

# MINDFUL *compassionate* PARENTING

## Concept Paper Engaging Hard to Reach Parents on the MCP Programme

June 2023

*Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.*



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

# Content

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Context / Rationale</b>	<b>4</b>
What is meant by 'Hard to Reach' Parents	4
<b>Why is Mindful Compassionate Parenting Important</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Possible barriers to accessing MCP for 'Hard to Reach' Parents</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Considerations in mitigating barriers for participation of 'Hard to Reach Parents' in MCP Programme</b>	<b>7</b>
More practical considerations to be aware of	8
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>10</b>

# Introduction

This concept paper has been developed in the framework of the Erasmus+ funded project “MCP goes Europe” that lasted from January 2022 to June 2023.

The fundamental aim of the project was to spread the parents’ program “Mindful Compassionate Parenting” as widely as possible across Europe, building on the success in Germany where it was initiated and where it is well established. The partner organisations behind this project are:

- **WeMIND eV** from Germany, the association founded by Jörg Mangold, the person who has developed this program.
- **LIMINA** from Austria, with Paola Bortini and Peter Hofmann, two early followers and teachers of the program and initiators of the “MCP goes Europe” project.
- **Casa del Cuculo** from Italy, with Sara Galeotti following a strong desire to make the MCP program known in Italy.
- **Leitrim Childcare Committee** from Ireland, with Tommy Lavalle having a strong interest to combine MCP with other offers and programs they provide for parents locally and regionally.

The project in these 18 months focused on setting the foundations for what eventually should become an European network for and around Mindful Compassionate Parenting. The most important documents – the guide for teachers facilitating MCP and the parents handbook – were translated into English and Italian. Building on it a first pathway for training new MCP teachers had been implemented. **Altogether 20 professionals from 13 different European countries have been trained to act as teachers facilitating the MCP program for parents.** The first courses for parents in Polish, Slovenia and Spanish language have already taken place.

Now at the end of this first phase the four partners behind the project have reflected what has been achieved including proposals around the engagement of parents and guardians who are generally harder to reach with parent education courses and how this learning can be transformed into approaches that can be used by organisations and MCP Teachers to engage with this cohort of people. These reflections you can find in this Concept Paper.

If you want to contact us to know more about the Mindful Compassionate Parenting Programme please visit our website: [www.mindfulcompassionateparenting.org](http://www.mindfulcompassionateparenting.org) or email us at: [contact@mindfulcompassionateparenting.org](mailto:contact@mindfulcompassionateparenting.org)

# Context / Rationale:

## What is Meant by 'Hard-to-Reach' Parents?

The phrase 'hard to reach' parents is often used to describe parents who do not or cannot engage or access services that support their specific role as parents within a family structure. It is important that attaching description to any part of the parenting community does not, in and of itself, pathologise this cohort of parents as being 'difficult', 'obstructive', or 'indifferent'—the kind of behaviour 'hard to reach' sometimes implies. The rationale for using the term in its most useful sense is to create focus and reflection about how parenting supports are offered by those who provide them for the purpose of identifying and adapting services and programmes to become as universally accessible as possible. So in the context of this concept paper and engagement of parents in the MCP Parenting Programme we use the term 'hard to reach' parents as a way to demonstrate an emphasis on considering what barriers might prevent any parents who may experience multiple barriers to engaging in the programme itself and some proposals on how to help parents overcome these barriers.

In the context of the MCP goes Europe project this concept paper briefly elaborates on the challenges experienced by 'hard to reach' parents in engaging with parenting programmes in general and proposes overall considerations about how to engage 'hard to reach parents' in the Mindful Compassionate Parenting Programme into the future.

Existing knowledge on Parental engagement with parenting programmes tells us that Parenting is influenced by a broad range of factors, including parents' own experiences, knowledge, expectations, social context and cultural beliefs. Compared to previous generations, parenting is also increasingly seen as an intensive undertaking with more parents playing an active role in their children's lives. Key challenges parents today include feelings of uncertainty, balancing work and parenting, navigating family transitions, managing complex needs and coping with children's educational, developmental and wellbeing needs.

Among 'hard to reach parents' additional challenges exist including, difficulties accessing timely and streamlined support. Informal networks and peer-support are the most commonly reported sources of support. Online sources of support and advice (websites, social media) were also frequently used, but are often seen as unhelpful or confusing. Most 'hard to reach parents' who have engaged in parenting programmes report having learned new skills, gaining knowledge, and experiencing solidarity through meeting other parents.

