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Evaluation of the Separated Parent Information Programme Plus (SPIP Plus) Pilot

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Summary

Context

- The Separated Parents Information Programme Plus (SPIP Plus) is a pilot programme for parents involved in litigation over residence and contact following parental separation or divorce. The SPIP Plus programme aims to assist parents to reach child-focused arrangements and to establish effective communication patterns. It consists of four elements:

    1. the Separated Parenting Information Programme (SPIP) which is a four-hour group session with former couples attending different groups. The SPIP is a revised version of an earlier group education programme called the Parenting Information Programme (PIP).
    2. an online programme *Getting it Right for the Children* (GIRFC)
    3. a Plus session with both parents meeting together with a facilitator
    4. a Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting (MIAM)

- The SPIP, GIRFC and MIAM are already available as referral options for the family courts outside of the SPIP Plus pilot. The SPIP Plus pilot itself has two distinctive features. First is the inclusion of the 'Plus' session where the two parents are brought together to practice skills introduced in the group SPIP and online programme. The second distinctive feature of the pilot is the packaging of the four elements as a distinctive pathway rather than as discrete interventions. The rationale for the pilot was the evaluation of the earlier PIP group programme (Trinder et al 2011) that found that parents and professionals liked the programme but it had limited impact on parental behaviour. SPIP Plus was designed to address some of the weaknesses of PIP.

- Parents who attend SPIP Plus are referred by the court. The programme is administered by Cafcass and the individual elements delivered by contracted mediation and contact centre services.

Research design

- The overall aim of the evaluation was to identify whether the revised SPIP was more effective than the original PIP intervention evaluated in 2011. As not all parents who were referred to SPIP Plus progressed beyond the group SPIP stage, the evaluation also sought to identify whether the full multi-element SPIP Plus programme was more effective than the SPIP group intervention alone. The research design involved the following elements (and see Appendix 1 for the methodology) –

1. *A telephone survey of SPIP parents (including attenders and non-attenders of the Plus element)* to measure the impact on separating and separated families of SPIP (either with or without the Plus element) versus PIP alone or non-PIP court routes. For the latter two groups we used the data collected previously for the 2011 PIP evaluation.
2. *Qualitative telephone interviews with SPIP Plus parents* for in depth exploration and understanding of the SPIP Plus experience
3. *Focus groups with SPIP deliverers* to explore perceptions of the issues and challenges and possible added value of SPIP Plus meeting

The impact of SPIP Plus

- The quantitative outcome data suggests SPIP was modestly successful. SPIP resulted in more cases being closed with arrangements in place and, especially where parents attended the whole SPIP Plus programme, more children having more contact. Parents were more likely to feel that their child was happy with arrangements.
- But there was little, if any, impact on the parental relationship outcomes that the programme was designed to target. The only exception was that parents reported that the other partner was more likely to stick to agreements.

The qualitative experience of the programme as a whole

- The qualitative interviews suggested the parent experience of SPIP Plus was diverse, with some parents achieving significant change, some parents taking away some learning points and other parents finding the programme irrelevant.
- In broad terms, the group session was useful in raising awareness, whilst the joint Plus session could be useful in re-establishing communication for some parents.
- The progress parents made within and after the SPIP programme was linked to their ability and willingness to engage with the aims and skills of the programme and their preparedness to apply them in practice. Building some trust in the other parent and mutual reliability was key for maintaining the progress.
- It is difficult to isolate which cases were most likely to benefit from the programme. People who were in a very entrenched conflict found the programme less useful although there were examples where those cases could make significant progress.
- Going back to court was not necessarily seen as a negative. Parents often appreciated the clarity and enforceability of private or mediated arrangements confirmed by court orders. Similarly, arrangements agreed or ordered at court, instead of mediation, could also result in very positive outcomes.

Referral and take up

- There were problems with briefing parents about the programme and ensuring compliance with the full programme. Only four out of ten cases in which parents attended the SPIP group sessions went on to complete the joint Plus session and MIAM.
- Parents' reactions to being referred to SPIP Plus were diverse – from those who were positive about attending, to others who did not feel it was necessary or desirable.
- Many parents were not aware that they would have to attend a joint session with their ex partner until they had started the programme. For some parents, having to attend a joint meeting was a source of anger or concern.

The SPIP group sessions

- The group sessions were generally viewed positively by parents. They valued the focus on children's needs, sharing experiences with others, and the focus on communication skills.
- The main shortcomings identified by parents were a lack of relevance to their individual situation or the content being too basic.

Getting it Right for Children (GIRFC)

- The programme design included an online programme for parents to develop skills introduced in the group sessions.
- Only three-quarters of parents reported being told about the online programme and just under half of Plus attendees accessed the programme.
- Those parents who did use the programme were positive, with 67% finding it useful and 48% relevant.

The Plus session

- The Plus session, where the two parents were brought together to work on their communication, generated a very mixed response from parents and providers.
- Some providers thought that it was transformative for parents; others felt it was unnecessary and even patronising. Some providers were also uncertain about the objectives of the Plus session.
- Parents were equally polarised. Just under half of parents who had attended a Plus session found it helpful.
- The Plus session appeared most helpful for those parents who were struggling to establish or maintain any communication. It appeared least effective for those already communicating well and those in very entrenched conflict.

Case progression and negotiation methods

- One aim of the programme was to encourage more parents to mediate rather than return to court and therefore the programme included a MIAM.
- Parents were deeply divided in their reactions to mediation, spanning those who were very keen to try and those who were resistant.
- Only a quarter of parents attending the Plus session did go on to mediate afterwards. However, that is a significantly higher proportion than for those attending SPIP alone.
- The reluctance to mediate was attributed to perceptions of the cost, uncertainty and lack of enforceability of mediated agreements.

Cases involving safeguarding issues

- Only cases with no safeguarding issues were suitable for SPIP Plus. But pre-referral risk screening was not consistent or adequate as a high percentage of SPIP Plus parents reported current safety concerns.
- Screening for risk by SPIP providers also appeared to be rudimentary and reactive and, often, insufficient for both the SPIP group session and the Plus meeting.
- Some of the safeguarding cases managed to make progress but it was sometimes at the expense of going through traumatic joint sessions.

Recommendations: enhancing the effectiveness of SPIP Plus

- The constituent elements and overall sequence of SPIP Plus should continue to be developed and tested to maximise its relevance and effectiveness.
- SPIP Plus should be made more widely available as a court-based Contact Activity in suitable cases.
- A range of information materials should be developed for parents and professionals that set out the aims and stages of SPIP Plus in a brief but clear fashion.
- More rigorous and consistent initial screening, using clearer criteria and procedures, is necessary on the part of Cafcass and judicial officers.
- Providers must utilise a rigorous and consistent screening tool in each case and refer cases back to court where safeguarding issues arise. There should be clear and consistent guidelines in place for all staff that have any contact with the parties. All staff should be trained to follow these guidelines. Administrative staff should not be responsible for final decisions on screening.
- The script for the Plus meeting should be developed so that providers are able to choose from an appropriate script or package to suit the existing level or type of communication in the particular case, i.e. an ‘icebreaker’ script where there has been no communication and a more advanced level script where parties can communicate.

- More extensive training, including access to online or video resources, should be available for providers before they run Plus sessions. The training should include case assessment to enable providers to select the appropriate approach to the Plus.
- The parties should not be required to attend a further MIAM where (a) they have previously attended mediation or (b) attended a MIAM in the current proceedings, if one or both parties indicates opposition to mediation during the Plus meeting.
- Rather than as a single programme applied to all cases, it is worth considering whether the four constituent elements of groupwork, online programme, joint Plus meeting and MIAM should be viewed as a menu of options that could be selected to provide a tailored package for the individual case. Responsibility for recommending an appropriate package might be best placed with Cafcass.
- Whether a standard SPIP Plus or a tailored package is devised, there is a need for a more effective mechanism to ensure that parties attend each phase of a programme to reduce attrition and delay. Consideration should be given to appointing a case manager who would facilitate and monitor the progress of the case through each stage of the process.
- Consideration should be given to how SPIP Plus can be made available outside of the court process, including access to a freestanding Plus session. That debate will need to address when and how non-litigating cases would access the intervention, screening, how to engage the second (non-initiating) parent without the authority of the court, who would case manage and, crucially, who would pay for the service.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Context

Over the last decade a range of interventions to support parents to work together post-separation have been developed overseas. These have included a range of parent education programmes designed to facilitate safe contact (Hunt 2005). These types of intervention were rather slow to develop in England and Wales until the Children and Adoption Act 2006 enabled family courts to refer litigating parents to a new 'Contact Activity' to support child contact with the non-resident parent. The Parenting Information Programme (PIP) was subsequently developed as a contact activity to support litigating parents to focus on the needs of their child. It aimed to help parents improve the relationship they had with their ex-partner so that they could reach and implement an amicable agreement on contact arrangements for their children. The evaluation of the PIP programme (Trinder et al 2011) found that whilst the programme was rated highly by both parents and professionals it had limited impact on parental behaviour and case outcomes, including take up of mediation. The evaluation team concluded that the intervention had promise but recommended that a revised and extended version of the programme should be developed and tested.

