

Bonding with Bumps: Evaluation of a Relationship Focused Antenatal Intervention

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Mellow Parenting is a charity which researches, develops and evaluates parenting interventions for vulnerable and hard to reach parents. These interventions are then rolled out, nationally and internationally, through training sessions delivered by Mellow Parenting trainers. To find out more about Mellow Parenting visit www.mellowparenting.org.

Mellow Bumps

Mellow Bumps is an attachment based antenatal programme. It aims to reduce antenatal stress and help the mother-to-be get to know her baby even before birth. There is a focus on self-care and stress management during pregnancy, as antenatal stress can have a large impact not just on the mother-to-be's wellbeing but also on the future outcomes of her unborn baby (Talge et al, 2007; O'Connor et al, 2002). The aim is also to help the mother-to-be communicate and interact in a warm, loving manner with her baby. This maternal attunement can help the baby to develop secure attachments, become resilient to life stressors and gain strong cognitive skills later in life (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005; Caspi et al, 2006).

Mellow Bumps is aimed specifically at vulnerable mothers-to-be. These mothers-to-be often do not engage with conventional antenatal provision as they are both hard to reach and difficult to engage. They are however, often very much in need of these services. Typical factors which can lead to a need for such targeted intervention include child protection issues, low socio-economic status, lack of social support, alcohol and substance misuse, gender based violence, homelessness, low education and mental health issues. Mellow Bumps has been developed to provide specific support to these mothers-to-be to help them for successful, loving relationships with their children.

Group Process

Mellow Bumps is run over six weeks for two hours each week.

There are four key components:

- ✎ Mother focused activities which help the mother-to-be to manage stress, anxiety and self care
- ✎ Baby focused activities which help the mother-to-be bond with her unborn baby and help her to recognise his/her socio-emotional development. This includes looking at the ways babies are born ready to communicate
- ✎ Relaxation which helps to decrease stress and anxiety during pregnancy and also provides skills which the mother-to-be can continue to use
- ✎ Have-a-go activities which act as a link inbetween groups and allows mothers-to-be to put their new skills into practice at home

Mellow Bumps works by building up a safe and trusting atmosphere with the group members. The group is non-didactic. Instead of just giving the mothers-to-be new information the facilitators use a variety of techniques and activities to help the mothers-to-be discover this information for themselves.

Methodology

This pilot study assessed changes in maternal wellbeing over the course of the antenatal intervention. Nineteen mothers were included in the study. The Adult Wellbeing Scale from the Department of Health (Snaith et al, 1978) was used as the primary outcome measure. This scale has four subscales: depression, anxiety, outwardly-directed irritability and inwardly-directed irritability. Mothers-to-be were asked to complete this scale before and after the group to gain a measure of change over the six weeks. Routine birth data was also collected. This included information about gestational age, birth complications and weight at birth, all indicators of a healthy pregnancy. Finally, the mothers-to-be were followed up to see if they had engaged with any further services.

