

How Mentalization-Based Therapy for Parents is improving couple communication, reducing parental conflict and increasing child wellbeing

Tavistock Relationships' Mentalization Based Therapy – Parenting Under Pressure (MBT-PP) is a 10 week intervention for parents which is suitable for separated parents or intact couples, either individually or together.

It is one of the eight interventions currently being delivered across four areas of England through the DWP's Reducing Parental Conflict programme. Tavistock Relationships is delivering MBT-PP in the Hertfordshire contract package area of this programme (which covers Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Buckinghamshire and Essex).

MBT-PP helps couples experiencing relationship difficulties and high levels of inter-parental conflict. This approach draws on the original work carried out by Professors Peter Fonagy and Anthony Bateman on mentalization as a way of helping individuals.

MBT-PP supports couples/parents experiencing high levels of inter-parental conflict to:

- Focus on, and think about, not only the feelings and emotions they are experiencing, but those of their children too, learning to modify their behaviour
- appreciate that their partner's thoughts and feelings may be different to their own, and that their partner may have a different perspective than they do, particularly in relation to alcohol/substance abuse
- be curious about possible differences between themselves and their partner, and especially about the reasons why people may behave as they do
- consider each person's involvement in/contribution to the problems of the co-parenting relationship and develop a better appreciation of what their children need
- promote awareness of their own and their partner's mental states/feelings/emotions, with a view to making choices that are in the best interests of children
- practice skills of mentalizing, communication and problem solving, particularly in relation to parenting and choice making around alcohol use.

Mentalization helps couples/parents gain more 'perspective' in order that they can start to put the needs of their children first.

How effective is MBT-PP?

The short answer is 'Very'.

Indeed, an analysis of data collected from parents receiving MBT-PP in the Hertfordshire contract package area of the Reducing Parental Conflict programme (across Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire and Essex) has shown impressive outcomes on a range of adult and child measures.

The measures used are the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation (CORE), which evaluates psychological wellbeing, and the Couple Communication questionnaire (CCQ), which measures couple communication, conflict and violent problem solving. Impact on child wellbeing is gauged directly via parental assessment of their children.

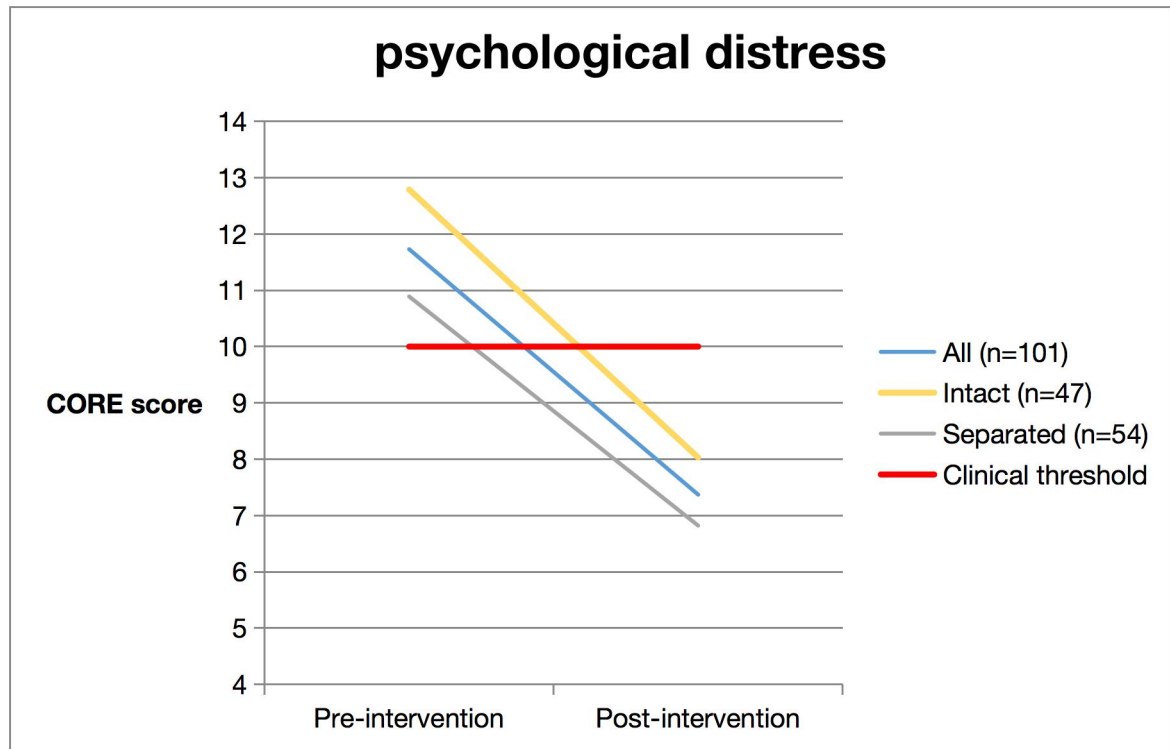
Responses to both the CORE and CQC questionnaires were collected by the practitioners from each parent during the initial assessment session and the last session, in order to measure the CORE and CCQ at pre-intervention and post-intervention.

