation of Mellow Dads is, in effect, a case study of the wider efforts to engage men, as non-traditional clients, in parenting support. It is distinct from other interventions reported in the Scourfield (2013) survey by its relative intensity (14 weeks) and its targeted client group. It is also an example of an approach which had been used exclusively with mothers being adapted for fathers.

## **Research Methods**

This small-scale qualitative process evaluation consisted of interviews, observation and study of programme manuals. Interviews were conducted with six fathers who had attended either a Mellow Parenting group for fathers or the adapted Mellow Dads group, all in the same local authority in central Scotland. Three of these fathers were interviewed in a group by Jonathan Scourfield, with the family support worker who had facilitated their group also present, following a meeting of a monthly fathers' support group. His presence inevitably made it less likely they would voice critical opinions about the intervention. The other three fathers took part in individual interviews with either Jonathan Scourfield or Peter Yates. One of the two interviews with Peter was conducted over the telephone. The second interview with Peter and the individual interview with Jonathan were conducted face-to-face. Interviews were also carried out by either Jonathan or Peter with five staff members who had been directly involved in providing the intervention in the same local authority, either as fathers' group facilitators or as children's workers. Two of these facilitators took part in an additional paired interview at the end of a Mellow Dads course. There were also two interviews with the intervention author Christine Puckering. Apart from Christine, all other interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

There was participant observation by Peter Yates of 72 hours of one Mellow Dads group, over 12 weeks of meetings. Detailed fieldnotes were written up, with particular attention to how programme theory was put into practice. The researchers also had access to the programme manuals, for purposes of understanding programme theory. Interview transcripts and fieldnotes were thematically analysed, with coding facilitated by N-vivo software. The process evaluation was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, as part of Jonathan Scourfield's research fellowship on the theme of social interventions with fathers. Mellow Dads was selected on the basis that it was an interesting example of an intensive intervention for fathers with high levels of need, which was adapted from a programme originally designed for mothers. A small amount of additional research expenses were funded by Mellow Parenting.

## **Research Findings**

### **1. Intervention Theory**

In this section there are several quotations from Christine Puckering, the intervention author. These are identified by '(CP)'.

#### **Core elements.**

All the core elements of programme theory are taken from the original Mellow Parenting programme for mothers. The programme is clearly targeted on need. This is partly pragmatic. Christine Puckering noted that although the group content could in fact apply to any father, it would be 'difficult to justify that amount of spending unless there was some level of need'. The target fathers are 'vulnerable' (CP) and problems include substance misuse, mental health problems and domestic violence, as well as typically unemployment, financial difficulties, offending, poor education and poor literacy. The targeting on vulnerability is no different from Mellow Parenting for mothers, but the issues presenting will be gendered, for example with men more likely to be perpetrators of domestic violence and more likely to have criminal justice involvement. A core aspect of the Mellow philosophy is that the programme should be voluntary: 'we go in with an offer, not with an assessment' (CP).

The key theory underpinning the programme is attachment, which is considered to be relevant ‘across the age span’ (CP). In particular, there is a connection made between fathers’ own up-bringing and their current attachment to their children:

Parents who are dismissive or preoccupied by attachment issues are more likely to have insecurely attached children. (Mellow Parenting *Going Mellow* manual, p.6)

Attention is therefore paid to repairing fathers’ ability to attach to children, through reflection on their own childhoods. The *Going Mellow* manual cites the Adult Attachment Interview (van Ijzendoorn, 1995) to support the idea that successful attachment to a child is more likely if a parent has an autonomous state of mind (which is analogous to a secure attachment in childhood). However, it also notes that even for someone with a difficult attachment history, security can be gained through learning to make sense of one’s childhood.