Subsequently, the Final Report of the Family Justice Review (Family Justice Review Panel 2011) recommended that PIP continue to be developed, including the possibility of being made available outside of the court process in conjunction with mediation. The government endorsed the FJR's recommendations, including a commitment to considering how to make such programmes available to parents as part of pre-court dispute resolution processes, but retaining the use of PIP within court proceedings where appropriate (Ministry of Justice and Department for Education 2012).

In anticipation of those recommendations Cafcass, in conjunction with the Department for Education, established a pilot of an extended version of the programme, now called SPIP Plus. The original evaluation team were invited to evaluate the revised pilot intervention using the original PIP sample to provide a comparison group. This report presents the findings from that evaluation.

1.2 The intervention: SPIP Plus

The overall programme

The SPIP Plus pilot was a court-referred programme, available only to parents involved in court proceedings about parenting arrangements post-separation in four pilot areas. The programme included four elements or stages: a four-hour group programme where former couples attended different groups, an online programme (Getting it Right for the Children), a scripted 'Plus' session attended by both parents together, followed by a

mediation information and assessment meeting (or MIAM). The parents could then proceed to mediation to negotiate an agreement, make their own arrangements or return to court.

The focus of the programme was to assist parents to make their own agreements but with the child's needs in mind. An explanatory leaflet for parents set out the aims as follows:

"SPIP Plus is designed to help parents who, the court believes, are able to reach their own agreement about their children but may benefit from additional help.
After completing the SPIP you and the other parent will meet with a SPIP facilitator to review and plan:

- *what the impact of the SPIP has been for each of you*
- *what communication strategies you have and can develop*
- *how you might start making your own Parenting Agreement*
- *how to keep focused on your child's needs*
- *what next steps need to be put into place to help this process.*

It is a chance for you to listen and talk to each other, with the child's needs in clear focus".

The revised SPIP group session

The first element of the SPIP Plus programme was a four-hour group session. Groups typically included between four and eight members. Former couples did not attend the same sessions. However, if at all possible, each group included a mix of both resident and non-resident parents. The groups were usually facilitated by two trained providers from the designated centres. Some centres ran the groups as two separate two-hour sessions, while others ran them on the same day, with a break for lunch.

The aims and content of the group sessions delivered as part of the SPIPs Plus pilot had been revised substantially from the original PIP that was evaluated in 2011. That research found that the aims and content of the original PIP course were diffuse and unclear. The revised programme had clearer aims, i.e. to help parents to: "become clear what their children need most from them, as children of separated parents and, as part of this, to help them to learn the fundamental principles of how to manage conflict and difficulties between themselves and their ex-partners including applying these principles by planning and imagining positive management behaviours." (SPIP Trainers' Manual, 2012). The programme itself was renamed from 'Parenting Information Programme' (PIP) to 'Separated Parents' Information Programme' to indicate that, rather than general knowledge about parenting, its purpose was to address issues of separated parenting.

The most significant change, however, was a greater focus on developing skills in conflict management for separated parents in order to minimise the impact of parental conflict on children, while increasing parents' understanding of the children's perspective and needs. The revised SPIP programme introduced a set of basic skills for managing conflict

between them. Those skills introduced in the group session were then developed further in both the online programme and the Plus session. The core skills were:

- *Staying Calm*: self-regulation to prevent/reduce conflict, stress levels, listen and respond when communicating
- *Learning to Listen*: for 'active' constructive listening
- *Being Clear, Sticking to the Point, Sticking to the Rules, and Speaking for Yourself*: communication and conflict management skills; principles and techniques for responding in a non-confrontational way.

The intention was that the group session would function as an introductory stage in learning these skills. The online programme and Plus session were intended to embed and expand upon the skills as a prelude to parents reaching and implementing an agreement.

Getting it Right for the Children online programme

As Paul Amato said succinctly, "Inter-parental conflict is a direct stressor for children, and it can also interfere with their attachments to parents, resulting in feelings of emotional insecurity" (Amato 2005). Getting it Right for the Children is an online programme designed to help separated parents understand the importance of managing conflict, to develop skills to enable them to manage conflict and potentially to collaborate for the sake of their children. The programme is based on principles of Behavioural Modelling Training (BMT) (Bandura 1977), which is based on social learning theory. The key elements of BMT are: attention – "I get it"; retention - "It sticks"; rehearsal – "I'm practising"; transfer – "I am applying it to new situations"; and motivation – "I can change, things will improve." Its design for embedding learning is as follows: describe a set of skills to be learned; model displaying effective use of behaviours; give opportunities to practise those behaviours; get feedback and social reinforcement following practice; find ways to transfer the behaviours. It is most effective when taught through showing contrasting ineffective and effective behaviours**.** Learners unlearn ineffective responses and learn effective, through practice scenarios and with social reinforcement from peer learners, and through learners setting goals for themselves.

The online Getting it Right for the Children programme follows these principles. It uses filmed scripted scenes of five different families in commonly occurring scenarios for separated parents and children. The scenes focus on the child in the midst of potentially conflictual parental interactions. The scenarios start by showing the parents interacting ineffectively – conflictually - and then a different section shows the same situation with them interacting effectively - non-conflictually. After the 'ineffective' and the 'effective interactions' have been shown, each character (the two parents and the child) reflects on their feelings and intentions, and the impact of their and the others' behaviour. In this way the learner can develop insight into why certain behaviours are ineffective and others

effective, both in terms of how the behaviours affect their children and how they enable them to reach their goals.

The programme seeks to progressively build effective skills, from the most basic, which are the ones taught in the SPIP group session, to more complex ones, which are the ones necessary for more collaborative behaviour. There is an online forum option and also sections in which parents can reflect and apply the content to their own situations by setting their own goals.

The online programme is available to the general public and is not restricted to parents referred to the SPIP Plus programme. In relation to SPIP Plus, the expectation is that parents work through the programme at their own pace at home, after attending the SPIP group session and before attending the Plus session with their former partner. As an online programme it enables learners to go through each of the steps at their own pace and provides opportunities at each point for practice, personal goal-setting, feedback - which is built in at each point - and then repetition as they move on through the programme.

Preliminary research on Getting it Right for the Children as used by the general population (Mansfield 2013) showed that after completing the course parents were significantly more likely:

- To talk to their ex-partner about child care arrangements.
- To be able to see things from their ex-partner's point of view.
- To be able to find solutions with their ex-partner to child care issues as they arise.

There was no significant difference in parents' perceptions of how often their child is put in the middle of disagreements or in their ability to stay calm when talking to their ex-partner. However the difference in mean scores was in a positive direction.

The Plus session

The third stage in the SPIP Plus programme was the Plus meeting attended, subject to suitability screening, by both parents together. The intention was to consolidate any progress resulting from the SPIP group session and online programme and to move the couple on to the next necessary step: to attempt to implement any progress together.

The Plus comprised an initial separate interview with each parent, in separate areas to apprise the parent of the structure, intent and goal of the session and primarily to check that the parent wished to go ahead and that there were no safety or other concerns about being in the same room with the other parent.

The Plus meeting itself used a tightly guided process - it was scripted - to apply the basic conflict management skills. During the meeting, building on BMT principles, the role of the providers was to provide feedback as they identified, supported and applauded the use of skills evidenced during the Plus encounter. A further purpose of the Plus meeting

was to emphasise the court's expectation that parents would make a serious effort to resolve their dispute, through introducing them to the next step, the MIAM, which would outline all resolution possibilities (though especially mediation) and further use of Getting it Right for the Children.

The first part of the Plus meeting consisted of the Plus facilitator (provider) giving the couple a simple exercise to do, in which the couple primarily demonstrated the skills of listening and staying calm. The next section consisted of the parents respectively speaking and listening whilst reviewing principles from the SPIP. The role of the facilitator was to note evidence of skills being deployed, thus providing reinforcing feedback. A list of the skills learned at SPIP was to be at hand, easily viewable by the provider and the two parents.

The final section introduced an 'active listening' exercise, facilitated by the provider, in which each partner, in turn, described something very simple and uncontroversial—the script suggested "can you describe 'how did you get here'?" - while the other listened and then fed back clearly what he/she has heard. The other parent did not go ahead with his or her turn until the first had said that what he/she described was accurately and comprehensively fed back. At that point the process was repeated with the second parent describing and the first listening. The exercise was intended to show the use, at the very least, of the two most essential basic skills: staying calm/self-regulation and listening effectively/active listening.

Mediation information and assessment meeting (MIAM)

The final stage of the PIP Plus was a mediation information and assessment meeting (MIAM) where the provider explained the purpose of mediation and encouraged the parents to consider proceeding into mediation rather than requiring the court to resolve the dispute.

