



In their own voices: immigrant mothers' experiences and perceptions of the group-based self-assured parents programme for parents in disadvantaged areas in Sweden

Sabina Kapetanovic & Therése Skoog

To cite this article: Sabina Kapetanovic & Therése Skoog (17 Feb 2024): In their own voices: immigrant mothers' experiences and perceptions of the group-based self-assured parents programme for parents in disadvantaged areas in Sweden, Journal of Family Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13229400.2024.2318319](https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2024.2318319)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2024.2318319>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 17 Feb 2024.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 219



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

In their own voices: immigrant mothers' experiences and perceptions of the group-based self-assured parents programme for parents in disadvantaged areas in Sweden

Sabina Kapetanovic^a and Therése Skoog^b

^aThe department of social and behavioural studies, University West, Trollhättan, Sweden; ^bThe department of psychology, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Culturally responsive parenting interventions are crucial for immigrant parents in disadvantaged areas. This qualitative study delves into the experiences of 18 immigrant mothers (Mage = 41.2 years) from Somalia, Syria, Turkey, Eritrea, and Iraq participating in the Swedish Self-Assured Parents programme, targeting immigrant parents who live in social disadvantage with teenage children. Thematic analysis revealed seven main themes (1) the meaning of the programme content and structure, (2) enjoying oneself and being comfortable, (3) putting the adolescent in the centre, (4) mothers' own socioemotional development, (5) changing from being a passive reactor to an active agent, (6) empowered citizenship, and (7) having always been a strong and good mother. Overall, the mothers were positive about both the content and the format of the programme, appreciating the warm and supportive climate. They also perceived themselves as being more attentive to adolescent needs, having improved their own socio-emotional skills, and being empowered both as a citizen and as a mother on account of attending the programme. With the development of culturally responsive programmes that take into account the unique needs and experiences of diverse populations, governments can effectively support parents, promote child positive development, and help cultivate social cohesion among the members of society.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 July 2023
Accepted 8 February 2024

KEYWORDS

Parenting programme;
immigrant parents; self-
assured parenting; social
disadvantage

In an environment characterized by crime and violence, and where young people risk being recruited to criminal groups, parents play an especially important role in protecting their children from harm (Janssen et al., 2017). However, being a parent and raising children in disadvantaged areas is not always easy. For example, in Sweden, families who live in disadvantaged areas are often low-income families, of foreign ethnicity, and with poor orientation in Swedish society (Grönqvist et al., 2023). Daily hassles with economic challenges, worry, and poor mental health make it even more difficult to take on the role

CONTACT Sabina Kapetanovic  sabina.kapetanovic@hv.se

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

of a parent and protect their children from dangers often present in their closest environments (Belhadj Kouider et al., 2014). This is particularly evident in multicultural groups of mothers living in disadvantaged and segregated areas with teenage children (Lindén et al., 2022). To prevent young people from engaging in criminal and other antisocial activities, and to promote the best possible outcomes for children, not least those living in disadvantaged areas, more attention and preventive programmes are needed. Therefore, social interventions, including parent support programmes, targeting parents living in disadvantaged and segregated neighbourhoods with teenage children, are called for globally, and in Sweden specifically (Family Law and Parental Support Authority, 2023). Such programmes generally aim to support and strengthen parenting competencies to provide the parents with the knowledge and skills to adhere to their parenting task successfully, and are generally effective (Garcia-Huidobro et al., 2018), having promising effects on parent–adolescent relationship quality (Puffer et al., 2017), parent–child communication (McNaughton et al., 2015), emotional awareness (Kim et al., 2016), self-regulation (Francis et al., 2023), response to child misbehaviour (Yuen, 2019), and development of a sense of competence in parenting (Osman et al., 2017).

To secure the quality of welfare services and social interventions, the first-person participants' experiences and perceptions of parenting support need to be addressed (Bjørknes & Ortiz-Barreda, 2021). Qualitative studies have the potential to identify the key learning experiences and mechanisms of change in parenting interventions, which in turn may contribute to the higher quality and efficiency of future interventions (Butler et al., 2020). According to the American Psychological Association (APA) Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice (APA, 2006), the evaluation studies should also intend to adhere to the participant's personal characteristics, including their worldview, cultural practices, and socioeconomic challenges, to be able to adapt and tailor interventions that are meaningful and helpful to participants. These points may specifically be relevant in terms of implementing social interventions, such as parenting support, with marginalized populations whose challenges may differ from those of the general population and whose voices are not always heard. Using qualitative interview design, in the current study we will (a) explore immigrant mothers' experiences and perceptions of the group-based Self-Assured Parents (SAP) programme for immigrant parents in disadvantaged areas in Sweden, and (b) explore whether, and if so how, mothers describe they have changed, with a particular focus on their role as parents, as a result of the programme.

Parenting support for immigrant parents

Migration to, and resettlement in, a new country is related to many stressors for parents, including loneliness (Västhagen et al., 2022), acculturation challenges (Lindén et al., 2022), and loss of a sense of identity (Baghdasaryan et al., 2021). Living in disadvantaged areas, as many immigrant parents do (Grönqvist et al., 2023), makes it even more difficult to take on the role of a parent and protect children from harm compared to what is the case for native parents (Belhadj Kouider et al., 2014). Specifically, as a result of their poor living conditions, economic hassles, and poor understanding of the social system, immigrant mothers who live in disadvantaged areas describe the challenges of the role of a supportive parent of a teen as strenuous, not least as their social supports are often

lacking (Lindén et al., 2022). The challenges that immigrant parents exhibit are essentially critical risk factors for the whole family's wellbeing and the adjustment of the children (Belhadj Kouider et al., 2014).

