

KidsTime Southwark Evaluation

Authors: Giulia Ravancia and Dr Bettina Moltrecht

Brief: Perceived advantages and challenges of a blended KidsTime approach?

The aim of this brief was to summarise the perceived advantages and challenges of a blended KidsTime approach, from the perspectives of the facilitators and participating families. The blended approach consisted of a combination of online and in person sessions of KidsTime Workshops. Cohort 2 took part from May 2021 to December 2021 and was offered this approach. For these families, sessions 1, 6 and 12 were delivered in person with multiple families, and all other sessions (child and parent/carer sessions) were delivered online. The in-person family sessions (lasting 1.5 hours) took place at a local school, and combined a family, a parent/carer only, and child only element.

Facilitator perspectives

Facilitators described multiple advantages of delivering KidsTime in a blended approach in comparison to cohort 1 where everything was online. This included: a) an impression that they could establish closer relationships with families, b) were able to gain further insights into how family members interact with each other and c) an impression that there was a greater impact of the blended approach, in particular the in-person sessions on families compared to the online approach. In addition, facilitators explained how the in-person sessions allowed families to

socialise and bond more with other families. Facilitators suggested that this was beneficial because families connected with other families who had similar experiences or who lived closer to each other and could therefore develop stronger relationships with each other. Facilitators also illustrated how the in-person sessions motivated families to leave their house to physically meet other people, which facilitators described as highly beneficial for these families and their mental health. Additionally, facilitators pointed out that in-person session may have made families feel more comfortable with each other, which seemed to have encouraged participants to have more open and explicit discussions about parental mental illness in subsequent sessions.

In this regard, facilitators described how the in-person sessions required less facilitation, as parent/carers seem to take more ownership of the space and how they wanted to make use of the time. Facilitators for instance, noticed that parents/carers in cohort 1 were more cautious around these conversations and waited for facilitators to guide the conversation, whereas parent/carers in cohort 2 interacted more with one another possibly because they had the time and space to get to know each other more in the in-person sessions. Facilitators also described several advantages of the online delivery including online sessions being easier for families to attend, and particularly being easier for children to attend especially when parent/carers were not feeling well or unable to bring their children to the in-person sessions, which is of particular importance considering the known challenges that these families with parental mental illness face.

Facilitators found the online sessions more challenging to deliver than the in-person sessions especially in terms of delivering the content, discussing sensitive topics, and doing drama exercises. For example, facilitators worried that children might feel uncomfortable acting on screen with children who they did not know, and that this may result in a negative experience for children. Additionally, facilitators found it harder to build relationships with family members on screen. However, both facilitators

reported that with time, they felt more confident facilitating the programme online and found effective ways to manage the challenges of the online environment.

Despite most facilitators reporting a preference for in-person sessions, they also acknowledged the benefits of the blended approach. For example, facilitators highlighted that both the in-person and online approach may suit people in different ways, thereby allowing to recruit and serve a broader range of participants. Additionally, facilitators explained how one approach enhanced the experience or potential impact of the other. For example, the online sessions were perceived as improving participants' attendance at the in-person sessions as families seemed to prioritise attendance whereas in person sessions improved engagement and sense of comfort during the online sessions.

Parent/carer's perspectives

Some parent/carers preferred the in-person sessions and described that their children were able to get more attention from facilitators and other group members. Parent/carers described enjoying the in-person sessions because allowed them to leave their house. Additionally, parent/carers found the in-person sessions as more engaging and potentially more beneficial as they engage in more physical activities and being outdoors.

Some parent/carers also reported preferences for the online sessions and explained that they provided children with more freedom to "switch off" and do something else. For instance, parent/carers explained how their children could choose in the sessions which parts to pay attention to, depending on how they were feeling. Furthermore, parent/carers mentioned that they experienced the online sessions as more relaxing than the in-person sessions, as they did not have to continuously supervise their children in a physical space. Parent/carers also explained that the online sessions for parent/carers were easier to attend, as they had to worry less about childcare when they could access the parent/carer sessions from home. However, a few parent/carers also explained how they and their

children found it harder to focus during the online sessions as they could get easily distracted at home.

In conclusion parent/carers described many benefits of having a blended approach, including increased flexibility and accessibility, as well as perceived greater connection and interaction with other families. Some parents shared that they would like the blended approach to include more in-person sessions than online sessions.

Young people's perspectives

Several young people reported that they were more active during in-person sessions and that they enjoyed the physicality of the games. Some young people felt that there were some limitations with respect to playing games during the online sessions. Young people explained that the in-person sessions were beneficial as it allowed them to connect with others and make new friends. In addition, young people described that they enjoyed being out of their houses for some time when they attended the in-person sessions. In summary, some young people appreciated the idea of a blended approach, as it offered them different ways to engage with the group during the workshops.

Conclusion

The blended approach was overall perceived and valued positively, as facilitators and families alike reported benefits of the online as well as in person sessions. In addition, facilitators reflected on how both the online and in person approaches could positively influence one another. Nevertheless, there seemed to be an overall preference for more in person sessions as these were perceived as more enjoyable and offering more opportunities to meet people. Both the facilitators and the families agreed that the social element of KidsTime was very important and that it requires in-person contact.