1.3 The study – aims and methods

The aim of the evaluation was to identify the added value of SPIP and SPIP Plus compared to the original PIP intervention (and the standard non-PIP pathway) investigated in the original evaluation (see Trinder et al 2011). The evaluation sought to:

1. Understand the court and non-court pathways undertaken by parents attending SPIP and SPIP Plus and how they compared to the experiences of comparable PIP and non-PIP cases.
2. Measure the impact of the intervention on key indicators, including shared decision-making and co-parenting, compared to other court-based pathways.

3. Understand why SPIP Plus might work better in some circumstances than others, including what parents and professionals perceive to be helpful and unhelpful about SPIP Plus and what changes may be required.

The research design involved the following elements –

4. *A telephone survey of parents referred to SPIP Plus.* The telephone survey provided data to measure the impact of SPIP and SPIP Plus versus PIP alone or non-PIP court routes on separating families. For the latter two groups we used the data collected previously for the PIP evaluation. The main outcomes of interest focused on case settlement and further case events, contact arrangements and a further set of related outcomes around relationship quality, well-being and maintenance. In addition, the telephone survey was used to collect data on the experiences of parents going through SPIP Plus in order better to understand what elements of SPIP may or may not lead to better outcomes for families.
5. *In depth qualitative telephone interviews with SPIP Plus parents.* These interviews focused on more in depth exploration and understanding of people's feelings and perceptions from their SPIP Plus experience, with a focus in particular on reactions to the SPIP Plus meeting and perceptions of the overall SPIP Plus process.
6. *Focus groups with SPIP deliverers*. The focus groups explored with deliverers their perceptions of the issues and challenges and possible added value of the SPIP Plus meeting and overall SPIP Plus process compared to their experience of the basic PIP.

A full description of the methodology can be found in Appendix 1.

1.4 The structure of the report

We present our findings in three main parts. Section 2 sets out the quantitative findings on the impact of SPIP Plus on a range of family and co-parenting outcomes. The following sections (3-9) draw upon the qualitative interviews and focus groups with parents and professionals to explore what might account for the outcomes identified in Section 2. The final part of the report (Section 10) draws together our conclusions and recommendations.

2. The impact of SPIP on parent and child outcomes

2.1 Introduction

The original plan for the evaluation was to compare the outcomes of parents who had attended SPIP Plus with the outcomes of a matched group of parents who had attended the earlier PIP in 2011. Our analysis was modified when it became clear that a majority of parents referred to SPIP Plus only attended the groupwork element of the intervention and did not go on to complete the Plus or MIAM sessions (see Section 1.2). As it turned out, this was an advantage as it enabled us to distinguish between the impact of the new revised group session (SPIP versus PIP) and the impact of the whole SPIP Plus programme (the new SPIP as well as the Plus and MIAM sessions).

The evaluation of SPIP therefore included a formal comparison of outcomes reported by a sample of 251 parents who participated in a SPIP in the trial areas between November 2012 and June 2013 (the 'new SPIP sample'), against outcomes reported by a matched group of 349 parents who had participated in PIP between April and October 2010 (the 'previous PIP sample'). Both groups of parents took part in a telephone survey interview three to 12 months after the PIP/SPIP (in 2011 or 2013). The difference in outcomes observed between the new SPIP parents and the previous PIP parents gives an estimate of the additional impact of SPIP compared to PIP. The 251 'New SPIP' parents included 192 who had attended the full programme, i.e. the revised SPIP group session, the Plus session and the MIAM. We refer to these as 192 as 'Plus attenders'. The 'new SPIP' parents also included a sub group of 59 parents who attended the revised SPIP group session but did not complete the Plus or MIAM sessions. We refer to these throughout as 'Plus non-Attenders'. The advantage of comparing the Plus attenders and Plus non-attenders is that it gives us a means of estimating the impact of the Plus session and the impact of other changes to the programme compared to the Previous PIP.[1]

Further, in the original evaluation of PIP (Trinder et al 2011) the impact of PIP was measured by comparing the outcomes of the 349 PIP parents with those of 292 parents who had also been to court in 2010 but had not attended a PIP (i.e. they followed the standard court pathway). So here we are able to report on the impact of SPIP (both with and without the Plus session) compared to both the impact of the previous PIP and the impact of not going on a PIP at all.

In Section 2.3 we summarise our findings on the impact of SPIP. Overall, we conclude that SPIP, as it operated in trial areas between November 2012 and June 2013, had a

[1] Parents self-select into the attending and non-attending groups so this is not a pure comparison. Differences in outcomes for the two groups may be attributable to profile differences in the groups rather than the attendance per se. Profile differences have, however, been controlled for as far as possible in our analysis.

modest but broadly positive impact on family outcomes. Across a range of measures, it was more effective than the previous PIP in achieving positive outcomes. While changes to the group session (from PIP to SPIP) appear to account for some of these improvements, the Plus session often had an added effect. The pattern of results was broadly similar among both resident and non-resident parents.

See Appendix 1 for a full description of the design of the impact element of the evaluation.

2.2 The overall impact of PIPs

Outcome indicators

The telephone survey interview collected information on a range of familial, parental and child outcomes, all of which were self-reported by parents. These can be grouped into four categories, all of which relate to the aims of SPIP (see Section 1.2) –

- **Case outcomes:** A clear positive outcome for a case is that an effective contact arrangement is put in place, which both parties accept.
- **Relationship between the parents:** A key purpose of SPIP is to encourage parents to work together in the best interests of their child, and to teach parents the skills required to have better lines of communication.
- **Family circumstances:** Ultimately, in most instances, the aim of getting parents to work in the best interests of the child is to facilitate a good contact arrangement between the non-resident parent and the child.
- **Situation from the child's perspective**: We include a number of measures to test whether (according to parents) going on SPIP improves the situation from the child's point of view.[2]

A fifth category – intentions for dealing with issues and contact in the future is considered below (section 7.5).

Although many of the questions asked to capture these outcomes involved four-point scales, each have been coded into binary variables for ease of comparison between the groups.

Tables 2.1 to 2.5 set out the estimates of the impact of SPIP, with the outcomes from the five categories each presented in one table.[3] Five columns of data are presented per

[2] If more than one child was involved in the case, one 'index' child was selected at random to be the focus of the parent interview.

[3] The percentages in the first two columns sometimes vary slightly from the figures in the previous report, due to differences in the estimation method used – see Appendix 1 for more details.

table. The first two columns show the findings from the 2011 survey, with the percentages of the 'non-PIP' comparison group and the previous PIP parents for each outcome of interest. The third column shows the percentage among the 2013 new SPIP group, while the final two columns split the 2013 SPIP group into Plus attenders and non-attenders.

Estimating impact

The survey respondents in the five groups - 2011 non-PIP, 2011 previous PIP, 2013 new SPIP, and SPIP Plus attenders and non-attenders - have been matched, using propensity score matching followed by regression, on a wide range of socio-demographic and pre-court characteristics (see Appendix 1). The non-PIP comparison group and the new SPIP parents have been matched to the profile of the previous PIP group, allowing us to answer the question of whether their outcomes would have improved if the PIP families had gone through SPIP instead of PIP. The matching process means we can be reasonably confident that any differences in outcomes observed between the groups are due to their different court experiences (i.e. non-PIP, PIP, SPIP or SPIP including Plus) rather than socio-demographics or prior circumstances[4]. The 'impact' of attending a SPIP (rather than a PIP) on an outcome of interest is estimated simply by calculating the percentages of PIP and SPIP parents with that particular outcome and then taking the difference in these percentages. For example, 92 per cent of parents in the SPIP group reported that the non-resident parent was in contact with his/her children. The percentage in the previous PIP group was 84 per cent. The difference between the two is eight percentage points: this is the estimate of the SPIP impact (against PIP) on 'any contact'. That is, we estimate that in eight per cent of SPIP cases, participation in SPIP led to contact between the non-resident parent and the child that would not have happened under the previous PIP.

A note on statistical significance

All the impact estimates presented in this report are based on the survey samples described above. The estimates are subject to sample variance and some apparent impacts may be due to sampling error. To account for this all the impact estimates have been tested for 'statistical significance', and our main conclusions on impact are based only on significant results. Impact estimates which are significantly different to zero are

[4] While some non-attendance at Plus appears to be down to provider processes, in some cases it may be due to one or other parent deciding not to attend. There is therefore an element of 'self-selection' among the Plus attender group. To a large extent we expect this to be controlled for in the matching, as the matching included a range of factors believed to be predictive of outcomes over and above the court process, including the quality of parents' relationships prior to court. Because the non-PIP and PIP parents went through court two or three years earlier than the SPIP parents, it is also possible that some of the change in outcomes we identify with SPIP could be linked to other policy changes over that period.

marked with an asterisk, and p-values are shown in Appendix 1.[5] However, we report on non-significant estimates of impact where they are of potential interest, or follow the same trend as the statistically significant estimates.