Offering parenting support to immigrant parents may be a key societal effort that could empower parents and reduce the risk of the child's negative development. However, as reported elsewhere (Hamari et al., 2022) engaging and retaining immigrant parents in parenting support programmes is not an easy task. Often, immigrant parents report that they cannot identify with programmes offered in usual care and that they wish for more culturally informed interventions tailored to their specific needs (Lindén et al., 2022). Indeed, intervention adaptation models, such as the ecological validity model (EVP) (Bernal et al., 1995) and the cultural sensitivity (CS) approach (Resnicow et al., 2000), inform what to adapt in the delivery and the content of the intervention in order to match the needs of the target group. Specifically, the CS approach (Resnicow et al., 2000), which originates from the field of substance use prevention, suggests that an intervention should match the inputs, materials, and messages to the characteristics of the target group (i.e. surface adaptation) and that the cultural, contextual, and historical forces relevant to the specific target group (i.e. deep structure) should be incorporated into the intervention. The idea is that such adaptations would increase the receptivity of the programme and perception of trustworthiness, which in turn would increase the retention of the parents in the programme. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis revealed that parenting programmes with deep structure sensitivity had the highest impact on positive parenting behaviours in ethnic minority groups (Van Mourik et al., 2017). Thus, if we are to support immigrant parents adequately, and consequently reduce the risk of their children's negative development, there are reasons to think that it should be in the form of parenting support specifically aimed at, and tailored for, this group of parents. Such an approach to parenting support promotes ecological validity and is appreciated and needed by the local community (Lindén et al., 2022).

Current study

As part of a larger research project studying the implementation and evaluation of a culturally informed parenting programme called the Self-Assured Parents programme (blinded for review1) (Skoog et al., 2022), in this study, we wanted to understand immigrant mothers' experiences and perceptions of the programme and how it contributed to the perceived changes in their parenting. Generally, evaluations of social interventions are conducted with pre-post self-report measures using Likert scales. Such measures, however, do not always capture the 'real world' experiences and thoughts of parents, thus risking the overall evaluation of the efficacy of the programme and qualities for widespread implementation (Bjørknes & Ortiz-Barreda, 2021). To secure the quality of the programme as well as understand the lived experiences of its participants, in this study, we took a qualitative approach aiming to respond to the following research questions:

1. How do immigrant mothers experience and perceive the group-based Self-Assured Parents (SAP) programme for immigrant parents in disadvantaged areas in Sweden?

2. Do mothers experience that they have changed and, if so, how, as a result of attending the programme?

Methods

Participants

We conducted a purposive sampling method to select immigrant mothers residing in disadvantaged areas in Sweden, who had previously attended and completed the Self-Assured Parents programme. The study included a total of 18 mothers (see Table 1). Recruitment of additional participants was ceased when the data no longer yielded any new insights or information. The age range of the participants spanned from 32 to 61 years ($M = 41.2$ years). The duration of mothers' residency in Sweden varied from 7 to 33 years ($M = 16.1$ years). None of the parents were native Swedish speakers. Among the participants, 12 mothers were born in Somalia. The other mothers in the sample came from Turkey, Morocco, Syria, Eritrea, and Iraq. Additionally, some of the mothers were employed either on a full-time or part-time basis. Most mothers were considered de facto single, indicating that they were raising their children without a partner. The number of children per mother ranged from 2 to 8 ($M = 5.5$ children). Importantly, all the mothers who took part in the study had at least one teenage child. We assigned pseudonyms for all participating mothers.

Intervention

To meet the needs of the ethnically diverse population of parents in disadvantaged areas, professional social workers, working in social services in one Swedish municipality,

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Name	Region of origin	Years in Sweden	Number of children	Family status	Occupation
Aamiina	Africa	9	7	Married	Studies Swedish for immigrants
Fatima	Asia	21	3	De facto single ¹	Employed
Barkhado	Africa	12	8	De facto single	Unspecified studies
Mariam	Africa	11	3	De facto single	Trainee
Farah	Asia	7	2	Married	Unemployed
Nala	Africa	26	6	De facto single	Employed
Yasmiin	Africa	8	5	De facto single	Unemployed
Obax	Africa	8	5	Married/Lives alone	Unemployed
Zehra	Asia	24	2	Married	Vocational education
Waris	Africa	12	8	N/A	Studies Swedish for immigrants
Meelaaney	Africa	13	6	Married	Employed
Jamilah	Africa	14	3	N/A	Unemployed
Hodan	Africa	30	6	Married	Employed
Hani	Africa	14	5	De facto single	Employed
Aylin	Asia	11	3	De facto single	Employed
Cawo	Africa	33	7	Married	Employed
Bilan	Africa	20	7	De facto single	On sick-leave
Samira	Asia	14	3	De facto single	Employed

Note. ¹ A person not living with a spouse, either married or as consensual union partner

developed a parenting programme aimed at immigrant parents living in disadvantaged areas, who worry that their teenage children engage in, or will be exposed to, harmful environments with crime and substance abuse. They called the programme Self-Assured Parents (SAP) (blinded for review 2) (Axelsson & Carlsson, 2016). SAP is a selective, manual-based prevention programme and an example of a practice-based model. In other words, SAP is a model developed by experts from their practice and experience, grounded in cultural awareness, values, and norms of the local community (West et al., 2019), which also requires an understanding of the challenges faced by those who receive and those who deliver the support (Ammerman et al., 2014). The programme is founded within the framework of developmental psychology, specifically attachment theory, theory of risk and protection, system theory, and theories of empowerment, and based on the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (blinded for review 1).

The main goal of SAP is for parents to become more confident in their role as parents, to have better communication with their children, and to have their worries about their children's developmental outcomes reduced. This is achieved through a focus on increasing parents' awareness of the importance of parent-child relationships for the development of children, building parenting self-confidence, and promoting mutual communication between the parent and the child. SAP consists of 10 weekly 1.5-hour sessions delivered by trained group leaders to groups of parents (approx. 10 parents/group) in the neighbourhood where the parents live. The following are the themes of the 10 sessions: (1) parents' important role in creating safety and security in the family and community, (2) identity in the family and community, (3) self-esteem, (4) shame and guilt, (5) child development and lifelong attachment, (6) risk and protective factors, (7) good communication – talking and listening, (8) the family – a secure base, (9) democracy and family structures, and (10) peace begins in the home. The content of SAP is delivered through didactic and interactive activities such as role-playing, storytelling, reflection exercises, and discussions. For example, after each session, the parents are given a home assignment based on the theme of the week. The next time the participants and course leaders meet, feedback is given regarding the activities and themes of the previous session. The parents are also given the opportunity to discuss lessons and challenges posed by the homework. The content of the programme is culturally informed, addressing the cultural differences and similarities in parenting and psychosocial stressors and needs specific to the target group, and making use of role-play and stories culturally recognizable to parents. In addition, the programme is delivered by course leaders with cultural competence making components of SAP easily accessible to parents (Sue et al., 2009).