# Why is Mindful Compassionate Parenting important?

To say that parenting isn't easy is an understatement. Parenting can be challenging. At worst, it can be intensely triggering. Becoming a parent is a major change in a person's life. Few other events have the power to completely upend your priorities, schedule, emotions, and well-being. Very few of us, if any of us are really prepared for a change of that magnitude or what it will bring up. And if we thought our lives were busy before, well now just add the situation that children are pretty much *born* busy. But once we become parents, busyness often becomes suffocating. Children bring a constant onslaught of demands. Raising them often feels like a never ending chase, with no clear guide as to whether or not we're doing it right — we tend to internalise that uncertainty as failure. Actually, it's worse than failure — can be downright painful. In several studies on uncertainty, failure, and pain, researchers found that people are more afraid of uncertainty than we are of loss, a negative outcome, or pain. In one experiment, participants who were unsure if they would receive a painful shock were significantly more stressed than those who knew that the shock was coming. Raising children can sometimes feel like an extended period of waiting for that shock.

So with all of that in mind the Mindful Compassionate Parenting Programme was developed by Jorg Mangold, a German Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, family therapist, mindfulness teacher and father of four. The objectives of the MCP Programme aimed at way supporting Parents through introducing them to firstly the idea that Parenting doesn't have to be so stressful, that there are fundamental evolutionary reasons why our brains default to certain instructions as to how we behave and also that developing a culture of self compassion can be so helpful to parents as a way in reducing the level of punishment and guilt they feel about their 'parenting' relationship with their children. Woven throughout the programme content are concepts and time to link all of this to help parents develop their own practice of Mindfulness.

Some of the tangible benefits for parents who engage with the programme could be:

- To increase mindfulness in the parent-child relationship
- To be more understanding towards your children and your partner
- To meet yourself and the children with more acceptance and compassion
- To develop a stronger bond with your children
- To trust your own heart
- To cope better with stressful situations and thus reduce general stress
- To reduce problems of parents and children at the behavioural and emotional level
- To cultivate happiness and be in touch with you heart
- To build inner resources from your positive experiences

It is important to note also that in real terms, amongst other developments in the MCP Programme, in 2019 the MCP programme itself was certified as a stress prevention course in Germany and can now be subsidised for Parents by their health insurance in this jurisdiction.

## Possible barriers to accessing MCP for ‘Hard to Reach’ Parents

One of the most significant barriers for the ‘hard to reach parent cohort’ is how they potentially arrive ‘to the doorstep’ of engagement with MCP. How have parents become aware of the programme? Have they ‘self referred’ or is there any suggestion or evidence that in some way they have been referred by someone else, a family support programme etc. Is there a suggestion that parents have felt mandated or ‘pressured’ to attend? Families generally considered ‘hard to reach’ (e.g., low income, adolescent parent) but without obvious existing problems may not perceive a need for preventive services and may engage but not participate. Families mandated or referred from another family support service historically have been considered to be at even greater risk for non participation because they are not self-referred and may not self-identify parenting problems they believe warrant changes. Families also may be burdened with numerous stressors, including resource limitations, which make participation difficult. Physical access is also a key barrier to engagement for this cohort also, the very reasonable ‘nothing is near to me’ argument.

There will be more elaboration on how to mitigate against such barriers in the next section but before that a simple consideration of the following statement should be overarching for those considering MCP as an option for the ‘hard to reach’ parent cohort whether you are an MCP teacher, Family Support Work etc. And this statement is:

***‘Mindfulness is for everybody but not everybody is for Mindfulness’***

When considering the statement it is also important to be fully aware that MCP Parenting Programme is **not** a treatment or counselling programme and should be presented to parents as a focus on their existing space, time, attitude, ideas that if matched could be beneficial to their own individual well being.

# Considerations in mitigating barriers for participation of 'Hard to Reach Parents' in MCP Programme

In considering the engagement of 'hard to reach parents' on the MCP programme it should be recognised that it may be very difficult to identify 'predictors' of whether parents from this cohort will actually engage at all. However there is emerging research on the effectiveness of engagement enhancement strategies for parental engagement. Additional considerations could be considered during the 'pre enrolment' phase of engagement on the MCP programme including for example, a brief orientation meeting with individual parents / guardians and MCP teachers, also consideration of more practical solutions (e.g., providing transportation) and psychological (e.g., addressing potential perceptions about the programme content, its overall objective and perceived expected 'results) in nature, could increase parental attendance during early stages of engagement.

MCP Teachers of course may have their own theoretical 'framework' to work from in terms of how to engage Parents on the MCP programme including Parents from the 'hard to reach' cohort. If this is not the case then one of many 'models' that MCP teachers could become familiar with is the **The Health Belief Model**, ([Rosenstock, 1974](#)). This model was proposed to explain and predict health-related behaviours, such as attending health care appointments. This model focuses on the attitudes and beliefs of individuals; for instance, if a parent has increased awareness of their child's susceptibility to developing a mental health problem, they may be more likely to engage in a preventive parenting program. Therefore, it appears there are additional strategies researchers can utilise during the initial engagement stage of a study to increase parental engagement across subsequent stages. Engagement enhancement strategies are defined in the current review as any methodology that looks to use evidence- or theoretically-based strategies to increase parental engagement.