It is important to know that it is not just whether you had a good childhood that defines your state of mind with respect to attachment, but whether you have been able to make sense of this. Parents who have had a very rough time as children can still develop what is known as “earned” security. (Mellow Parenting *Going Mellow* manual, p.6)

This emphasis on processing of difficult past experiences has several purposes, in fact. Firstly, it is designed to influence the capacity for attachment: ‘nurturing the parent to enable the parent to nurture the child’ (CP). Secondly, and more pragmatically, it maintains investment in the programme. Allowing parents to talk about their own lives and difficulties they have experienced originally came into Mellow Parenting following feedback from mothers who had attended a programme with a more exclusive focus on behaviour management. These mothers wanted space to deal with their own difficulties in addition to learning parenting skills. Mellow Parenting assumes that without this focus on parents’ own lives, it would be very difficult to maintain attendance from the more vulnerable parents who are the key target group for the programme. The third purpose is that a ‘closed and contained’ group (CP) allows fathers to build strong relationships with each other. And fourthly, these reflective discussions allow for difficult but important issues such as mental health and domestic violence to be aired and discussed.

The programme consists of fourteen meetings, each lasting a whole school day. The morning is devoted to topic-based discussion of fathers’ own lives. The lunchtime is then an important element. The opportunity for fathers and children to eat together can help them to bond. It also offers a realistic parenting scenario in which father-child interactions can be filmed, for later discussion. The lunchtime slot also includes play activities (e.g. craft, decorating biscuits) which may be new to the fathers. Here there is a conscious modelling process: ‘you don’t think to do these things with your child if you’ve never had that experience yourself’ (CP).

The afternoon session then consists of group feedback on father-child videos, including both the filming of lunchtime interactions and videos made in family homes. The idea is that both facilitators and the other fathers will make micro-level commentary on father-child interactions. Considerable emphasis is placed on pointing out existing strengths in the fathers’ parenting styles, although there should also be some attention to aspects they found difficult. Despite the focus on parenting skills in the afternoon session, Mellow Dads is clearly meant to be distinct in its approach from behaviour-focused parent training:

Although (...) with various parts of the programme, we would be discussing behavioural management, that’s not where we start from; we start from relationships. (CP)

In terms of staffing, there are two important core elements. One is to ‘try and reduce the social demand gradient between the practitioner and the participants’ (CP), meaning that facilitators also take part in all activities and self-disclosure is expected. Another is the provision of ‘wrap-around’ care, with fathers transported to the venue and children looked after in a crèche during the group sessions.

### **Adaptation for fathers.**

Four of the fathers interviewed (see findings section 2 below) had attended an all-male Mellow Parenting group, before the intervention was re-packaged as Mellow Dads. The other two attended the Mellow Dads programme that we observed. An important reason why we have considered the fathers’ views on Mellow Parenting to be relevant, as opposed to only the views of fathers attending Mellow Dads, is that there has in fact been very little adaptation in creating Mellow Dads.

There is inevitably some tailoring of material. The sessions on ‘you and your body’ and ‘pregnancy and birth’ were clearly different in content from the equivalent sessions for mothers. Interestingly, the session on self-esteem from the mothers’ programme has been replaced with ‘being a Dad’. Other sessions which might have been distinguished - violence in the home is the most obvious one, given the gender differences in experience of violence – are in fact not adapted at all but remain the same on the basis that they are equally applicable to either parent.

One important aspect of adapting Mellow Parenting into Mellow Dads is the strong steer for mixed sex staffing. This is considered especially important in the fathers’ group but also for the children’s group, as it helps with modelling of gender equality and non-traditional roles for men. Facilitators spoke of a previous group having been challenging as some powerful group members had fixed ideas about a traditional gendered division of labour in families: ‘I’m never in the kitchen; I never do that; that’s a woman’s job’ (Lisa, fathers’ group facilitator). The facilitators had taken a deliberate decision that the male staff member would Hoover up food mess at lunchtime and bottle-feed one of the babies, to model men’s participation in such tasks. And it was considered important to counteract ‘myths that they maybe have grown up with about how a female should be’ by consciously providing a model of a ‘strong female’ (Catriona, fathers’ group facilitator).