Procedure

To establish contact with mothers who had previously participated in the SAP programme, we involved the same social workers who had served as course leaders (i.e. deliverers) for the programme. These social workers, located in three municipalities in Sweden, provided the names and contact information of the mothers who took part in the programme. If a mother expressed interest in participating in the research, an appointment for a personal interview was scheduled at the locations used by social

services in the respective municipalities. The social workers assessed whether an interpreter was required for the interview, and if so, they arranged for one. In total, seven interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter. Additionally, 15 interviews were audio-recorded, while three interviews involved note-taking instead of audio-recording, based on the preferences of either the participant or the interpreter.

We utilized a semi-structured interview guide to collect data. The interview guide consisted of 10 questions that focused on the mother's experiences with the SAP programme. Some examples of these questions include: 'What was it like for you to participate in Self-Assured Parents?', 'Why did you decide to enrol in the course?', and 'Can you identify anything specific that you learned or did during the programme that you believe has positively influenced you as a parent?'. The interview guide also included six additional questions that explored the mothers' perceptions of themselves as parents before and after their participation in the support programme. Some sample questions from this section include: 'How would you compare your current experience as a parent to your experience before taking the course?' and 'How would you describe yourself as a mother?'. Lastly, the interview guide incorporated three statements for which the participants were asked to provide their thoughts. These statements were: 'I think I am a good role model to my children', 'Being a parent is manageable, and any problems are easily solved', and 'I honestly believe I have all the skills necessary to be a good parent to my child.' Participants were invited to share their perspectives on these statements during the interview. The interviews, conducted by the first or the second author, or another member of the research team, took place between October 2022 and February 2023 and lasted between 20 and 60 min.

Data analysis

To develop an understanding of the content and familiarize ourselves with the data, we initially read through all the transcriptions multiple times. Then we conducted an inductive analysis of the data following the six-step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's approach, we began the analysis by performing semantic coding. We read each word of the data, highlighted and coded sentences, paragraphs, and words that were relevant to or captured the essence of, the research questions. This part of the data analysis was done separately by each author. After compiling the lists of codes, the next step was to compare the codes and subsequently categorize them based on their similarities and differences. We identified preliminary themes and clustered them under different subthemes. In the subsequent step, we merged and organized the initial subthemes into overarching themes that represented the core aspects of the subthemes. As a final step, we reviewed and compared all themes against the initial codes to ensure coherence and consistency.

To enhance the credibility and confirmability of the findings, we engaged in discussions to reach a consensus at every stage of the analysis process. This helped ensure that our interpretations and conclusions were grounded in the data. Selected excerpts from the participants' responses were chosen to illustrate the identified themes and were translated from Swedish to English by the second author. In the translation process and for clarity, we have made minor revisions to participants' quotes.

Results

We present the results in relation to the two research questions. The themes and subthemes representing mothers' answers are presented in Figure 1. Quotes are marked with each mother's respective pseudonym.

General experiences and perceptions of the programme

We identified two overarching themes relating to the first research question, which represent mothers' experiences and perceptions of the SAP programme: 'the meaning of the programme content and structure course', and 'enjoying oneself and being comfortable'.

The meaning of the programme content and structure for learning

The first theme was divided into four subthemes. First, mothers talked vividly about the course content and mentioned learning about adolescent development, parenting, parent-adolescent relationships, and where to seek help. This is in line with the programme goals. Jamilah said: 'We talked about many things. For example, believing in yourself, listening, and trying to understand what your child is thinking and feeling. Take responsibility for yourself and leave shame and guilt behind. We learned many things.'

Second, several mothers mentioned role-play in the sense that it was a central component enabling learning of the programme. Bilan said: 'Everything was very nice, but the best was theater.' Aamiina also mentioned role-play:

There are many things I have learned. Some of them concern when the children come home from school. That you shouldn't talk right away, you can take it easy. If the child is screaming and is upset, you shouldn't get upset yourself. You should wait until the child is calm. It was the role-play that helped with that.

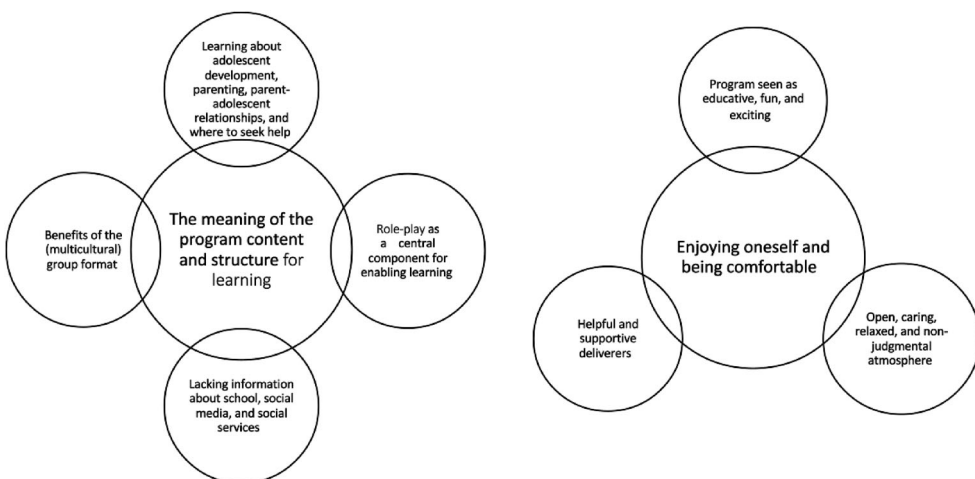


Figure 1. Themes and subthemes in relation to the first research question emerge from the thematic analysis. Note that the central circles represent themes and the surrounding circles represent subthemes.

Some parents talked about having wanted more information about, and attention given to, school, social media, and social services (legislation) during the sessions. Farah said:

Especially immigrant parents are very worried about social services taking their children. So, it was a suggestion to use more time [i.e. in the course] to talk about it / ... / I lived here for almost seven years, but I still need information about this system because it doesn't exist in Syria or in Arab countries.