Case progress

Table 2.1 presents our findings about six outcomes related to the progress of the family's case. These include the objective measures of whether a case has closed and whether a court order or arrangement is in place, and subjective measures of whether there is an order or arrangement in place which the parents feels is working well; whether the parent and their ex-partner are happy with the current situation; and whether they have any safety concerns when their child is with the other parent.

In comparison with the previous PIP parents, the cases of those who had been through the new SPIP were significantly more likely to be closed by the time of the survey interview.[6] After taking into account any differences in the length of time between the date of the court application and our survey interview date, the cases of those going through SPIP were 16 percentage points more likely to have closed than the cases of those going through the previous PIP (84 per cent had done so compared to 68 per cent among PIP parents). Conversely, comparing the previous PIP parents with the non-PIP comparison group of parents, who went through court without PIP (or SPIP), their cases were *less* likely to be closed (68 per cent compared to 77 per cent of comparison group parents). In other words, the 2011 survey suggested that PIP had slowed down the process. This positive impact on case closure may be due to the SPIP process being more efficient than PIP was. It could also be attributed to SPIP being better than PIP at helping parents resolve their issues, leading to case closure. The positive significant impact among both Plus attenders and non-attenders suggests this is largely a SPIP rather than Plus effect.

Related to the case closure finding above, a SPIP which includes the Plus session appears to significantly improve families' chances of having a court order or arrangement in place, compared to the previous PIP. In 2011, eight in ten (80 per cent) PIP parents reported having an order or arrangement (compared to 78 per cent of non-PIP parents). In 2013, SPIP Plus non-attenders were no more likely than PIP parents to have an order or arrangement, but nine in ten (91 per cent) Plus attenders did (an 11 percentage point increase). There was a similar – but non-significant – pattern in terms of the proportion of parents who felt they had an arrangement in place that was working well.

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[5] All tests are two-sided and based on a 5 per cent significant level. Standard errors take into account the matching weights applied to the data and the clustering of a proportion of the samples into pairs (ex-partners).

[6] Case closure was defined by either the case being closed on the Cafcass CMS system or reported as closed by the parent during the interview.

While there was no marked change in how happy new SPIP parents reported being with the current situation compared to their previous PIP counterparts, they were significantly more likely to feel that their ex-partner was happy with the situation (56 per cent compared to 43 per cent). This was especially true among Plus attenders.

Table 2.1: Impact of SPIP on case progress outcomes

	2011 survey data		2013 survey data		
	'No PIP' matched comp'n group	Previous PIP group	New SPIP group	Plus non-attenders	Plus attenders
	%	%	%	%	%
Case progress outcomes:					
Case closed	77*	68	84*	81*	86*
Court order or arrangement in place	78	80	86	81	91*
Agreement that is working well	52	59	64	59	68
Survey respondent happy with current situation	41	50	48	45	51
Ex-partner happy with current situation	39	43	56*	54	58*
Survey respondent has safety concerns when child is with other parent	22	26	26	26	26
Unweighted bases:	*292*	*349*	*251*	*59*	*192*

Source: PIP and SPIP Plus surveys, and Cafcass CMS data on case closure

The relationship between the parents

We have limited evidence that SPIP impacts on how parents perceive their relationship with their ex-partner (Table 2.2). Across a range of measures, including how easy they find it to discuss their child with their ex-partner and whether their arrangements are a source of tension, we found very little difference between PIP and SPIP (although with some indication that Plus attenders were more likely to cite a positive outcome). However, the new SPIP parents were significantly more likely than the previous PIP parents (by 14 percentage points) to report that their ex-partner was reliable in sticking to their arrangements (64 per cent compared to 50 per cent). This appears to be a function of changes to the SPIP group session rather than the Plus session, with a similar impact found amongst both Plus attenders and non-attenders. There were non-significant

improvements in how friendly parents perceive their relationship with their ex-partner to be and in how happy they reported being with the amount of decision-making they have. For both these outcomes, parents who had *not* attended the Plus were more likely than Plus attenders to report a positive outcome. We consider why that might be the case in Section 6.3 below.

Table 2.2: Impact of SPIP on family relationships

	2011 survey data		2013 survey data		
	'No PIP' matched comp'n group	**Previous PIP group**	**New SPIP group**	**Plus non-attenders**	**Plus attenders**
	%	%	%	%	%
Relationship between the parents:					
Parents have equal say in decisions about child	21	16	15	7	22
Survey respondent happy with amount of decision-making they have	47	44	54	58	51
Survey respondent finds it easy to discuss issues to do with their child	11	15	15	18	12
Survey respondent views their relationship as friendly	13	18	25	32	19
Ex-partner is reliable about keeping to arrangements	50	50	64*	64	63*
The arrangements are a major source of tension	32	39	41	45	38
Unweighted bases:	*292*	*349*	*251*	*59*	*192*

Source: PIP and SPIP Plus surveys

Family circumstances

We found that SPIP had a range of positive impacts on the levels of contact between non-resident parents and their children (Table 2.3). In 2011, parents attending a PIP reported a higher rate of having *any* contact between the non-resident parent and the child than parents in the non-PIP comparison group (84 per cent compared to 78 per cent). Among those attending a SPIP in 2013, 92 per cent reported that there was some contact, a statistically significant increase of eight percentage points (with Plus attenders

reporting higher levels of contact (94 per cent) than non-attenders (91 per cent)). Similarly, the Plus attenders were significantly more likely than parents attending the previous PIP to report *weekly* contact between the non-resident parent and child, and overnight stays. However, parents were no more or less likely to report feeling happy with the contact arrangements. Parents in the new SPIP group (particularly the Plus non-attenders) were less likely than PIP parents to report having a child maintenance arrangement in place. It is not clear why that might be the case. It is possible that SPIP had some impact on reducing child-related disputes between parents but the underlying conflict was not resolved and instead found expression in disputes over money.

Table 2.3: Impact of SPIP on family circumstances

	2011 survey data		2013 survey data		
	'No PIP' matched comp'n group	**Previous PIP group**	**New SPIP group**	**Plus non-attenders**	**Plus attenders**
	%	%	%	%	%
Family circumstance outcomes:					
Child in any contact with non-resident parent	78	84	92*	91	94*
Child in at least weekly contact with non-resident parent	60	57	61	53	70*
Child stays overnight weekly with non-resident parent	37	38	42	27	56*
Child sometimes stays overnight with non-resident parent	55	55	56	44	71*
Survey respondent happy with the contact arrangements	56	48	47	45	49
Maintenance arrangement in place	61	68	56*	49*	61
Unweighted	*292*	*349*	*251*	*59*	*192*

Source: PIP and SPIP Plus surveys

The child perspective

There is some evidence that SPIP increases the likelihood that parents feel that their arrangements are good for their child (Table 2.4). Parents attending SPIP were significantly more likely than parents attending the previous PIP to feel that their child was happy with the contact arrangements (65 per cent compared to 51 per cent). The impacts are significant for both Plus attenders and non-attenders, suggesting changes to the SPIP group programme, rather than the Plus element, are influencing these findings. The pattern is similar – but not significant – in terms of parents feeling that the arrangements are in the best interests of their child.

Table 2.4: Impact of SPIP on situation of child

	2011 survey data		2013 survey data		
	'No PIP' matched comp'n group	**Previous PIP group**	**New SPIP group**	**Plus non-attenders**	**Plus attenders**
	%	%	%	%	%
Situation from index child perspective					
Child is happy with contact arrangements	45	51	65*	67*	62*
Survey respondent feels the arrangement is in the best interests of the child	55	53	61	62	60
Child has socio-emotional problems that interfere with everyday life	17	16	13	14	12
Unweighted bases:	*292*	*349*	*251*	*59*	*192*

Source: PIP and SPIP Plus surveys

2.3 Summary

The outcome data present a rather mixed picture. There are some real positives: the new programme did appear to result in more cases being closed with an order or arrangements in place and, especially among the Plus attenders, more children having more contact. Parents who attended the new SPIP programme were also more likely to feel that their child was happy with arrangements. On the other hand, it is clear that the new SPIP, without or without the Plus, is not a magic bullet. There was little, if any, impact on the parental relationship outcomes that the programme was designed to target,

other than a perception that the other partner was more likely to stick to agreements. In the following chapters we draw upon the qualitative data from parents and professionals to seek to understand what might account for this rather mixed picture.

3. Referral and take up

3.1 Introduction

In this section of the report we explore the referral of parents to SPIP from the court and, in particular, the transition from the SPIP group session(s) to the joint Plus session. Our aim is to explore two questions: what accounts for the limited take up of the Plus session and how might the initial referral process impact on the receptivity of parents to the programme and its subsequent effectiveness?