The rationale for offering single sex groups was evidence from other parenting programmes (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2003) that fathers being present can ‘dilute the effect on mums’ (CP). Also it is thought that some women would find the more personal discussions difficult in the presence of men if they have experienced domestic violence or sexual abuse. However, in both New Zealand and Germany, Mellow Parenting programmes have been run with fathers and mothers in separate groups in the morning and then merged for the afternoon to discuss parent-child videos.

## **2. Reception by Fathers**

It needs to be remembered that only fathers who attended a whole course were interviewed. It will be important in future evaluations to also hear the views of fathers who have refused the offer of attendance or who have dropped out before the end. It should be noted that four of the six fathers interviewed had attended an all-male Mellow Parenting course rather than Mellow Dads. Given that the adaptations for the re-packaged Mellow Dads were minimal, as noted above, we consider the views of all six to be relevant.

All the fathers told us their expectations before attending had not been good. There was considerable nervousness, as we see from the three excerpts below:

I had a view in my mind that it would be (...) pretty intense, we would all be talking about stuff that we didn’t want to talk about and things like that. (Joe, father)

That's how I felt before I went to the group - what's it going to be like? What are the people going to be like? Sitting staring at me? (Eddie, father)

I felt really withdrawn, frightened, scared, there is going to be drug addicts, is it going to be this and that? You know, I had my own problems I didn't want to speak about. Nobody is going to notice if you are in the background. But you know, I just wanted to be the wallpaper the first week. (John, father)

The common theme from these three fathers is fear of public scrutiny. There is a sense from at least two of them of being reluctant to speak in front of strangers, perhaps especially about personal matters. John made an explicit connection between this reluctance to talk and what is typically expected of men, when he said 'I don't know if it's something to do with their manhood or whatever' but that some men would not want to 'talk or open up or anything', at least for the first few weeks.

Their fears were not in fact realised, however, as the facilitators succeeded in creating a 'relaxed' atmosphere, against the odds. The 'relaxed and happy' feel of the facilitators at the start of the day was said to be infectious: 'it kind of makes you change and you feel relaxed and ready for the day' (Joe, father). There was surprise expressed about the fact that humour was allowed, given that an 'intense' environment had been expected. Joe was pleased that it was quite acceptable to have 'a laugh and a joke but at the end of the day we still get the work done at the same time'. Also the fathers valued the facilitators sharing their own experiences:

They were down to earth, they felt like one of us sort of thing. They didn't come across as too authoritative or anything like that. (Brian, father)

We still talk to them like we'd talk to a pal in the street, in that context (Phil, father)

Relationships with other fathers in the group were also important. The fathers spoke of valuing time spent with other people who are in similar current circumstances or who have had some similar experiences in life:

It kind of makes something click and you say to yourself, this person has been through or is going through the same as you. It might be worth having a listen and bouncing a few ideas off each other. (Joe, father)

After a few times, I was, like, 'this is good', because I actually learned things really. I'm not the only person stressed out with my life. Other people have stress in them (John, father)

This was especially so for the fathers who chose to attend the monthly post-Mellow Dads support group. Some of these men had in fact requested the group be set up, to offer them on-going support, because they were missing the group.

It helped me quite a lot when it was there, because it brought me out of my depression quite quick, and I've got two or three good mates that I keep in touch with, sometimes. But if I've got a problem, I'll give Neil a phone and have a blether<sup>4</sup>. (Brian, father)

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<sup>4</sup> Chat

You know, we were in limbo after it finished, because we enjoyed going there that much. So we decided to start this group, and carry on. (Eddie, father)

As well as the opportunity for social bonds, some fathers made specific comments about valuing the lunchtime activities and the video feedback. The first of these excerpts concerns strengths-based commentary on videoed interaction which this father appreciated. The second is about one specific play activity which the father has used several times since encountering it at Mellow Dads.

