

Supporting families online: Exploring the experiences of service users and practitioners and the development of a best practice framework for digital social care.

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Gráinne Hickey & Siobhan Greene.

Abstract

Background: Digital technology has become an increasingly prominent feature of healthcare delivery, yet social care has remained less digitised than other systems. The use of digital services to support families, however, accelerated greatly during Covid19 yet there remains much that we need to learn regarding the implementation, appropriateness and acceptability of digital interventions for parents and children. We explore the service user and practitioner experiences of working together online during the pandemic and outline the development of a digital practice framework. This work was conducted in the Republic of Ireland as part of an internal evaluation of online work with families delivered by Barnardos Ireland in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Barnardos Ireland are a children's charity and provide a range of evidence-based interventions for children and parents including one-to-one and group-based supports and services.

Methods: A mixed-methods study combining survey and qualitative research was conducted. In total, 139 parent/adult service users and 102 social care practitioners working in the Republic of Ireland who respectively received and delivered a range of digital social care supports, took part in online surveys. Nineteen focus groups with 106 staff members working directly with children and families were also conducted. The findings informed the development of a best practice framework that includes guidance documents, protocols, and assessment tools to support staff and service users working in an online space.

Results: The service user survey results indicated that majority of participating service users enjoyed engaging in online services, whilst more than half of participating parents identified a blended approach of online and face-to-face meetings as their preferred option for receiving services. Results from the survey and focus groups with practitioners indicated they generally felt confident and comfortable engaging in digital service delivery. Benefits of digital practice included perceived positive impacts on participation rates, ease of access and removal of barriers to engagement. Challenges included lack of access to technology and/or WiFi, inadequate spaces to engage in digital intervention, concerns regarding privacy and safeguarding.

Implications: These findings shed light on both service user and practitioners' experiences of digital social care services during the Covid-19 pandemic. Both benefits and challenges within the delivery of digital social care supports, as well as conflicting findings were identified. The digital practice framework developed by Barnardos Ireland in response to these findings provides guidance and outlines activities to support high quality online service delivery and achieve outcomes in the following areas: session planning guidance; safeguarding and risk assessments; maintaining programme fidelity; delivering online supports; building therapeutic relationships online; and evaluation and reflection following service delivery.