The benefits of the (multicultural) group format were highlighted by mothers' comments related to peer support, sharing personal experiences with other mothers, and learning from one another. Jamilah said: 'It is good to meet other people. It gives you ideas/ ... / It is good to meet parents with children of the same age.' Hani said: 'When you are worried all the time you cannot live / ... / Maybe you need some help, to be together with others, to breathe a little.'

No mother said that they would have preferred to have same-ethnicity courses.

Mariam said about the mix of mothers from different cultural backgrounds:

It was great because we exchanged experiences. We've also been able to talk in Swedish. We've asked questions in Swedish and we've also had discussions in Swedish. We've asked each other what we do when the children do this or that or when the husband has a conflict at home. Things like that.

Enjoying oneself and being comfortable

The second theme related to mothers' general experiences and perceptions of the programme had to do with feeling enjoyment and being comfortable during the sessions. This theme had three subthemes: programme seen as educative, fun, and exciting; open, caring, relaxed, and non-judgmental atmosphere; and helpful and supportive deliverers.

Overall, mothers expressed that they were highly satisfied with the programme and its delivery and that they thought that more parents should be given the opportunity to take the programme. Cawo said: 'I was also happy when I took the course. I would have liked to have more meetings, and more time.' Zehra said: 'If there was a possibility, I would go again. You get great thoughts and ideas.'

Some mothers were hesitant about attending the programme at first, but eventually changed their minds. Fatima said:

In the beginning, actually I didn't want to go there. To tell the truth ... you know you get shy, and you don't want to tell your problems to others and so on. Yes, and then in the end ... I said I have to go just the first time and check how things are and if I want I can continue, otherwise I won't. But I enjoyed it very much. I continued all these 10 times.

Many mothers mentioned how helpful and supportive the deliverers of the programme had been and how important that was for their overall (learning) experience of the programme. Farah said:

I told NN and NN [names of the deliverers, removed by the authors] what was happening and how I dealt with the problem, and they said 'Farah, good! We keep our fingers crossed! You are doing it right!' And so, when others tell you that it is right, you are doing the right thing, you feel proud of yourself, that you are doing the right thing ... I'm okay!

Cawo said: 'I came there and met two wonderful people who were running the course, the leaders. They were very nice and clear.'

Experienced changes as a result of attending the programme

We identified five overarching themes relating to the second research question, which represents mothers' perceptions of if and how they had changed as a result of participating in the SAP programme (see Figure 2). Overall, mothers described meaningful changes in themselves as parents and as persons as a result of attending the SAP programme. In particular, the participants described trusting more in themselves as parents (mothers) and in their own parenting skills, which made them feel more confident and calmer in their parenting role.

Putting the adolescent in the centre

The first theme concerned how the mothers had started putting the adolescent in the centre as a result of having participated in SAP. Most mothers talked about prioritizing their adolescents and their needs and preferences more during the interviews. This included that the mothers allotted more time to the adolescent (subtheme 1) and that they had become more responsive to the adolescents' needs and preferences (subtheme 2), including being more supportive of adolescent autonomy development. Nala said:

You should give the children time. When they come home from school, if I'm doing the dishes or cooking, I try to stop and listen to the child. Maybe it is very important what he or she wants to tell you ... Take the opportunity as a parent and listen all the way from the beginning to the end. I've have learnt that.

Farah talked about supporting autonomy and independence in adolescents:

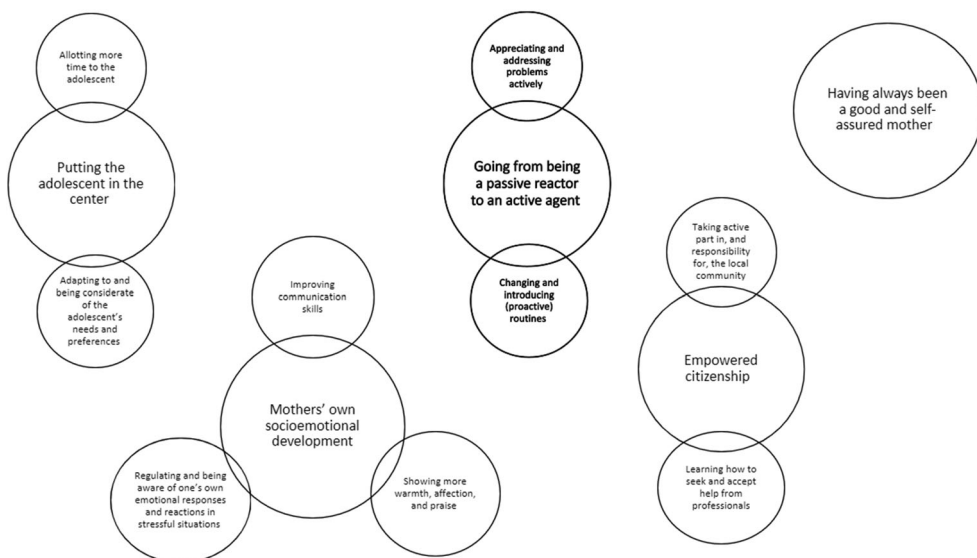


Figure 2. Themes and subthemes in relation to the second research question emerge from the thematic analysis. Note that the central circles represent themes and the surrounding circles represent subthemes.

So, I get really worried about my son's education. He's, you know, a teenager. The last thing on his mind is education. Teenagers think about clothes, going out, hanging out with friends and computer games. That's their priority / ... / I usually study with him and tell him you have to think more about studying, ignore computer games, you're not allowed to go out and so on, but after the course ... I learnt it was good to leave him a little bit. He has to take responsibility himself. It's good to remind him that it's important for the future.

Mothers' own socioemotional development

The second theme related to the second research question concerning mothers' own socioemotional development. It was clear from what mothers said in the interviews that they had developed and improved their social and emotional skills and abilities. The theme had three subthemes: improving communication skills; showing more warmth, affection, and praise; and regulating and being aware of one's own emotional responses and reactions in stressful situations.