Getting to watch the video back and seeing his development (...) when I first came and I was rubbing his back, I have always done that and I never knew that I done it. And people pointed it out and said it was a comfort thing. That makes you feel better about yourself. (Joe, father)

My wee boy enjoyed most of them. It was all right. I didn't know how to make playdough or nothing so after a couple of wee things like that. My wee lassie that is what we make just about every weekend now. (Brian, father)

Perhaps most important was that the fathers spoke of practical changes in their parenting that resulted from attending Mellow Dads. When asked what they gained from attending, it was practical lessons they recalled, rather than any therapeutic gain from talking about past difficulties. The first example is of learning to distract a child from a bad mood and the second is of learning to be calmer and less authoritarian.

One time, (...) we were talking about getting children out of moods, and I started mucking about making him dance, dragging him off the chair and making him dance, or tickling him, things like that. And that worked a lot. (Eddie, father)

I used to be a 'do as you're told, end of!' Sergeant Major type person. Now I'm more, 'OK, you've done that, it's not the end of the world.' Slight change. So now I can handle lots of situations where, beforehand, I would have just lost my rag. (John, father)

### **3. Theory Into Practice**

This next section deals with the challenge of putting theory into practice. It includes some discussion as well as presentation of findings. The process evaluation set out to assess fidelity to the programme principles. It was not so relevant to assess fidelity to the programme manual, since this is not a highly manualised programme with detailed prescription of content. Instead what follows is commentary on some of the difficulties that were encountered with putting Mellow Parenting principles into practice. Some of these difficulties may be surmountable, but others are arguably inherent to the client group. If you aim to work with vulnerable fathers of at-risk children, you are likely to experience the challenges distinctive to this group.

The first issue to note is the principle of voluntary attendance. This is in practice hard to achieve, because of the context of many of the children being caught up in the child protection process. In this context, it is not surprising that some of the fathers would feel coerced – not by Mellow Dads staff but by social workers with a child protection brief expecting them to attend and judging their commitment to their children in terms of whether or not they attend. One of the fathers said 'the first group is the one you feel you're forced to go on sometimes, because you get referred by social workers' (John, father). However, workers were sometimes successful in conveying the

voluntary nature of attendance. Another father told us ‘I accepted it a bit better cos it was voluntary’ (Brian, father).

The numbers of men attending the group we observed were small. Twelve initial referrals were received; out of whom six men attended at least once, but only three completed the course. When the numbers of men attending courses are low, practitioners find it more difficult to apply criteria for group membership. For example, in the group we observed, the ages of children ranged from four months to nine years. This wide age range is difficult in terms of finding appropriate activities. Also the practical parenting issues that arise in the later primary school years are quite different from those which arise with babies. There was some frustration with local services for not referring greater numbers of fathers. Danny (fathers’ group facilitator) said ‘I don’t believe for one minute that there’s not, you know, possibly half a dozen dads that health visitors could be referring’. Having low numbers also meant that any non-attendance threatened the viability of the group. The facilitators put considerable time and effort into contacting non-attenders, including visiting them at home, to ensure the group had enough core members to survive. The course was twelve weeks long rather than fourteen, for various logistical reasons, and then other sessions had to be moved around and two additional afternoon sessions missed out because of low numbers at some sessions (although some missed topics were reprised in later weeks). One of the reasons for the course being only twelve weeks long was the need to move the venue, due to one of the fathers’ local drug scene connections.

Another feature of the intervention’s specific client group was that children did not always live with their fathers. In fact, of the three men who completed the Mellow Dads course we observed, none was currently living with the child about whom concern had originally been expressed and a referral received. This meant that it was very difficult to instil a culture of completing video and homework tasks from the start, with half the group not having access to their children in-between Mellow Dads sessions. The complex transport arrangements involved with bringing children from foster carers and separated ex-partners to the centre where Mellow Dads was taking place also took additional hours away from the group sessions, meaning that for this group of men, the ‘dose’ of the parenting intervention was not what it was intended to be. Some specific sessions were intended to be used, but could not be covered as planned in the manual because of time being restricted by transport logistics. These included sessions on relaxation and common mental health problems.