An important first step for those considering trying to reach parents to engage with the MCP Parenting Programme is to think about what level of awareness exists about the culture and perception of Mindfulness in general. What role, if any, can we play in developing and fostering a culture of Mindfulness within the community of people we are working with but also those who we hope to work with in the future. This is connected to but also in tandem with the MCP Programme overall and is a key challenge in engaging the 'hard to reach' parenting community - there may be a very low level of awareness and of the value of Mindfulness in general. Therefore tailoring the promotion and value of Mindfulness, including self needs to be cognisant of the country and 'cultural' context with MCP being a part of that as a wider representation of developing cultural engagement with Mindfulness.

More practical considerations to be aware of could also include:

**Voluntary Participation** - it is vitally important that Parents have complete autonomy with regards to how they engage and participate in the MCP Programme. While course content has a structure and content it is important to understand that the individual experience and indeed potential outcomes for Parents will vary, however engagement and participation has a much greater chance of success for parents themselves if it is rooted in their own personal decision to take part or not. Linked to this is the necessity to raise awareness that the MCP Parenting Programme has its roots in supporting parents to develop their own Mindfulness practice which could be construed as being much different to a more 'traditional' parent education programme.

**Promotional Outreach about MCP Parents Programme Availability** - this seems obvious that parents can only consider engaging if they are aware of when and where and how the programme takes place. The MCP Programme has evolved in terms of accessibility in its offer to be hosted and facilitated in the 'in person' and 'online' environments. So there is that flexibility. However further consideration needs to be given to what outreach can be managed in relation to engaging general family support personnel (in the widest understanding of all professionals who provide support to children and families) in agency / organisational structures towards their promotion of MCP in terms of parenting support with a possibility of programme adaptation. The MCP Parents Programme can have various time incentive 'offers' more than just the existing full MCP Parents programme which overall is designed to be facilitated periodically over 10 weeks. Family support personnel are key actors in having information as to what might work with the 'hard to reach' parent cohort in terms of what can accommodate parents engagement in terms of first MCP 'steps' - such as 'teaser' options etc.

A crucial relationship in this regard is the development of linkages between qualified MCP teachers and relevant existing Parenting Support agencies / organisations including Public Health professionals / roles, this requires that MCP Teachers become aware of and educated about the wider 'picture' of family supports beyond the field of Mindfulness at a very practical local level to the context and environment in which they hope to facilitate the MCP programme directly with parents. Other than parents themselves there possibly are no great champions for MCP promotion then personnel who have a deep understanding of what the programme is about and have seen the benefits in the context of their own work with parents.

**Financial Support for Parents** - Is it possible to consider how to organise the provision of free to access / subsidised places on MCP Parents Programme for the 'hard to reach' parents cohort. Could existing MCP Teachers who are already in an organisational role incorporate MCP delivery as part of their 'salaried' work thus potentially reduce the cost of MCP Programme facilitation that can reduce or eliminate the cost to at least some parents who could not participate otherwise. Is it possible to initiate discussions with existing Family Support agencies / organisations about 'sponsoring' either full course facilitation for a cohort of parents or at least discreetly sponsor spaces for identified parents who are



ready and willing to engage and whose only barrier is the finance required. Already mentioned at the beginning of this paper is the example in Germany where MCP Parent Programme is accredited for subsidy with parents health insurance provision therefore limiting the financial impact on their participation with the recognition of its health benefits. Examples of this also exist in Vienna, Austria. This demonstrates a willingness to discuss how financial barriers can be removed for parents who want to participate in the programme and the programme's credibility in terms of value placed on it by relevant authorities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is quite clear that there is further development required in exploring the concept of how to engage with 'hard to reach' parents through the MCP Programme. However it is hoped that some of the content in this paper will provide some valuable reflection and 'food for thought' for those that are connected with the MCP Programme and also those that is hoped that the programme will connect with into the future. Not covered in detail here but certainly a question for future consideration will be to explore whether there is another cohort of what might be deemed to be 'hard to reach' parents cohort in that those that might be ready and willing but regardless of flexibility, cannot engage. Identifying and harvesting feedback on reasons for this could help in informing part of the development of MCP into the future.

## References

Rosenstock (1974) Rosenstock IM. Historical origins of the health belief model. *Health Education Monographs*. 1974;2:328–335.