In terms of communication, mothers talked about how they had changed to be more curious about the child and thus asked more questions to and about the child, to create opportunities for child disclosure, and to listen more to the child rather than only telling the child own's mind. Overall, mothers had become more mindful of their communication styles and the impact they had on their adolescents, and on their adolescents' willingness to communicate with the mothers. Samira said: 'You have to listen first and then talk to the child about what has happened. Then you make your decision.' Aamiina said:

You get worried about who the child will meet when they are out. Show the children that you are attentive and willing to help. Where you have been? Who you have met? The child should see that the mother is ... that you treat them well. Then the child can also tell you who they have met and what they are doing. Then the child has the energy to tell you.

Many mothers expressed that they showed more warmth, affection, and praise towards their adolescents after having attended the programme. Hodan said:

[the course] makes us pay more attention to how to raise the child, it is not only the body and food, but also about feelings/ ... / How to share feelings, how to raise the child as a self-assured [person] ... But I, as an adult, have to think what the best for the children is, and not to neglect their feelings. For parents and children to be close to each other, parents have to work (for it).

All mothers talked about having learned how to regulate and be aware of their own emotional responses and reactions in stressful situations involving their adolescents. They all talked about the importance and power of remaining calm. This has been helpful in stressful and challenging situations with their adolescents. Mothers had observed the positive effect that staying calm had on their adolescents. Fatima said:

For example, when the child is angry and shouting and so on, you don't have to shout as well. You have to listen and find out what it is, why he or she is shouting and so on. Make sure it's calm. You ask questions and so on.

Hani said:

Before, when the children screamed, I screamed back. When they threw shoes, I yelled and said you have to clean up. But now I don't say that. Don't worry. Leave it on the floor, get up,

calm down. I don't think like that anymore. Then they can come back and tell me, we will solve this problem. When they come back, I listen to all the problems they have. Then children say oh we are so sorry mom. And then I say, ok now pick up your shoes. And they do it.

Going from being a passive reactor to an active agent in one's parenting

It was quite evident from mothers' descriptions of how they had changed as a result of the programme that their parental self-efficacy had improved and that in several ways they had gone from being a passive reactor to a (pro-)active agent in relation to parenting. The first subtheme of the third theme was appreciating and addressing problems actively and the second subtheme was changing and introducing (proactive) routines.

Meelaney said, in relation to whether anything from the programme had helped her in her everyday parenting:

You can activate the children in some way. It can be boring to sit at home. But then you can ask 'What do you want to do?' and you can find something suitable. So, if it's going out or playing or something. Some activity in some way ... Or a fun activity like sports.

Mariam said, in relation to appreciating and addressing problems actively and assertively:

Now I feel after I have done this course, I feel very self-assured. In my home country, we act in a different way. Here we are more careful. But now I feel very confident after this course. I know what to do and what not to do.

Barkado explained more specifically what she had learned to do in the programme in order to learn if her son had stolen items or items that he had bought with money coming from criminal activity:

I have started to be observant by checking his shoes, jacket, clothes, things that are expensive that I may not have bought/ ... / The problem is, starting at the age of maybe 11–15, the children are not mature enough to say no. Because there are adult men everywhere who take advantage of children. I think that if we parents go through all of this together, we have a tool to prevent all this.

Concerning routines, Nala answered a question about differences in her parenting after the programme:

I have also learned to set goals and routines. It's great if my children have routines. What the day should look like from Monday to Sunday. Get up in the morning, brush your teeth, eat breakfast before you leave ...

Empowered citizenship

One prominent theme that emerged from the thematic analysis was empowered citizenship. The first of the two subthemes was learning how to seek and accept help from professionals, including those in social services. Through the programme, mothers realized that seeking help from authorities was essential for resolving issues at home and ensuring their children's safety. The first subtheme concerns the mothers' initial fears and misconceptions regarding seeking help from social services. Prior to engaging in SAP, mothers expressed concerns about disclosing problems, such as incidents at home, due to the belief that involving social services would result in their children being taken away. However, through their participation in the programme, mothers gained a

deeper understanding of the fact that contacting social services and other relevant authorities in times of need was not a threat to their parental rights but, in fact, a necessary step in accessing support and ensuring the safety and wellbeing of their families. This theme highlights the potential of SAP in empowering mothers to proactively seek assistance when facing challenges at home. Mariam said:

Before I took this course, I said that I was afraid to disclose my problems, for example if something happens at home. Because we think that if the social services know, they will come and take the children, things like that. But that is wrong. Now I know that if something happens at home, I have to contact everyone, the police, social services, other authorities. I have to contact them and ask for help.

The second subtheme concerned taking an active part in, and responsibility for, the local community. The mothers expressed a newfound courage and willingness to engage with others and offer help within their community. Overcoming previous fears and insecurities, they now felt empowered to approach and assist others in need. Mariam said: 'I have started to dare to ask or help others. Because I was very afraid and insecure before, but now I know that if something happens, I dare to get close and ask and help.'

Moreover, mothers highlighted the significance of cultural integration and adapting to the parenting norms in their new country. Through the programme, they learned how to become better parents within the Swedish context. Waris said, in relation to a question about whether the course had been helpful in any way: 'A lot! / ... / We come from another culture, so we have learned during the course how to be a parent in Sweden.'

Mothers' newly gained knowledge and confidence also inspired them to share their learnings and experiences with others. Yasmiin said: 'I have a YouTube channel and Snapchat. There I share the information that I have learned as well.'

In this way, mothers contributed to the wellbeing of others within their local communities as a result of attending the SAP programme.

Having always been a good and self-assured mother

The final theme, having always been a good and self-assured mother, which had no sub-themes, emerged from the thematic analysis, reflecting some of the mothers' accounts of them having always been a good and adequate mother and that participating in the course had not changed that. However, while they considered themselves strong and self-assured mothers, they recognized the need for further learning and support. Obax said: 'To be honest, I was a self-assured mother before the course. But / ... / I didn't have any knowledge and didn't know how to deal with it.'

Mothers also highlighted their previous accomplishments as single parents, successfully nurturing their children who were now thriving academically and professionally. The theme emphasizes mothers' pre-existing resilience and self-assuredness while also acknowledging the importance of continuous growth and learning through parent support programmes. Yasmiin said, in response to a question about how she had felt about herself as a mother before attending the programme:

I thought I am a strong mother and have had very good self-confidence / ... / I think I have been a good mother. I have been alone and taken care of my children. And today they have good educations, they work and manage life. Therefore, I think I have been a good mother.