Non-attendance was exacerbated by lack of support from other local agencies. There were instances where other social welfare agencies the fathers were involved with made essential appointments which clashed with Mellow Dads. One of these was made by the same child welfare charity which had referred the father to the group. Another was an appointment for drug counselling. The facilitators took the view that the same issue would not have arisen for mothers, since attendance at a parenting course is a more generally accepted use of mothers’ time.

Because the three fathers who completed the group did not have their children living with them, they were very preoccupied by frustration at social work decisions they did not agree with. Facilitators put in considerable efforts outside the group to mollify these frustrations, especially when giving the fathers lifts to and from the centre, and sometimes these concerns came into the group itself. The facilitators dealt with the concerns very skilfully, allowing some strong feelings to be aired but helping the men to re-frame the situation as one where they needed to display their responsible fatherhood, rather than one simply of persecution. Although it is not a specific aim of Mellow Dads to help fathers better manage their dealings with social services, this was in fact an outcome. Some good quality motivational work had been undertaken by the facilitators and arguably it was attending the Mellow Dads group, with its emphasis on nurturing fathers and respecting their views, which made this motivational work achievable. We could speculate that the fathers took advice on dealing with statutory child protection processes much better from the

Mellow Dads staff, with whom they had a good rapport, than from the statutory caseworkers from social services who are responsible for child protection.

There were a number of ways in which working with this population of fathers raised distinctive issues. One father was prescribed methadone because of an opiate addiction. He sometimes fell asleep in group sessions. This issue could also arise in a mothers' group, but it is more likely to arise with fathers because opiate addictions are more common in men than in women. Group dynamics were very slow to get going in the Mellow Dads group we observed, despite the facilitators' highly skilled attempts to get the men to gel as a group. For a group of vulnerable men to relate to each other on a personal level may well be more of a challenge than it would be for women, because women are typically socialised to have closer emotionally dependent relationships on each other than are men. John was hinting at this in the earlier section on fathers' views, when he said it was perhaps 'manhood' which held back fathers from fully participating at first.

It was noted above that Mellow Dads is avowedly strengths-based and that feedback on videoed interaction includes comment on positive aspects of parenting style. In the group we observed, the feedback on videos was almost exclusively strengths-based. The influence of more than one different parenting programme could be seen. Although Christine Puckering explained that noting strengths was very important, in her account this should be balanced with some discussion of interactions that did not work so well. This should then be shared in the group to ask for support in generating solutions. She explicitly contrasted this approach with Video Interaction Guidance (Tooten *et al.*, 2012), which takes a solely positive approach to feedback. One of the facilitators, however, referred to training in Video Interaction Guidance as influencing his practice. There were instances when fathers were clearly looking for advice on aspects of parenting they found difficult, but advice-giving is not the approach of Mellow Parenting. Facilitators tended to respond with more examples of things they were already doing right or questions designed to elicit from the father himself or from other group members. Input from other group members was more difficult to generate because of the small size of the group.

There are some general reflections to be made on the more personal morning session in the Mellow Dads programme. The aim of repairing damaged attachment styles is a very ambitious one. For fathers who do not take easily to talking therapy, it may in fact be too ambitious. There may be limits to what can be opened up in the morning session, especially since there is no expectation that facilitators have any particular level of professional training. That does not mean to say that talking about past difficulties does not have other kinds of benefits, such as helping to build relationships between group members and with the facilitator, allowing for the facilitator's advice (when it comes) to be heard and respected, as was noted above in connection with statutory social work contact.

