

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE PARENT-LED SUPPORTIVE PARENTING FOR ANXIOUS CHILDHOOD EMOTIONS (SPACE)



## GROUPS IN PRIMARY CARE.

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### INTRODUCTION

Anxiety disorders are the most common child presentation to primary care services and with rates increasing by possibly up to 50% (Creswell et al., 2020) there is an urgent need for effective interventions.

Efficacious treatments include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and medications, but are insufficient in up to half of cases in clinical trials (Silverman et al., 2008).

Parent-led approaches have a number of advantages in addressing child anxiety and have been shown to be effective (Byrne et al., 2021). Such approaches focus treatment on parent in helping change problematic parent-child dynamics,

Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions (SPACE) is one such treatment and has been shown to be an effective intervention as a one-to-one therapeutic approach (Lebowitz et al., 2022) in not only reducing child anxiety but also family accommodation (FA). FA involves changes that parents make as a means of alleviating the child's anxiety such as providing excessive reassurance and helping the child avoid anxious situations that provide short-term benefits but ultimately maintains anxiety.

No studies to date have looked at the potential of adapting SPACE as an online group for parents attending Primary Care Psychology services. This has the potential to increase the reach of SPACE while also helping parents access such approaches in a timely manner.

#### Research aims:

The current pilot study aimed to examine the acceptability and effectiveness of online Group SPACE as a first-step in the potential roll-out of the program in Primary Care Services and as part of a wider research focus into the group.

### DISCUSSION

This pilot, feasibility study is one of the first studies to examine the effectiveness and acceptability of an online Group SPACE programme in the world.

Parent-led approaches may be particularly useful where child-based interventions are not an appropriate option, for example when children are reluctant to engage in therapy or if developmental concerns preclude child involvement.

The lack of attrition and high attendance rates also suggests that the online Group SPACE programme was acceptable to parents who engaged. Parents particularly liked the focus on what they themselves could do in helping address their child's anxiety.

In line with the study's aims, the programme seemed to target not only child anxiety symptoms but also FA suggesting that parents were able to modify and change their own reactions to child anxiety into something more helpful and adaptive. Findings provide further evidence that specifically targeting FA helps reduce child anxiety and promotes parents' beliefs that they can help their child manage feared situations and events..

#### Limitations

Limitations inherent in pilot, feasibility studies are relevant here and temper the positive findings such as small number of participants, lack of control group, in addition to the study not being randomised. The authors aim to address these shortcomings in further research so as to clarify the effectiveness of SPACE and if the 8 session protocol provides an adequate treatment dosage. Follow-up assessment will also be used to assess maintenance of treatment gains.

### CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

At present the department is conducting a randomised controlled trial (RCT) involving over 80 parents who will be assigned to either Group SPACE online or a waitlist control in order to examine the effectiveness of the group in a more methodologically rigorous manner.. The RCT study also includes supervision from the Developers of SPACE at the Yale Child Study Centre and a qualitative study nested within the RCT is being conducted by a trainee from the Clinical Psychology Doctorate Programme in Trinity College Dublin. The positive findings highlight how the Primary Care Psychology Service can develop and adapt novel and effective interventions that have the potential to reach a large cohort of parents for a very common problem seen in Primary Care services.

### References

Byrne, G., Connon, G., Martin, E., McHugh, S., & Power, L. (2021) Evaluation of a parent-led cognitive behaviour therapy programme in routine clinical practice. A controlled trial. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 60, 486- 503

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### METHOD AND RESULTS

#### Method

**Participants:** This pilot, feasibility study involved six families of children under the of 12 who attended an online SPACE programme. All children presented with heightened levels of anxiety.

**Intervention:** The online SPACE programme comprised of eight-2 hour sessions that ran weekly. The programme aimed to provide parents with a knowledge of child anxiety and an understanding of supportive statements in helping validate the child's anxiety. Crucially, FA's were carefully and deliberately charted. A detailed plan for how to change such accommodations was mapped out and parents were encouraged to implement the accommodation reduction plan. When the first target was reduced a second one was selected and addressed in a similar manner.

#### Outcome Measures:

- The Pediatric Anxiety Rating Scale (PARS)
- The Screen for Childhood Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED)
- Family Accommodation Scale-Anxiety (FASA)

#### Results

All families completed the programme with families attending at least 6 of the 8 sessions. At treatment end, there were significant reductions in scores on the PARS,  $t(5) = 3.31, p < .021$ , the SCARED,  $t(5) = 3.18, < .025$ , and the FASA,  $t(5) = 3.53, p < .017$ . Medium effect sizes were reported ( $d = .6 - .7$ ). Parental feedback also indicated that the programme was helpful in changing their own behaviour, as well as helping their child face feared situations in a manner that increased confidence and the child's sense of self-autonomy.