In total, questionnaires from 290 individuals at pre-intervention and 124 individuals at post-intervention have been collected thus far from parents receiving MBT-PP.

All these parents exhibited intense problems with their partner/co-parent at intake, with a roughly even split between intact and separated couples.

Impact of MBT-PP on psychological distress

Analysis of data on the 101 parents who provided CORE scores before and after the intervention, and whose score before the intervention indicated they were experiencing a clinically significant level of psychological distress, shows a **significant alleviation in parents' psychological distress.**



In addition to these findings, when the CORE scores of the 38 participants who had completed the post-intervention CORE questionnaire - and who showed moderate/severe depression at pre-intervention - were converted to the Beck Depression Inventory scores (a measure used to estimate levels of depression), it was shown that the mental health difficulties of 68% of these parents (n=26) had reduced to minimal/mild. **These results give a strong indication that improving the quality of the parental relationship has a direct impact on parental mental health.** This is a finding which corroborates analysis of data from patients receiving Couple Therapy for Depression through the national Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme.

Impact of MBT-PP on communication and couple conflict

The CCQ measures levels of conflict between parents, levels of violent problem solving, and conflict in co-parenting the children.

Analysis of data shows a **significant reduction in a) conflict between parents in intact relationships and separated relationships, b) violent problem solving for parents in intact relationships and for parents in separated relationships, and c) conflict about the children for parents in intact relationships and for parents in separated relationships.**



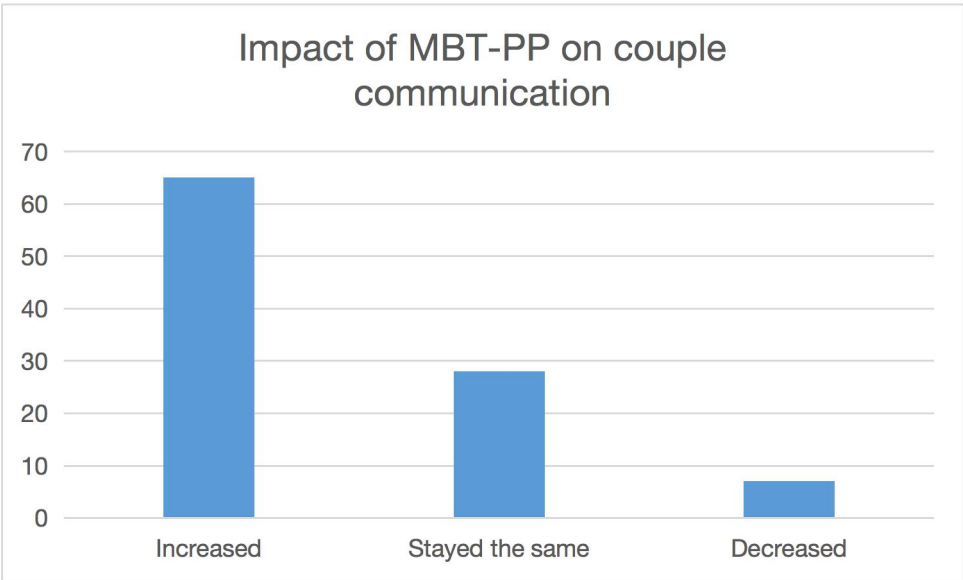
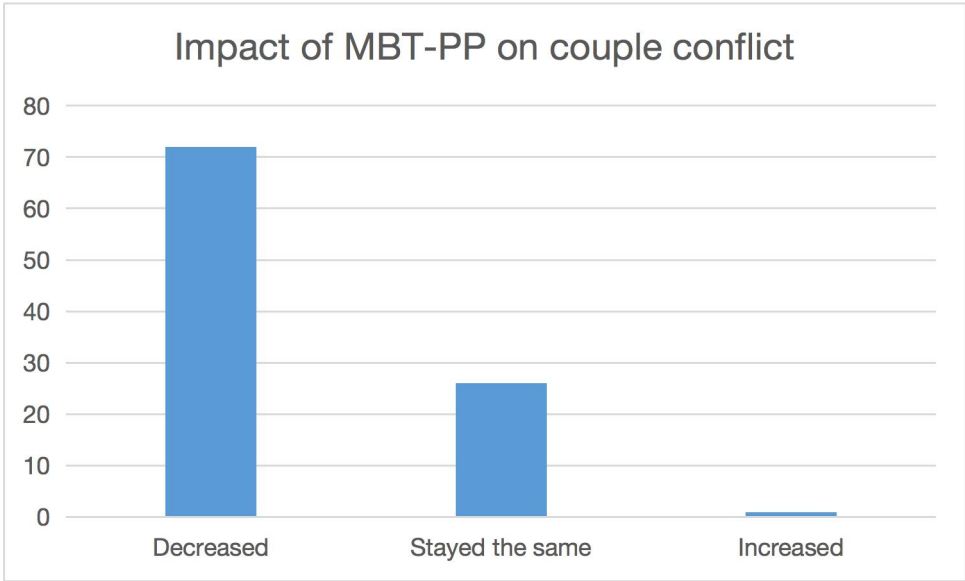
Pre- and post-intervention mean score changes in conflict, violent problem solving, and conflict about the children for parents in intact and separated relationships.