The facilitators themselves saw a limit to what could be opened up in the morning session. One commented during a break in a Mellow Dads session that it was not a 'therapy group'. In a joint interview at the end of the course the two facilitators discussed with Peter Yates the difficulty in knowing how to respond to the father who hinted at his experience of childhood sexual abuse, although without explicitly disclosing it. They had some concern about lacking 'the expertise, skills or training to pick up the pieces for him if he discloses too much'. They contrasted their professional background as family support workers with the ability of a psychologist to do more therapeutic work. The issue of sexual abuse they saw as more suitable for one-to-one work, rather than in-depth discussion in front of the whole group, just as you would 'never do counselling session downstairs in the middle of a waiting room'. It should be noted that despite these dilemmas, this particular father was in fact seen as something of a Mellow Dads success story. He had been spurred on by attendance at the group to seriously address his substance misuse and by the end of the Mellow Dads programme was seen as much better able to care for his child.

There may well be limits to what can be achieved through Mellow Dads, because of the low base the fathers tend to be starting from. The facilitators made comments along these lines during the Mellow Dads course. Given that the fathers' problems were ongoing and deep-rooted, they thought that possibly the best that could be achieved was relatively subtle improvements in parenting.

One final comment to make about theory into practice is that the issue of violence was fairly marginal to the programme content. The session on violence in the home from the manual was used, with the main focus being on the distinction between assertiveness and aggression or passivity. This lesson was applied to discussion of meetings with social workers more than to intimate relationships. The session included discussion of fathers as victims of violence but not as perpetrators. This was surprising, since although domestic abuse is a complex phenomenon with several different possible scenarios (Johnson and Ferraro, 2000), women experience more serious and more frequent domestic assaults than men (Brookman and Robinson, 2012). The Mellow Dads material on violence is not intended to be different from that used with mothers. Given that many fathers are referred to the programme because of their domestic abuse (although not for the particular course observed for this study) and most domestic abuse is highly gendered, we would recommend that programme developers consider differentiating the suggested material on violence between mothers' and fathers' programmes in future.