Discussion

Understanding and recognizing parents' experiences and perceptions of social interventions is critical to evaluation science (APA, 2006). Therefore, using qualitative data from mothers who have completed a parenting intervention targeting immigrant parents living in disadvantaged areas with teenage children in Sweden, labelled Self-Assured Parents programme (SAP), we wanted to understand (a) how the immigrant mothers experienced and perceived the group-based SAP programme, and (b) whether mothers experienced that they had changed, and if so, how, as a result of the programme. The findings revealed that the mothers were generally positive about both the content and the format of the programme, appreciating the warm and supportive atmosphere in the groups. As a result of the programme, mothers perceived they had learned to be more attentive to adolescent needs, having improved their own social and emotional skills, and being empowered both as a citizen and a mother.

Experiences and perceptions of the SAP programme

Overall, the mothers who completed the SAP programme were generally positive about the course content and format. Mothers experienced that they had learned much about adolescent biopsychosocial development and the importance of parent–child relationships. As a critical point for their learning, almost all mothers emphasized role-play as a meaningful learning technique. Indeed, when actively participating in role-play, the participants can take on the role of others; in this case, a hypothetical parent or a child, which in turn helps the participants to understand the thoughts and the feelings of others and is advantageous for improving both verbal and non-verbal communication skills in the participants (Baile & Blatner, 2014). This could particularly be of importance when working with interventions involving individuals with poor language skills, as usage of such a technique in learning situations helps participants to enhance their own reflective thinking (Rønning & Bjørkly, 2019), which in turn contributes to participants' active and careful instillation of, and adaptation to, new knowledge (Baile & Blatner, 2014).

Satisfaction with the programme was generally high among mothers, who expressed that they experienced the programme as educative and exciting, with helpful and supportive deliverers, and a relaxed and non-judgemental atmosphere. As suggested in previous research (Jukes et al., 2022), these are some of the mechanisms that facilitate engagement in parenting interventions. Specifically, the relationships between the deliverers and the participants may be crucial for recruitment and engagement, as well as retention of parents in the parenting programmes. While professional skills and programme knowledge in deliverers are generally considered as facilitators for social interventions (Butler et al., 2020), personal characteristics that involve showing empathy and having a genuine interest in the issues that mothers deal with, as well as being objective, flexible, and self-reflexive, may be crucial cornerstones for working with parents (Leitão et al., 2023). In addition, working with immigrant parents also requires knowing the culture and its values (Hamari et al., 2022). We suggest that enhancing deliverers' skills that help to connect with parents and to build trustful, yet professional, relationships may be key to immigrant parents' engagement and retention in the parenting interventions.

All mothers were satisfied with being included in a programme with a multicultural format. Interestingly, no mothers said that they would have preferred to have same-ethnicity parenting courses. As mothers expressed, the multicultural format offered parents the possibility to be introduced to, and to exchange experiences with, parents from other cultural backgrounds, which, given the cultural diversity in the communities that the parents lived in, could offer possibilities to form stronger bonds and integration in the community. In fact, even in multicultural settings, people are inclined to form inner groups with people of similar cultural backgrounds and do not often have high-quality interactions with out-group members, which inevitably has adverse effects on trust towards others in the community (Dinesen et al., 2020). Therefore, engaging parents in activities that include members of different cultural groups may play an important role both in the development of trust towards others as well as the growth of democratic values in society.

Perceived changes in parents as a result of the programme

Although almost all mothers in our study perceived being strong and confident mothers even before attending the programme, they nonetheless experienced certain changes both as parents and as members of the community. In fact, mothers specifically drew attention to the growth of emotional awareness relating to the child and child's needs, and their own social and emotional skills and communication with children following their participation in the programme. The mothers had understood the importance of staying calm in distressing parent-child interactions and perceived that their own emotional control had a spill-over effect on their children's emotional reactions. This finding corroborates the results from other studies involving immigrant parents (e.g. Kim et al., 2016). Indeed, enhancing parental knowledge of social and emotional development in general, and parent-child communication in particular, is often a core goal of parenting programmes, including those for immigrant parents (Hamari et al., 2022). Further, parents who are emotionally mindful and responsive create venues for the development of their children's social skills, emotional knowledge, and self-regulation (Morris et al., 2017), the competencies critical for children's positive development and adjustment (Domitrovich et al., 2017). In the context of such a family climate, parents and adolescent children may grow more open communication with each other, which essentially is the key parenting mechanism for protecting children from the development of risk-behaviours, including delinquency (Kapetanovic & Skoog, 2021). As shown in earlier research (Västhagen et al., 2022), immigrant parents often experience multiple stressors that put a strain on their psychological health and inevitably their family interactions. Our results indicate that enhancing knowledge as well as strategies for parents' own social and emotional regulation may help parents both in terms of their own psychological development and in terms of developing skills to adhere to the parenting task successfully.

As a result of the programme, the mothers in our study perceived themselves to be more agentic in their parenting. They became more observant of both their own children's and other children's behaviours, having the confidence to seek help and support from social services when needed. Moreover, they were also empowered as members of the community, expressing a newfound courage to offer support to

other parents and share their knowledge with others. These findings suggest that social interventions, where parents interact with other parents from the community, but most importantly where they acquire knowledge of the social system and public institutions, have the potentials to provide parents with a sense of empowerment and improved confidence, both as parents and citizens (Hamari et al., 2022; Osman et al., 2017). Indeed, parents of foreign backgrounds, specifically those living in socially disadvantaged areas, often feel like second-class citizens, navigating through the new social and cultural setting (Baghdasaryan et al., 2021). Inevitably, these parents often perceive being discriminated against (Esaiasson et al., 2023) and being subjected to injustice that has a bearing on both their own and their children's lives. They are not always sure about their rights, obligations, or possibilities in a new resident country (Lindén et al., 2022), which makes them susceptible to the spread of misinformation in the community. This, in turn, contributes to a growing distrust towards the new resident country and its institutions (Esaiasson et al., 2023) which puts more strains on parents' possibilities to manage parenting successfully. In that sense, our results indicate that group-based parenting programmes targeting immigrant parents living in disadvantaged areas may be promising both in terms of strengthening parents' own parenting efficacy and in terms of strengthening the social cohesion among members of the community.