We draw on a range of data sources in this chapter. The first are administrative records held by Cafcass and the providers. Cafcass maintains a database of financial claims for SPIP and SPIP Plus attendance made by SPIP providers. This database, which records the date that the claims are made, is the source of statistics on take-up of SPIP Plus. In addition to the Cafcass data we have statistics from two of the four areas running SPIP on the take-up of the Plus session. The throughput data is supplemented by survey data from the parents about when they were informed about the Plus session and their reaction to it. The other two sources are the qualitative interviews with parents who had attended SPIP Plus and focus groups with providers.

3.2 SPIP Plus numbers and take up

The expectation was that all parents eligible for SPIP in the four pilot areas would attend the SPIP group session and the Plus and MIAM sessions. The only exception would be if parents were screened out on safety grounds (see Section 9.2). In practice, it appears that the take-up rate of the Plus sessions was only around 39%. The Cafcass database indicates that providers in the four pilot areas made claims for the SPIP group session for nearly 1,400 parents in the eight months from November 2012 to June 2013. However, over the same period the providers made claims for just 540 parents attending a Plus session. The overall figure of about 39% take up masks quite marked variation across the four areas, from 22% in one area to 68% in another. That would suggest that the take-up rate cannot be entirely attributable to the willingness or otherwise of parents to attend, but may also be driven in part by local management of the programme.

3.3 Briefing and preparing parents

In the 2011 evaluation, we found that parents were referred to PIP without sufficient briefing from the court about the nature of the intervention. This had improved in 2013, with parents clear about the fact that they would not be attending the group with their ex-partner. However, the message that parents would then attend the subsequent Plus session *with* their ex-partner was much less consistently conveyed. In the survey data, 51% of Plus attenders reported that they were told about the joint Plus meeting at the

same time as being told about SPIP, but 17% reported being told during the group session and 18% after the group session.

The qualitative interviews with parents revealed that the level of knowledge of the programme aims and components varied significantly between parents with some not knowing what to expect, which sometimes caused uneasiness:

> I was informed at the court of what the programme was very briefly but in no real detail until I got there on the day. (Father, Area B)
>
> I was actually quite scared, I was really scared, it was like 'Oh no what do I expect!' So once I got there it was a relaxed environment and I enjoyed it. (Mother, Area A)

Regardless of the timing of the information, the parents were divided in whether or not they thought the joint Plus meeting was a good idea in principle. In the parent survey, 58% of Plus attenders had thought the joint Plus session would be very or fairly useful. However a substantial minority of parents did not think that it would be useful. The most frequent reasons given in the survey for thinking it would not be useful were that their ex partner would not want to go, their ex partner's likely behaviour or that they didn't want to meet with or discuss things with their ex partner.

The providers confirmed that a substantial number of parents had been referred to the programme with insufficient briefing from the court, particularly in relation to the joint session. The providers noted that they had to engage with and address numerous parental concerns, including having a joint meeting/being in the same room as the ex, especially but not only where there are safety issues (these should have been screened out in any case, see 8.2 below); having repeated meetings that do not necessarily address the parent's particular concerns; not seeing why they had to attend if the main problem was seen as their ex partner; and the programme being too late in the process of separation. The providers found that those with history of domestic violence, repeat litigants, and cases involving more entrenched conflict tended to be more reluctant. The providers also noted the difference between the attitudes of the two parents, with one often more engaged than the other:

> I think you'll find in a majority of the cases you've got one very keen person, one more reluctant person. (SPIP Provider, Area C)

The result was that it was often left to the providers to make the case for attendance at the Plus session in the face of sometimes hostile, sceptical or worried parents. This took time in the group session or involved considerable efforts by administrators to book parents onto each session:

They come out with 'I wasn't told I'd have to meet or be in the same room as the person'. So you kind of explain that there will be a facilitator as part of the course, and explain how it will work (SPIP Provider, Area C)

A lot of them are really … they're annoyed, they're p-ed off, you know 'Why me, why do I have to do it, I never … I wasn't told this, therefore I'm not doing it?' … And you may get one person in a group of say 6 or 7 SPIP attendees who may say 'Oh yeah I think that's quite a good idea'… (SPIP Provider, Area D)

The qualitative interviews with parents also revealed their reactions to having to attend the programme as a whole, not just the joint Plus session. Some parents felt positive about having to attend the course as they saw it as an opportunity to get additional guidance, learn new skills, or gain more knowledge about being a separated parent. Others, however, were much more negative about having to attend the programme and may have invested less in the programme as a result. This was related to a wide range of issues – from feeling there was little to be learned from the programme or taking it as a criticism of their parenting, to expecting little or no impact on one's situation as compromises were very hard to reach. The opposite was also found, with some parents feeling that they had been making progress on their own, which caused some reluctance to attend the SPIP Plus programme. Finally, some parents suggested that they had no expectations or reactions about the programme – it was something that had to be done, so they simply went along with it 'automatically', primarily to comply with the court order.

I felt very optimistic. I felt it was very worthwhile (Father, Area D)

I was a bit like I don't think that's necessary for me (Mother, Area A)

I kind of went along with it automatically (Mother, Area B)

3.4 Key points

- Parents' reactions to being referred to SPIP Plus were diverse – from those who were positive about attending, to others who were very sceptical about it and did not feel it was necessary or desirable. Others approached the programme in a very matter-of-fact way, doing what they were told in court and having little expectation of it. Parents' initial expectations are likely to influence the effectiveness of the programme.
- Only four out of ten cases attending the SPIP group sessions went on to complete the joint Plus session and MIAM.
- Many parents were not aware that they would have to attend a joint session with their ex partner until they had started the programme and there were varying views about whether or not it would be helpful in their case.

- For some parents, having to attend a joint meeting also caused anger or concern.
- Negative reactions to the delayed news about the joint session, together with the perceived challenging nature of the session itself, may account for the lack of take up of the Plus session as well as impacting upon its effectiveness.

4. The SPIP group sessions

4.1 Introduction

In this section we explore how the experience of the SPIP group sessions may have contributed to the programme outcomes. Our data is drawn primarily from the qualitative interviews with parents and provider focus groups.

4.2 The range of reactions

In contrast to a degree of confusion about the Plus and MIAM sessions, all parents interviewed were able clearly to identify the group sessions as a separate aspect of the programme and most understood their goal. As we explore below, parents did differ on the extent to which they found the sessions useful or relevant in their circumstances. Providers, whilst generally very positive about the group sessions, were less sure about how much parents were able to take on board and remember by the time they reached the Plus session:

> Provider 1: I would say none of them remember anything very much at all ...
>
> Provider 2: I disagree with you…. I've definitely had people say 'Oh yes, I remember that from the programme'… So maybe not in the majority … so I would say it is in the minority that remember … but some do. (Providers, Area B)

4.3 Helpful features

Parents identified the group sessions as most helpful in relation to focusing on the interests of children, learning to communicate better, sharing experiences with people in similar situations, being able to see things from the perspective of the other parent, and reaffirming existing knowledge and practices.

One of the strongest benefits of the group sessions was the focus on children's experiences, which was mentioned most often by parents as something that they learned about or were made more aware of. Parents seemed to recognise the importance of this message and agree with it. While some parents thought that, under the current circumstances, they were already doing what was best for their children and thought that they did not need further guidance, most appreciated the reinforcement of this message. Reiterating existing knowledge and reaffirming current positive parental practices was also a positive outcome for those parents who, even though they felt they did not learn anything new, had become more confident in what they were doing.

Parents also mentioned the new focus of SPIP on highlighting better ways of communicating with the other parent as helpful. The practice-oriented approach was seen as useful and some parents spoke of being able to apply the skills they learned into practice.

Sharing experiences and being able to engage with people in similar situations was highlighted by a number of parents as particularly helpful, as was seeing that you are doing quite well compared to others. Finding out that others face similar difficulties was liberating for some, while others pointed to the differences in the way people dealt with similar situations as being a useful learning opportunity. Listening to different perspectives, especially those of the other gender, was also helpful in assisting people to see beyond their own experiences to how the situation was also affecting others, such as children, ex partner, and extended family.

> For me the big thing was putting the children in the middle (Father, Area D)
>
> Some people are in a far worse situation than we were in, it kind of made us appreciate what we have a bit more (Mother, Area B)
>
> I learned more from the seven women that were sat next to me than I did from the actual course itself (Father, Area C)
>
> It was good to know the things I had done were the right things to do (Father, Area D)

4.4 Less helpful features

The more critical views of the group sessions were mostly linked to a perceived lack of relevance– either because they did not reflect the particular circumstances people were in or because the content was seen as basic and not offering anything new. In spite of the more focused messages of SPIP compared to PIP, the group sessions were still considered by some to be too broad and criticism was targeted at failure to address issues related, for example, to long-term separation; never together parents; having very young children; parents who were able to communicate and get on; or experiences of domestic violence.