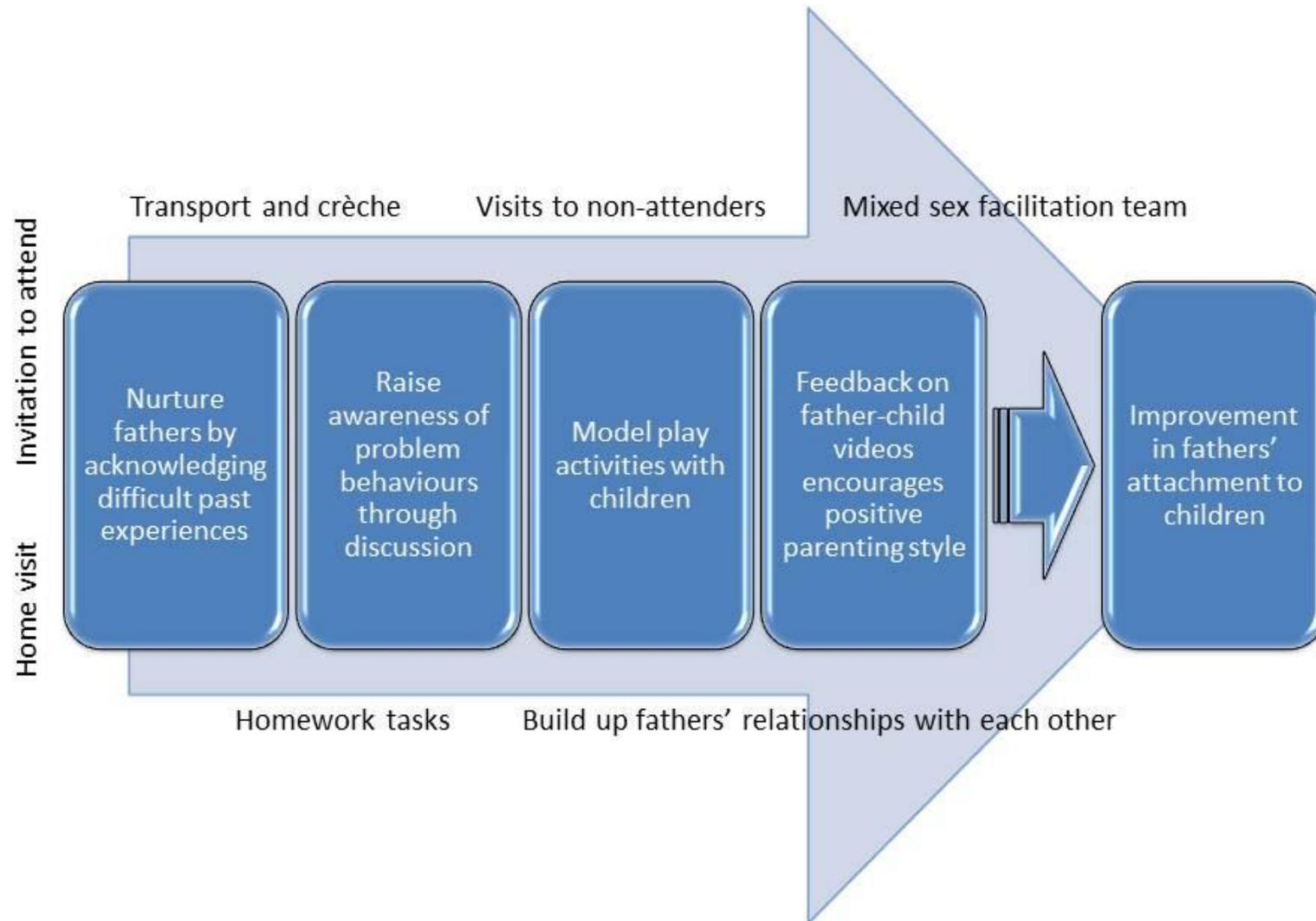
## Conclusion

A logic model for Mellow Dads is presented in Figure 1. This is mostly based on formal programme theory as outlined by the intervention author and in the manuals, but it has been modified in the light of findings on fathers' reception of the programme and the apparent challenges of putting theory into practice. In particular, the aspiration of repairing attachment styles through the morning's more personal group session has been toned down. In the logic model it is recognised that improved attachment is the aim. It is suggested, however, that this might perhaps be achieved in a slightly different way from how it is envisaged in formal programme theory. It is possible that a warm, respectful, nurturing atmosphere is created and maintained by the morning session, which then opens up fathers to learning more practical lessons. These include raised awareness about the specific problems addressed by the morning topics and parenting tips which are picked up, through video feedback in particular. The aspiration of repairing attachment styles is laudable and very understandable when programmes are under pressure to articulate theories of change. It may be that the Mellow Parenting group for mothers does manage to achieve this goal. This process evaluation has not included any study of mothers' groups so it is not possible to comment in this regard. But a more mundane and practical aim may simply be more realistic for a fathers' group. Transformational change would probably require more than fourteen weeks and some intense inputs on specific problem behaviours such as domestic violence. If Mellow Dads is to be successful, this may be with fairly modest improvements in both fathers' own well-being and their ability to relate to their children. If so, it will be important in the child protection process not to over-state the potential for change in troubled and vulnerable fathers.

So is working with fathers different from working with mothers? Not necessarily, as most parenting help will be equally useful for either sex. But men are non-traditional clients of family services, meaning it will be difficult to fill a group with decent numbers of fathers, leading to a number of problems for group process and content. Vulnerable fathers will have a range of distinctive problems, including some which can interfere with group attendance and engagement. And dominant models of masculinity make any kind of approach to parenting help which is rooted in talking therapy difficult to deliver (Courtenay, 2000). Where studies have disaggregated effect sizes for fathers from those for mothers, the effects are clearly smaller and even sometimes non-

significant (Wilson *et al.*, 2012). This qualitative study has shed light on some of the reasons for these findings. More qualitative process studies are needed, as well as robust outcomes research using experimental and quasi-experimental designs.

**Figure 1 – Mellow Dads logic model (theory in practice)**



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