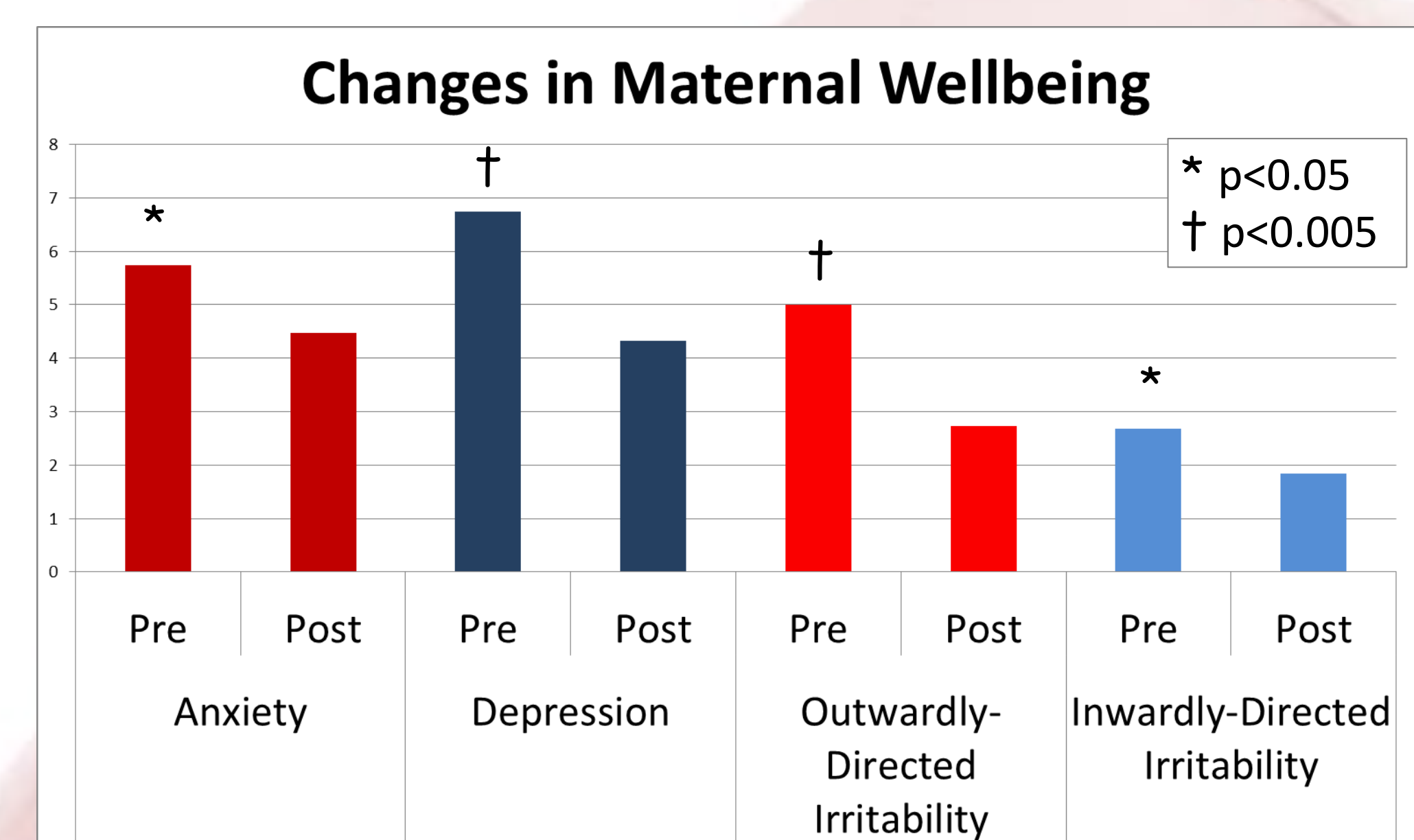
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Results

There were significant differences in depression ($p < .05$, $d = .65$), anxiety ($p < .005$, $d = .92$), outwardly directed irritability ($p < .005$, $d = .96$) and inwardly directed irritability ($p < .05$, $d = .55$) subscales of the Adult Wellbeing Scale.

The study also found that gestational age averaged at 38.8 weeks (SD=1.79 weeks) and birth weight, uncorrected for gender, averaged at 6.61 pounds (SD=0.79 pounds). The pilot also found that all of the mothers followed up had engaged with further postnatal services.



Discussion

The results showed that there was a significant improvement in all four subscales used to assess maternal wellbeing after the Mellow Bumps programme. This suggests that an attachment based antenatal intervention such as Mellow Bumps can have a positive impact on a mother-to-be's emotional wellbeing. Specifically, there is the potential to improve levels of anxiety, depression, outwardly-directed irritability and inwardly-directed irritability. The larger difference found in maternal depression, as compared to maternal anxiety, was noteworthy as literature has shown maternal anxiety to be a strong predictor of later child outcomes (O'Connor et al, 2002).

In terms of physical outcomes, the birth data showed that the Mellow Bumps participants had all reached at least close to full term and none of the babies were classed as having a low birth weight, both positive indicators of a successful pregnancy.

Follow up for engagement with further services was difficult due to the diverse mix of voluntary and statutory agencies involved and their differing referral pathways. However, all mothers who were successfully followed up had started attending at least one further postnatal service. Given that the intervention sought to help hard to reach mothers this is a very positive find as further engagement opens up avenues of ongoing support for both the mother and the child.

Conclusion

The data from this pilot is, due to the nature of its sample size, limited and further research is needed. However, the data does show promising evidence that Mellow Bumps, as an antenatal intervention focused on relationships, infant mental health and stress management, can have a positive effect on maternal wellbeing including factors which have been strongly associated with later parent-child relationships.

Research is currently underway to evaluate the effectiveness of Mellow Bumps against other antenatal programmes in two randomised controlled trials. Mellow Bumps is currently being rolled out in teenage pregnancy units across Scotland.