Implications for policy and practice

Based on the findings, we make the following recommendations for policy and practice. Parent programme content should focus on essential topics like adolescent development, parent-child relationships, and seeking help to meet participants' needs (Lindén et al., 2022). Role-play should be incorporated as it appears to enhance learning experiences and develop parenting skills. Specific attention should be given to schools, social media, and social services to support immigrant parents. Multicultural groups provide peer support and shared experiences. Programme deliverers should create inclusive environments that encourage cultural exchange and support. A non-judgmental and supportive atmosphere should be strived for as it is crucial for participant enjoyment and comfort. These implications can guide the development and improvement of parent support programmes, ensuring that they address mothers' needs, promote positive parenting practices, and empower mothers to create nurturing and supportive environments for their adolescents.

The study findings further highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity within parent support programmes. Policymakers should prioritize the development of culturally responsive programmes that take into account the unique needs and experiences of diverse populations. Creating inclusive environments that foster cultural exchange, mutual support, and respect can enhance the effectiveness of these programmes and promote positive outcomes for parents and youth from various cultural backgrounds. By implementing such policies, governments can effectively support parents, promote positive parenting practices, and ultimately contribute to the wellbeing and development of children and adolescents in society as well as cultivating social cohesion and democratic values among the members of the society.

Limitations and future research directions

There are some study limitations worth mentioning. First, contact with the participants was established with the help of the social services and, more specifically, group leaders of the SAP programme. As the participants have dependent relationships with the social services, there is a risk of self-presentation bias, resulting in parents presenting their perceptions, experiences, and changes in a more favourable way than is actually the case. Moreover, there is a risk of self-selection bias with possible differences between parents who chose to participate in the interviews and those who did not. In that sense, it is possible that parents who were satisfied with the programme were more likely to agree to be included in the study than those who were dissatisfied with SAP. Such sampling bias may be a particular risk in studies with marginalized samples and participants with possible distrust of social and public institutions. Further research should address these issues in order to secure the reliability of the results. Even though the interviews were conducted not more than five months post-participation in the programme, there is a risk of recall bias in participants. As some of the participants had previously participated in other parenting programmes, there is also a risk that the changes and learnings they perceived experiencing post-SAP programme were confounded by their previous experiences in parenting programmes. Therefore, we recommend that the data collection in future studies should be immediately subsequent to the completion of the programme. The current study is part of a larger evaluation, which also includes standardized assessment of mothers' self-efficacy, parent-child communication, and worry about their children pre- and post-engagement in the programme. Although mothers' experiences of the programme are generally positive, as shown in the current study, the effectiveness of the programme has yet to be evaluated. To gain more knowledge of the potential of SAP as a parenting support programme for immigrant parents, it is important to consider the findings using different methodological approaches in the evaluation of the programme. As noted, the SAP programme, as well as our interview data, includes only mothers. Fathers generally hard to engage in parenting programmes and may require specifically tailored and father-friendly programmes with sufficient resources for fathers' needs (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Future interventions need to adapt the delivery of the programme to fathers' specific needs, if fathers are to be attracted and engaged in the parenting programmes, specifically those for immigrant parents. Furthermore, with the increasing development of preventive programmes targeted at immigrant parents (e.g. Osman et al., 2017), there is a need for future research to adopt a meta-perspective in order to map and compare various preventive programmes designed for the same demographic group of parents.

Conclusions

Investigating parents' perceptions of engaging in a culturally informed parenting programme targeting immigrants, the SAP programme, the findings of our study reinforce the evidence for the importance of certain mechanisms in the delivery of the programme, as well as the potential for personal growth in the parents through engagement in a programme. Specifically, we identified that a programme that is delivered in a multicultural format, with warm and inclusive deliverers using role-play as a learning technique, has

the potentials to retain and engage parents who generally are difficult to reach (Hamari et al., 2022). Moreover, engagement in a culturally informed parenting programme helps parents to increase the emotional awareness of their children's needs, parents' own social and emotional skills, and communication with children; skills that may benefit children in their own emotional and social development (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Additionally, engagement in the SAP promotes democratic values and social cohesion among members of the community. These insights have the potential to guide and inform the development of future parenting interventions targeting immigrant parents who live in social disadvantage.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Charlotte Lindén for her assistance with the interviews with the parents, as well as to all the parents who participated in our study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare: grant number 2020-01349.