> It didn't help me at that particular time because I needed it before (Mother, Area B)
>
> I think we were a bit too far down the line for some of it (Father, Area C)
>
> I just felt like I shouldn't really be there, other people were on the course definitely had bigger problems than I did (Mother, Area A)
>
> They had some of the issues very raw and real and it was a lot of talking about the child's emotions etcetera which didn't feel relevant to me (Father, Area B)

The other significant point of criticism of the group sessions was related to the level at which the content was pitched. Some parents found that it was rather basic and did not teach them anything that they thought that they did not already know. Even though most parents found it helpful to be reminded of important things, some were very critical, pointing to what they perceived as a lack of novelty, basic content, and lack of relationship to what they had sought from the court.

> I wanted specific access and I got that, and I would have got that without the group sessions (Father, Area C)
>
> They didn't tell me anything I didn't already know (Mother, Area B)

4.5 Summary

- Providers were more confident in the content of the group sessions and their outcomes than they reported being with the previous PIP evaluation and felt they could explain it better to parents.
- As with the 2011 PIP evaluation, we found that the most positive aspects of the group sessions identified by parents were related to focusing on children's interests, sharing experiences with others, seeing things from a different perspective, reaffirming knowledge, and enhancing confidence. The new focus on communication skills was also highlighted as beneficial.
- Shortcomings identified by parents included a content focus which was too broad and sometimes felt irrelevant to certain situations, such as long-term separation; very young children; a history of domestic violence; and those where parents were already getting on well.
- Some parents found the content too basic and not much different from what they thought they were already doing or aiming to achieve.
- Providers identified that there were problems with parents remembering any or all of the key messages from the programme.

5. Getting it right for children

5.1 Introduction

The online programme Getting it Right for Children (GIRFC) was made available to SPIP parents. The intention was that they would access the programme after completing the group session in order to practice and extend the skills introduced in that session. In this section we examine the extent to which parents used the online programme and their perceptions of its usefulness. The material draws upon the parent survey and the parent qualitative interviews.

5.2 Awareness and use amongst Plus attenders

Although the expectation was that all parents would access the online course, in practice just under half (48%) of Plus attending parents logged on. Only 73% of Plus attending parents recalled being told about the online programme and then only 65% of those actually went on to look at it. Those who did access the programme usually did so between the SPIP group and Plus sessions (74%). Less commonly they did so before the group session (9%) or after the Plus session (15%).

The main reason for not looking at GIRFC was that parents did not expect it to be helpful or relevant. Other reasons were related to lack of time, no access to the internet or a computer or simply not remembering about it.

> Apparently the information was there in some of the information we were given, but I wasn't aware of that (Father, Area C)
>
> No we were never told about an online course of any sort (Father, Area B)

Those people who knew about the online tool did not seem to have a clear understanding of the possible benefits of it in terms of assisting with communicating with the other party; others had decided not to use it as it appeared irrelevant to them.

> I think I knew everything I needed to know (Mother, Area B)
>
> They sent me so much literature anyway to get through, and again, I really couldn't see the relevance (Father, Area B)
>
> [I] didn't really go right through it to the end […] I think I logged on and went through a couple of the videos to at least if when I was back in court I could say well yes I've started it (Father, Area D)

5.3 Relevance and usefulness of the content

If parents did access the programme then the feedback was generally positive. In all, 67% of Plus attendees who had used the programme reported in the survey that they had found it useful and 48% found it relevant.

In the qualitative interviews, the positive points identified by parents who had used the programme were those that the course designer had intended: that it highlighted the different perspectives of people involved, the effect conflict and separation had on children, and that it offered useful tips for communicating better:

> It was brilliant […] I've used lots of different skills from that […] it showed what the children were thinking, and things that you don't think of as a parent (Mother, Area C)
>
> I probably got as much help and information from the online course as I did from the actual course (Father, Area C)

However, some parents did not appreciate that the online programme was intended to build upon and reinforce the material from the group session. For them the online programme was repetitive rather than developmental:

> I don't think that taught us anything that wasn't already in the course (Father, Area D)
>
> I just thought it was a repeat of what we had learned already (Mother, Area C)

5.4 Summary

- The survey showed that only three-quarters of parents recalled being informed about the online programme and just under half of Plus attendees accessed the programme.
- Those parents who did use the programme were positive with 67% finding it useful and 48% relevant.
- In-depth interviews suggested that those who had used it and found it helpful felt it highlighted different perspectives, the effect of conflict on children, and tips about communication.
- Those who did not find it useful suggested that it seemed to be repeating the earlier content of the course, even though the intention was that the online course built upon the group session material.

6. The Plus Session

6.1 Introduction

The Plus session was perhaps the most innovative and distinctive element of the SPIP Plus programme. Its origins lay in the 2011 evaluation report that identified that relatively few former partners initiated direct discussions having attended the group sessions separately. This section explores how the parents and providers experienced the Plus session, drawing on the survey data and parent and provider qualitative data.

6.2 Experience of the Plus session

The new joint sessions created real challenges for both providers and parents. We noted in Section 3.3 above that providers struggled to ensure parent attendance at, and engagement in, the session as well as to overcome the negative expectations of parents. As one provider from Area B noted aptly, the really resistant parents simply did not attend, and of those parents who did attend, not all of them were “there in spirit”.

For some parents the prospect of sitting down with their former partner was daunting and potentially overwhelming. For some it was the first time they would meet with their former partner since the separation.

> I felt quite anxious about it (Mother, Area A)
>
> It wasn’t very comfortable to be honest (Father, Area D)

In some cases parents had experienced violence in the former relationship and had not been screened out appropriately (see Section 8.2 below). However, some parents felt fairly relaxed about having to attend a joint meeting. Others, who initially felt uncomfortable about it were able to overcome their uneasiness as the meeting progressed.

The Plus meetings were also challenging for the providers. All the facilitators were mediators or contact centre workers, for whom the scripted meeting with potentially conflictual and volatile clients was a very new approach. Providers had had very limited training prior to doing Plus meetings. We found that providers were not entirely clear about the objectives of the Plus session and felt that they were not always able to convey these to the participants in a clear and encouraging way. Furthermore, some providers were not confident in the effectiveness and potential benefits of the session. Some thought that the exercises were patronising or that the script devised for the Plus session was too “restricted” with its focus mainly on communication – active listening – and felt that ‘adapting’ the script to the particular case was beneficial. This was sometimes

related to circumstances where the parents or the practitioner preferred to focus on negotiation and addressing specific concerns, rather than on communication.

> It's very restricted. So by being creative and making it more like a conversation rather than a lecture […] our clients ... they feel more comfortable and confident (SPIP Provider, Area C)

There was plentiful evidence therefore that some, perhaps most, providers did not follow the script closely, adapting it significantly, whether to reflect the parties' varying needs or the provider's own preferences and style.

The lack of clarity from the providers may have had a domino effect on the parents, who also struggled to identify and to remember what was done during the Plus session and how it was different from the MIAM.

> I think I'm muddling the two up in my mind, in my memory (Mother, Area B)
>
> We had our Plus meeting which I call the mediation, cos that's really what it was (Father, Area B)

6.3 The perceived helpfulness of the Plus session

Both parents and providers were quite polarised in their views of the helpfulness or otherwise of the Plus session. The parents were split down the middle, with almost half (47%) of the parents responding to the survey saying that the Plus session had been very or fairly helpful and the other half reporting that it was unhelpful.

The qualitative interviews and focus groups were useful to gain more understanding of what features of the Plus were seen as helpful or unhelpful. Looking first at what was seen as helpful, the parent interviews suggested that the Plus session could help improve interaction and communication skills, as well as focusing on problem solving, addressing particular difficulties and assisting progress in these areas. In addition, many people acknowledged the particular benefits of being able to meet in person, in a safe space with a neutral third party there to facilitate the communication:

We practised how to communicate, without being argumentative or accusing (Father, Area B)

She [provider] was absolutely fantastic and she really created a safe space in which I was able to say what I wanted and it was good (Mother, Area B)

Good to be on a neutral turf really, because a lot of the arguments and things we've had have been on the front door step (Father, Area B)

Some of the providers also viewed the communication exercises used in the Plus sessions as particularly helpful, at times even transformative, in the right cases:

And with the exercises, for some people … not for all, but for some people they are really useful in breaking that first level of communication which they haven't been able to achieve… And at the end of that often clients will say that's the first time we've actually had a meaningful conversation, that's the first time I've heard the other person … Now that we've done that, I think we could use mediation to work on some of that. (SPIP Provider, Area B)

It is important to slow it down and understand the exercise and understand they can achieve it together...and that someone else has witnessed them doing it (SPIP Provider, Area D)

The Plus session appeared to be particularly useful for parents who had been struggling to establish or maintain communication and, in some cases, the meeting enabled them to make progress on this. Some parents who had experienced entrenched conflict over long periods with no recent or positive communication were also able to make progress during the Plus session:

Well initially we couldn't communicate … but by the time we'd finished we were actually talking properly (Mother, Area C)

It was the first time we sat in a room together and talked together since the breakdown (Father, Area B)

On the other hand, some parents and providers saw the Plus session as unhelpful or irrelevant. The providers in each area could generally identify positive examples, but also identified cases where the scripted nature of the intervention did not address the needs of the participants. Providers criticised the script and some of the exercises as being

patronising. In other cases the provider was unable to maintain control of the meeting and the parents argued throughout the session.

