



Parents with intellectual disabilities seeking professional parenting support: The role of working alliance, stress and informal support[☆]

Marieke Meppelder*, Marja Hodes, Sabina Kef, Carlo Schuengel

Department of Clinical Child and Family Studies and the EMGO* Institute for Health and Care Research, Faculty of Psychology and Education, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Delaying or refraining from seeking advice and support in difficult parenting situations is identified as an important risk factor for child abuse and neglect. This study tested whether the extent of delays in support seeking is associated with working alliance for parents with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) and whether the importance of working alliance may depend on parenting stress and availability of informal support. Delays in support seeking were measured as parental latency (time waited) to approach the support worker. This latency was assessed in the intended response to hypothetical situations (vignettes) and in the reported behavioral response to real life difficult parenting situations from the preceding weeks. Multiple regression analyses were conducted for testing main and interaction effects of predictors on latency for support seeking. Better quality of the working alliance was associated with shorter intended latency to seek support for parents with MID, if parents had little access to informal support. Higher parenting stress predicted a shorter latency for intended support seeking. Parental support seeking intentions were positively associated with support seeking behavior. A good quality of the working alliance might be important to connect needs of parents with MID to resources that professional support can offer, in particular for the most vulnerable parents. Parental reluctance to seek professional support may be the result of a combination of risk and protective factors and is not always a sign of poor working alliance. Implications for risk assessment and support practice are discussed.

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Parenting is among the most complex of human activities, and many parents experience difficulties raising their children. When difficulties pile up, and no appropriate support is provided, these initial difficulties sometimes escalate into child abuse and neglect (Azar & Siegel, 1990). Parents with borderline intellectual functioning (BIF) or mild intellectual disabilities (MID) are high at risk for this escalation (Euser, Van Ijzendoorn, Prinzie, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010; Lewellyn, McConnell, & Ferronato, 2003; McConnell, Feldman, Aunos, & Prasad, 2011; McGaw, Scully, & Pritchard, 2010; Tymchuk & Andron, 1990). This might be explained by a combination of limited social resources (Lewellyn & McConnell, 2002)

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* Corresponding author address: Department of Clinical Child and Family Studies, Faculty of Psychology and Education, VU University Amsterdam, Van Der Boerhorststraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

and limitations in adaptive and intellectual functioning (Azar, Stevenson, & Johnson, 2012). Furthermore, parents with MID experience more sources of stress, such as hardship and poverty (Booth & Booth, 1999), (mental) health problems (Llewellyn, McConnell, & Mayes, 2003), and more often carry a history of being abused and neglected themselves (Tymchuk & Andron, 1990). Failure to seek help is therefore seen as a risk factor by professionals (Willems, de Vries, Isarin, & Reinders, 2007) for parents with MID or BIF (in this article, further referred to as parents with MID). In a secondary analysis of child maltreatment investigations in Canada, parental non-cooperation with protective services explained why child maltreatment cases involving parents with MID were more likely to result in court applications (McConnell et al., 2011). Furthermore, parental tendency to seek support with difficult child rearing situations has been incorporated in scales to assess parental competence (e.g., Harnett, 2007). Readiness or reluctance to seek support with child rearing has hardly been studied for parents with MID, and little is known about possible determinants of their support seeking behavior.

According to help-seeking models, support seeking is foremost a product of perceptions of need for support (Cohen, 1999; Fischer & Turner, 1970). Need for support is the perception “that there is a problem/task which he or she cannot solve/perform with his or her resources alone” (Cohen, 1999, pp.70). Parental perceptions of a mismatch between abilities and resources to solve parenting issues have also been conceptualized as parenting stress (Deater-Deckard, 1998). Although heightened levels of experienced parenting stress might be required for support seeking, they may not be sufficient. When parents perceive a need for support, the next step is to appraise the availability of support and determine whom, how, and when to ask for support.

Literature on support seeking behavior distinguishes between formal support seeking (i.e., from professional sources), and informal support seeking (i.e., from sources such as family members and friends; Ciarrochi & Deane, 2001; D’Avanzo et al., 2012). People prefer support from informal network members over professional support (Marx, Miller, & Huffmon, 2011; Pavuluri, Luk, & McGee, 1996), and parents with MID are no exception (Llewellyn & McConnell, 2002). However, informal support networks of parents with MID are relatively small (Llewellyn & McConnell, 2002) or low on resources for offering the required multifaceted support. Therefore, support seeking toward professionals is of major interest for parents with MID.

The decision to seek professional support in difficult child rearing situations might depend on the working alliance between the parent and professional (Bordin, 1979). The working alliance refers to the quality and nature of the interaction between professional and client, their agreement about the tasks and goals of the intervention, and the personal bond or attachment that emerges (Kazdin & Whitley, 2006). Working alliance theory (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993) encompasses several theoretical perspectives on the factors determining the quality of the alliance, including psychodynamic, social learning, and ecological perspectives (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993). Theoretical and empirical links have been made with attachment (Erickson, Korfmacher, & Egeland, 1992; Schuengel, Kef, Damen, & Worm, 2010; Tyrrell, Dozier, Teague, & Falot, 1999; Zegers, Schuengel, Van IJzendoorn, & Janssens, 2006). Working alliance theory is often applied to explain non-specific factors predicting psychotherapy outcome. It has also been useful as a guide to explain and improve the effects of child welfare and social work, in particular parent training and parenting support in the face of social risk factors (Karver, Handelsman, Fields, & Bickman, 2005; Kazdin & Whitley, 2006). The role of working alliance in support seeking toward professionals and its interaction with parenting stress and access to informal support has not been explored in the field of support for parents with MID.

Present study

To explain reluctance of parents with MID in support seeking toward professionals, this study focused on working alliance between the parent and the support worker. In this study, parental descriptions of their support seeking behavior in hypothetical situations were used as an indicator of support seeking intentions. This strategy is in agreement with other studies on support seeking (Wilson, Deane, Ciarrochi, & Rickwood, 2005). In addition, this study explored parental descriptions of their support seeking behavior in real life situations. Other studies as well have found that intentions and self-reported behavior are moderately associated and therefore should be investigated as distinct (Ajzen, 1991). First, support seeking toward professionals was compared to support seeking toward members of the informal support network. Then, associations among support seeking, working alliance, parenting stress, and access to informal support were studied. Hypotheses were that the association between support seeking toward professionals and working alliance would depend on levels of parenting stress and access to informal support. The most vulnerable parents, with high levels of parenting stress and little informal support, might be less capable of social problem solving in general (Ciarrochi & Deane, 2001). To lower the threshold for support seeking, high quality working alliance might be necessary, and therefore, working alliance may be more strongly associated with reluctance to seek support among parents with high levels of parenting stress and low levels of informal support. Alternatively, working alliance may be more strongly associated with reluctance to seek support for parents with lower levels of parenting stress. These parents might have trouble recognizing the stressful aspects of parenting. They might also avoid discussing parenting stress and need a good working alliance to approach a professional when they cannot solve a parenting problem. A conceptual model of the study is depicted in Fig. 1. Analyses were controlled for parental adaptive functioning, including daily living skills, socialization, and communication skills.

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