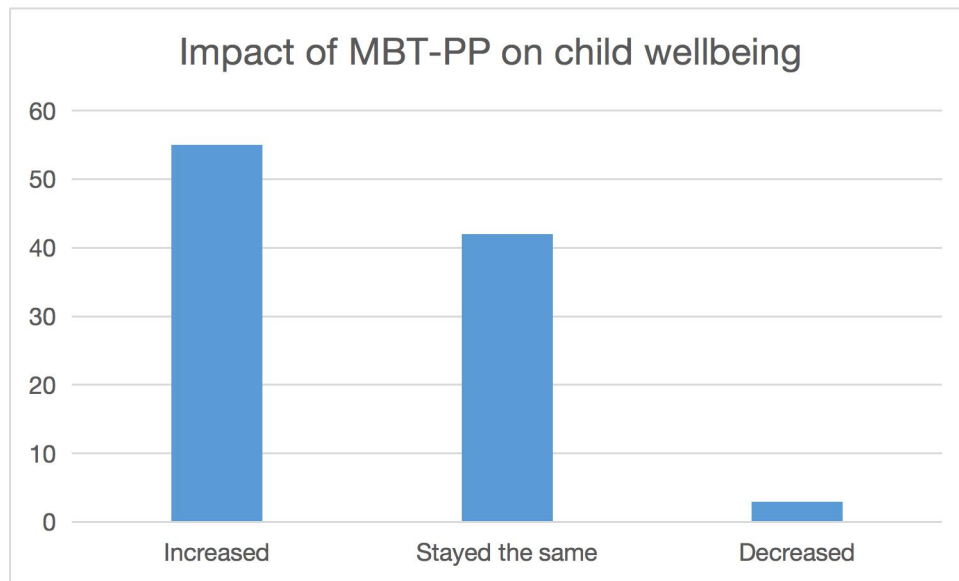
What did the parents feel about the intervention?

In addition to the CORE and CCQ measures, sixty-nine participants responded to the following three questions after completing the MBT-PP intervention:

- a) "Conflict in my couple relationship has decreased/stayed the same/increased"
- b) "Communication with my partner has increased/stayed the same/decreased".
- c) "My child's wellbeing has increased/stayed the same/decreased".

The table below shows the responses to these questions:





These results show that **for over half of the participants, conflict in their relationship has decreased, communication with their co-parent has increased, and their child/children’s wellbeing has improved after the intervention.**

This not only echoes the result of the analysis on the pre- and post-intervention CORE and CCQ, but also shows the effectiveness of the intervention.

How the intervention has helped provide parents with a time to reflect and consider what is in the best interests of their child(ren) - feedback from parents

“I would definitely recommend this programme. It has taught me to realise these triggers before the situation escalates into aggression, irritation and arguments. It has also taught me how to relate to my son to improve our relationship and get the best from my son”.

“The programme is invaluable to any parent going through separation. It is entirely different to anything else out there”.

“A really helpful programme that benefitted me at a time I needed support without judgement. I would definitely recommend it to other parents.”

“Learning to take a step back and really think what’s best for my child.”

“Helping me to think about how to we behaviour, things we need to do more together to come to a good conclusion. To get the best for our children. Sticking together as parents so children see consistency.

“Thank you so much. Our therapist was amazing and I truly believe this saved our relationship and improved our parenting. We are now working as a team and the whole family has felt the benefits.”

“How to manage my emotions and communicating with my child. Managing conflict with my ex-partner.”

“It’s difficult making the transition from a separation when children are involved. This programme allows you to confront issues that parents may overlook. It allows you to grasp the difficulties and challenges from all points of view and put into action the strategies that work best for everyone!”

Policy context and expansion

The stated ambition of the Government’s Reducing Parental Conflict programme is to ‘build an evidence base by testing 8 face-to-face interventions to reduce parental conflict in 4 local areas across England (31 local authorities in total)’.

This briefing presents initial evidence of the effectiveness of one of these interventions, Mentalization-Based Therapy for Parents.

We believe that, given the effectiveness of the programme and this particular intervention so far, the Government should commit funding to the Reducing Parental Conflict pilot programme in order that this work can be expanded, and provision extended to families across the country.