> It still feels quite patronising now I think. And there's the sort of doing to people rather than doing with (SPIP Provider, Area D).
>
> I get the impression that a lot of them use it as an opportunity to bring up all of their ... like have a slagging match almost… (SPIP Provider, Area A)

From the parent perspective, the Plus session was seen as less effective for those who were already talking to each other and did not feel they needed a session on communication skills. It was also viewed negatively by those whose relationship was particularly problematic due to high levels of conflict or a strong desire not to communicate (for example due to previous experiences of violence or abuse). It also felt less relevant to parents who were eager to make progress on their own agenda (e.g. child arrangements) and felt that the Plus session was deterring them from achieving this goal.

> We were already communicating and that's what it was already about. It felt a little bit tedious doing these things (Mother, Area A)
>
> It was a waste of time, absolutely waste of time … very patronising (Father, Area D)
>
> It would certainly work better for people in early stages of separation and stuff but it doesn't work very well for the long-term [separated] (Father, Area D)

The views of both parents and providers about the Plus session were very mixed, with the two groups both expressing quite strong opinions, either in favour or against. It is possible that this bifurcation might explain the rather mixed impact of Plus noted in Section 2.2 above where on some variables better outcomes were reported for parents attending only the SPIP group session and not the Plus. There is a danger, of course, that bringing the two parents together in the Plus session is a higher risk strategy than the more abstract discussion of the group session. Where it went well, and there were many examples, it could go very well, but in some cases it could also be very difficult and perhaps exacerbate the conflict.

6.4 Summary

- The elements of the Plus session were particularly hard to identify and were often blurred with the MIAM.

- Providers were very polarised in their opinions of the Plus session – while some thought it was transformative for parents, others felt it was unnecessary and even patronising. Providers were also uncertain about the objectives of the Plus session and its potential benefits to parents.
- Some practitioners described the script as ‘very restricted’ with its focus mainly on communication and they adapted it to suit particular cases.
- The Plus session was most helpful for those parents who were struggling to establish or maintain communication but was least effective for those already communicating well, and for those in highly entrenched conflict.
- However, progress was made in some particularly ‘difficult’ cases with the help of the Plus session and almost half of the parents who had attended a Plus session found it helpful, according to the survey.

7. Case progression and negotiation methods

7.1 Introduction

Following the Plus session, all parents were then expected to attend a Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting, or MIAM. The hope or expectation was that significant numbers of parents would then choose to go on to full mediation rather than return to court. In this section of the report we describe how the new SPIP parents reacted to the MIAM sessions, and whether and why parents took up the offer of mediation. We also examine what other dispute resolution methods were used after SPIP, including the court. Our data in this section is drawn from provider administrative data, the parent survey and parent and provider qualitative interviews and focus groups.

7.2 The timing of the MIAM sessions

The timing of the MIAM session varied somewhat between the four providers. In one area the Plus session, MIAM and any subsequent mediation session were scheduled over three separate days. In a second area, the Plus meeting and MIAM ran consecutively on the same day with any subsequent mediation timetabled for a different day. In a third area the Plus session was held separately and was followed by the MIAM on a different day with the potential to roll straight into a mediation session. In the fourth area the Plus Provider and MIAM were offered by different providers and on different days. Not surprisingly, many parents found it hard to distinguish between the various meetings.

7.3 Negotiations inside and outside of court

Two of the four SPIP areas provided statistics to the evaluation team on the take-up of mediation. These indicated that the take-up of mediation was quite low (with only around a quarter to a third of those taking up the Plus session progressing to mediation), but a high percentage (80%) of those taking-up mediation reached a successful conclusion.

In Area B take-up of the Plus session amongst SPIP attenders was 40%. Of these 34% went on to mediation and a successful conclusion was recorded for 81%.
In Area C take-up of the Plus session amongst SPIP attenders was 68%. Of those attending the Plus session, 24% went on to mediation, and a successful conclusion was recorded for 80% of these.

The telephone survey provided further insight into the range of negotiation methods that parents used during the progress of their case. Table 7.1 shows the proportion of parents who had engaged with various in and out of court negotiations during their case, comparing those not attending a PIP, those attending the previous PIP and attending the current SPIP (split into those who did and did not attend the Plus session). As in Chapter

2, the groups are matched so that any differences reported between them can confidently be attributed to their court experience, rather than socio-demographic differences.

The findings on the proportion of parents who had attended a MIAM or mediation need to be treated with caution. From the qualitative interviews, it is clear that some parents conflate the Plus and the MIAM session, leading to underreporting of having attended a MIAM. (We would expect very high proportions of Plus attenders to have attended a MIAM, but only 30 per cent report having done so.) It is also clear from other evaluation evidence that some parents report having attended mediation when they have only attended the MIAM session, leading us to be cautious in interpreting the findings from the survey on mediation attendance. However, the survey finding that 26% of Plus attenders report attending mediation is not dissimilar to the administrative data from providers reported above. If accurate, then parents attending a SPIP Plus session were significantly more likely to attend mediation than all the other comparison groups.

Table 7.1 also suggests other differences in the type of negotiation method compared to the previous PIP group. Plus attenders were significantly less likely to return to court or to use solicitors' letters, perhaps the corollary of mediating. In contrast, Plus non-attenders were more likely than the previous PIP group to attempt private negotiations outside of court.

Table 7.1: In-court and out of court negotiations

	2011 survey data		2013 survey data		
	'No PIP' matched comp'n group	**Previous PIP group**	**New SPIP group**	**Plus non-attenders**	**Plus attenders**
	%	%	%	%	%
Case progression:					
Parents negotiated privately outside court	32	31	46*	51*	41
Letters sent between solicitors	58	68	57*	59	55*
Parents attended a MIAM	10	13	19*	13	30*
Parents attended mediation	4	8	16*	4	26*
Case returned to court	66*	81	72*	80	62*
Unweighted bases:	*292*	*349*	*251*	*59*	*192*

Source: PIP and SPIP Plus surveys

Whilst Table 7.1 indicates that both SPIP Plus attenders and SPIP Plus non-attenders were more likely to try private negotiation and mediation and less likely to rely on the court and lawyers, the practical result of these different methods shows little difference

between the groups. Table 7.2 shows the point at which parents' latest agreement about their parenting arrangements had been made. Across all groups, the majority of parents reported that the latest agreement had been made during a court hearing (other than their first day in court). There were no significant differences between PIP and SPIP parents in this respect, or in the proportions coming to agreements outside of court.

Table 7.2: Point at which the latest agreement was made

	2011 survey data		2013 survey data		
	'No PIP' matched comp'n group	**Previous PIP group**	**New SPIP group**	**Plus non-attenders**	**Plus attenders**
	%	%	%	%	%
Latest agreement made:					
On first day at court	14	17	16	15	17
Subsequent out of court negotiations	12	8	8	5	11
At a subsequent court hearing	47	58	58	63	53
No agreement made	27	17	19	17	19
Unweighted bases:	*292*	*349*	*251*	*59*	*192*

7.4 Helpfulness of the MIAM and reasons for/against going on to mediation

The provider data and parent reports indicated that under a third of parents went on to mediation (7.3 above). This is significantly higher than for the other comparison groups, but one might have expected it to be higher given the requirement to attend a MIAM. The parent reactions to the prior MIAM session give some insight into why the uptake was relatively low, although it should be acknowledged that many parents found it difficult to distinguish between the mediation information meeting and mediation itself.

According to the survey, 40% of parents reported that the MIAM session was fairly or very helpful. In the qualitative interviews the views of the parents on the MIAM were very polarised between those who were hopeful that it might make some change to their current situation, and those who did not see it as a useful way of making any progress, or were generally resistant to negotiations.

Those who were the most positive about the MIAM were the parents who were after particular outcomes, for example an agreement on a specific arrangement. They felt

hopeful that the MIAM and then mediation might help them achieve their goal, or at least move in the desired direction:

> The part that worked best was the agreement and the mediation and the agreement that was brought about as a result of that mediation (Father, Area C)
>
> The mediation session was to agree the contact arrangements and that was mostly straightforward, and they were then written up by the mediator and put into the court order and became the residency order (Father, Area D)
>
> We went to the mediation, reached an agreement, that agreement was then basically ratified by the courts (Father, Area C)

There were four main reasons for not proceeding with mediation. The first was a history of previous unsuccessful mediation attempts. Some parents who had been referred to mediation earlier on in their separation process saw the MIAM as a step back and were frustrated about being asked to do it again, especially as it had not worked before.