References

- Ammerman, A., Smith, T. W., & Calancie, L. (2014). Practice-based evidence in public health: Improving reach, relevance, and results. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 35(1), 47–63. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-032013-182458>
- Axelsson, M., & Carlsson, Å. (2016). Trygga föräldrar (Eng. Self-assured parenting) Unpublished manual.
- APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice. (2006). Evidence-based practice in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 61(4), 271–285. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.61.4.271>
- Baghdasaryan, Z., Lampa, E., & Osman, F. (2021). 'Let us understand each other and work together in the child's best interest' – Exploring the narratives of newly arrived refugee parents in Sweden. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 81, 226–235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.02.004>
- Baile, W. F., & Blatner, A. (2014). Teaching communication skills: Using action methods to enhance role-play in problem-based learning. *Simulation in Healthcare*, 9(4), 220–227. DOI: 10.1097/SIH.0000000000000019
- Belhadj Kouider, E., Koglin, U., & Petermann, F. (2014). Emotional and behavioral problems in migrant children and adolescents in Europe: A systematic review. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 23(6), 373–391. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-013-0485-8>
- Bernal, G., Bonilla, J., & Bellido, C. (1995). Ecological validity and cultural sensitivity for outcome research: Issues for the cultural adaptation and development of psychosocial treatments with Hispanics. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 23(1), 67–82. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01447045>
- Björknes, R., & Ortiz-Barreda, G. (2021). Are the voices of parents heard? A scoping review of satisfaction in parenting programs. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 88, 101928. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalproplan.2021.101928>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Butler, J., Gregg, L., Calam, R., & Wittkowski, A. (2020). Parents' perceptions and experiences of parenting programmes: A systematic review and metasynthesis of the qualitative literature. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 23(2), 176–204. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-019-00307-y>
- Dinesen, P. T., Schaeffer, M., & Sønderskov, K. M. (2020). Ethnic diversity and social trust: A narrative and meta-analytical review. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23(1), 441–465. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-052918-020708>
- Domitrovich, C. E., Durlak, J. A., Staley, K. C., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Social-emotional competence: An essential factor for promoting positive adjustment and reducing risk in school children. *Child Development*, 88(2), 408–416. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12739>
- Esaiasson, P., Lajevardi, N., & Sohlberg, J. (2023). Perceived group discrimination and the integration paradox in stigmatized neighborhoods. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2023.2227438>
- Family Law and Parental Support Authority. (2023). *Fortsatt stöd i genomförande av nationell strategi för ett stärkt föräldraskapsstöd*. Slutrapport 2023. Myndigheten för familjerätt och föräldraskapsstöd.
- Francis, T., Packer, D., & Baker-Henningham, H. (2023). A qualitative evaluation of the mechanisms of action in an early childhood parenting programme to prevent violence against children in Jamaica. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 49(3), 579–590. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.13074>
- Garcia-Huidobro, D., Doty, J. L., Davis, L., Borowsky, I. W., & Allen, M. L. (2018). For whom do parenting interventions to prevent adolescent substance use work? *Prevention Science*, 19(4), 570–578. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-017-0853-6>
- Grönqvist, H., Niknami, S., & Santavirta, T. (2023). *Bostadsområdets betydelse för brottslighet och barns möjligheter*. Studieförbundet Näringsliv och Samhälle (SNS). Stockholm.
- Hamari, L., Konttila, J., Merikukka, M., Tuomikoski, A. M., Kouvonon, P., & Kurki, M. (2022). Parent support programmes for families who are immigrants: A scoping review. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 24(2), 506–525. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-021-01181-z>
- Janssen, H. J., Weerman, F. M., & Eichelsheim, V. I. (2017). Parenting as a protective factor against criminogenic settings? Interaction effects between three aspects of parenting and unstructured socializing in disordered areas. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 54(2), 181–207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427816664561>
- Jukes, L. M., Di Folco, S., Kearney, L., & Sawrikar, V. (2022). Barriers and facilitators to engaging mothers and fathers in family-based interventions: A qualitative systematic review. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-022-01389-6>
- Kapetanovic, S., & Skoog, T. (2021). The role of the family's emotional climate in the links between parent-adolescent communication and adolescent psychosocial functioning. *Research on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology*, 49(2), 141–154. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-020-00705-9>
- Kim, E., Hong, S., & Rockett, C. M. (2016). Korean American parents' perceptions of effective parenting strategies in the United States. *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, 23(1), 12–20.
- Leitão, S. M., Francisco, R., Gaspar, M. F., & Seabra-Santos, M. J. (2023). The person within: Parents and professionals' views about the practitioner's role in a parenting program. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-023-02553-9>
- Lindén, C., Kapetanovic, S., & Skoog, T. (2022). Raising teenage children in disadvantaged neighborhoods: The experiences and challenges of immigrant mothers in Sweden. *Journal of Family Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2022.2054721>
- McNaughton, D. B., Cowell, J. M., & Fogg, L. (2015). Efficacy of a Latino mother–child communication intervention in elementary schools. *The Journal of School Nursing*, 31(2), 126–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059840514526997>
- Morris, A. S., Criss, M. M., Silk, J. S., & Houlberg, B. J. (2017). The impact of parenting on emotion regulation during childhood and adolescence. *Child Development Perspectives*, 11(4), 233–238. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12238>

- Osman, F., Salari, R., Klingberg-Allvin, M., Schön, U. K., & Flacking, R. (2017). Effects of a culturally tailored parenting support programme in Somali-born parents' mental health and sense of competence in parenting: A randomised controlled trial. *BMJ Open*, 7(12), e017600. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2017-017600>
- Panter-Brick, C., Burgess, A., Eggerman, M., McAllister, F., Pruett, K., & Leckman, J. F. (2014). Practitioner review: Engaging fathers—recommendations for a game change in parenting interventions based on a systematic review of the global evidence. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(11), 1187–1212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12280>
- Puffer, E. S., Annan, J., Sim, A. L., Salhi, C., & Betancourt, T. S. (2017). The impact of a family skills training intervention among Burmese migrant families in Thailand: A randomized controlled trial. *PLoS One*, 12(3), e0172611. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0172611>
- Resnicow, K., Soler, R., Braithwaite, R. L., Ahluwalia, J. S., & Butler, J. (2000). Cultural sensitivity in substance use prevention. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(3), 271–290. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1520-6629\(200005\)28:3<271::AID-JCOP4>3.0.CO;2-I](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1520-6629(200005)28:3<271::AID-JCOP4>3.0.CO;2-I)
- Rønning, S. B., & Bjørkly, S. (2019). The use of clinical role-play and reflection in learning therapeutic communication skills in mental health education: An integrative review. *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, 10, 415–425. <https://doi.org/10.2147/AMEP.S202115>
- Skoog, T., Kapetanovic, S., & Sorbring, E. (2022). Study protocol for a mixed-design evaluation of self-assured parents-A parenting support program for immigrant parents living in deprived areas in Sweden with teenage children. *Public Health in Practice*, 3, 100270. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2022.100270>
- Sue, S., Zane, N., Nagayama Hall, G. C., & Berger, L. K. (2009). The case for cultural competency in psychotherapeutic interventions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60(1), 525–548. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.163651>
- Van Mourik, K., Crone, M. R., De Wolff, M. S., & Reis, R. (2017). Parent training programs for ethnic minorities: A meta-analysis of adaptations and effect. *Prevention Science*, 18(1), 95–105. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-016-0733-5>
- Västhagen, M., Özdemir, M., Ghaderi, A., Kimber, B., Giles, C. J., Özdemir, S. B., ... Enebrink, P. (2022). Refugee parents' experiences of coming to Sweden: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 91, 97–109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.08.010>
- West, S., van Kerkhoff, L., & Wagenaar, H. (2019). Beyond “linking knowledge and action”: towards a practice-based approach to transdisciplinary sustainability interventions. *Policy Studies*, 40(5), 534–555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2019.1618810>
- Yuen, L. H. (2019). New immigrant parents' experiences in a parent education programme. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 27(1), 20–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2017.1390445>