> It just made things worse. Then they asked us to do mediation and we both refused it cos we'd been there before (Father, Area C)
>
> You go into mediation and they make you feel stupid again. As if you don't know what you're doing … it was just an absolute nightmare (Mother, Area B)

Conversely, where parents had not previously tried mediation, they felt it was too late to try mediation after they had entered the court process:

> I just wished he'd gone through mediation in the first place rather than going through the courts cos we could have come to an agreement through that (Mother, Area A).
>
> Mediation ought to be enforced at an earlier stage and more than one session should have been ordered by the courts (Father, Area C).

The third reason related to the cost of mediation. Some parents saw mediation as a very expensive service, especially compared to the modest cost of going to court as a litigant in person. The fact that it was means-tested was sometimes problematic where one of the ex partners would have to pay more than the other because this created resentment.

I certainly feel she [ex partner] either heard or listened to it for a change at the time, but then the lady went on to tell us she wanted to do it for £170 for an hour so ridiculous (Father, Area B)

It was going to cost him a lot more money than me and he didn't like that. The court's cheaper than going through mediation, that's the issue, that's why we went through court (Mother, Area B)

Finally some parents raised concerns about the voluntary nature of mediation, fearing that their former partner would not agree to mediate and/or that mediated agreements might not be enforceable. A small number of parents appeared to have been influenced by dissatisfaction with the MIAM facilitator as they thought that s/he had not managed to maintain neutrality and had taken the other parent's side.

While the majority of cases did go back to court, there were varying reasons for this. In some cases it was to obtain a consent order to confirm a mediation agreement. The qualitative interviews revealed that parents appreciated the enforceability of court orders and saw them as a guarantee that the decisions made during mediation were going to be followed in the future.

In other cases the parents were unable or unwilling to negotiate between themselves or to mediate post MIAM and preferred to rely on the court to make a decision.

My ex-wife wasn't really prepared to agree to anything the mediator suggested and said she wanted the court to decide, so that was that really. (Father, Area B)

My daughter's father is very black and white in his thinking, he had to have a court order, had to go through the court process regardless. I think he thought he was going to get something more through court than he was going to get through mediation (Mother, Area B)

My ex-wife made it clear that she did not want to change her situation nor did she want to progress with mediation, and that we were just left with going back to court (Father, Area B)

7.5 Intentions for dealing with contact issues in the future

Finally, it is reasonable to measure the success of SPIP partly by whether it changes parents' perceived ability to renegotiate any future changes themselves, rather than having to return to court. In the 2011 evaluation, we found that parents attending a PIP were significantly more likely than the non-PIP comparison group to say that, should they

need to renegotiate their arrangements in the future, they would do so themselves rather than going back to court. In the 2013 evaluation we found no significant differences between the previous PIP and the new SPIP parents, although the trend (particularly among those not attending the Plus) seems to be towards more personal negotiation and less use of the court.

Table 7.3: Intentions for dealing with contact issues in the future

	2011 survey data		2013 survey data		
	'No PIP' matched comp'n group	**Previous PIP group**	**New SPIP group**	**Plus non-attenders**	**Plus attenders**
	%	%	%	%	%
Expected future plans for dealing with contact issues:					
Likely that contact arrangements will need to be renegotiated in next two years	27*	39	31	27	34
Would negotiate between themselves	25*	36	41	47	36
Would return to court	37	42	32	29	36
Unweighted bases:	*292*	*349*	*251*	*59*	*192*

7.6 Summary

- The opinions of parents ranged from those who were keen to try the MIAM and mediation and were hopeful that they might help them to alter their current situation, to those who did not see the MIAM or mediation as a useful way of making any progress;
- Only a quarter of SPIP Plus parents did go on to mediate after the Plus session. However, that is a significantly higher proportion than for those who attended SPIP alone;
- Negative attitudes to the MIAM and mediation were associated with previous unsuccessful mediation attempts and perceptions of the cost, uncertainty and lack of enforceability of mediated agreements.

8. Cases involving safeguarding issues

8.1 Introduction

The SPIP Plus programme is restricted to cases not involving safeguarding issues. Those cases should not be referred by the court and providers should screen out any inappropriately referred cases. In this section we explore how effective those screening processes were. We draw upon the administrative data on cases involving safeguarding issues and parent and provider qualitative data.

8.2 Referrals and screening processes

The evaluation of the original PIP programme (Trinder et al 2011) was critical of the fact that 31% of cases being referred to the programme had existing safety concerns. The situation had not improved in 2013. Safeguarding issues had been identified on the court applications of 44% of the SPIP sample and 33% of the Plus attenders.[7]

In the case of PIP, there appeared to be a perception among judges, Cafcass and providers that parents with safety concerns might derive some benefit from the programme and would not be harmed given that each party attended separate group sessions. This view was not necessarily well-founded because, whilst the parents were 'protected' within the process, the pro-contact message of PIP meant that parents may have been encouraged to agree arrangements that would compromise children's safety. The PIP course did not address how to manage safety issues as cases where the issue would arise were not expected to attend. This was also true of the revised SPIP where the curriculum assumed that there were no safety issues to be addressed when devising contact arrangements. However, the addition of the Plus meetings in which parties are required to discuss matters face-to-face, meant that SPIP was particularly unsuitable where there were safety concerns. Yet some SPIP providers suggested that neither judges nor Cafcass were taking account of the one-to-one format of the Plus sessions when deciding whether a referral was appropriate.

> Cafcass, when they're centrally doing the safeguarding checks… they're looking at whether there are welfare issues or not, whether or not there should be a Cafcass report, they're looking at whether or not they should be recommended to do the SPIP, but they're not then dealing with that added issue... about should the parents be in the same room together. (SPIP provider, Area D)

[7] In the PIP evaluation, the percentage of harm cases was based on the number of parents surveyed who said there were safety concerns. The measures are similar, however, in that they are both based on the self-reporting of parents, rather than any objective assessment of true levels of risk.

Providers did express concern about cases being referred to SPIP inappropriately in spite of the safeguarding checks included in the court process.

> ...actually we had one who was actually in a refuge. (SPIP provider, Area C)
>
> [We had] one person who had a restraining order so couldn't do PIP Plus …Probably shouldn't have been on a PIP anyway. (SPIP provider, Area B)

Nevertheless, further screening by some of the providers themselves seemed rudimentary and reactive. Providers were not generally taking systematic steps to identify safety concerns, including prior to any potential joint meeting. Rather, providers spoke of taking cues about potential safety concerns from the body language or stress levels exhibited by participants.

> One couple turned up and she hadn't asked for separate waiting, but as soon as I walked into the room I could see that should have happened. Because he was large as life this end of the room and she was as far into the corner as possible like this – really hunched up. And so I took him upstairs first and had a chat with him and then brought him down and had a chat with her. And when I had the chat with her she came out with some things which made me very concerned for safety, and I made the decision that we wouldn't go any further. (SPIP provider, Area B)
>
> Interviewer: Do you use a particular screening at all?
> Provider 1: No. Common sense and gut reactions quite honestly.
> Provider 2: Yeah absolutely. So but it's done when that person ... when the people arrive. (SPIP provider, Area C)

Where participants specifically raised the issue of safety concerns or a history of domestic violence, responses were not always sufficient. As was the case with the original PIP programme, it appeared that providers operated a very strong contact presumption and applied a very high threshold for domestic violence or other safety concerns to warrant exclusion from the programme.

People have said, oh well yeah, there's domestic violence, I shouldn't have to do this. In which case you talk about what are the risks to doing it, because actually the risks are all managed, there are no risks. So you're trying to kind of weigh up that bit between someone actually genuinely being very traumatised at the thought or using it as an excuse. (SPIP provider, Area C)

[It's] trying to work out past domestic violence issues and issues which still are having a current impact… that's not just a simple screening is it, that's the difficult thing. … and actually that's an issue very often for people trying to parent isn't it, that they still mix up the issues of … well there was domestic violence between us … and they find it very difficult to put that to one side and work out how to be a parent, bearing in mind that that child still needs a relationship with the other parent. (SPIP provider, Area D)

Because referrals to SPIP have been made by a court, providers reported feeling restricted in their ability to respond when participants presented with safety concerns based on the relationship history and/or the behaviour of their former partner.

Our hands are a bit tied because the courts have said that they've made sure that they vetted through to us the correct ones (SPIP Provider, Area C)

However, the providers must still operate within their code of practice that requires their own risk assessment to be carried out.

In cases they considered to be extreme, providers did indicate that they would write to the court to say that the Plus meetings were inappropriate. However, one interviewee (Area B) reported a particularly troubling experience. When she arrived at the first Plus session, she was not given the opportunity to speak to the provider alone first but she disclosed during the session that there was a non-molestation order in place. It is difficult to conceive of a situation in which the face-to-face meetings would be appropriate notwithstanding a current non-molestation order. However, the session proceeded anyway and the MIAM was also scheduled for a later date.

8.3 The experience of cases involving safeguarding issues

The experiences of SPIP participants who had safety concerns were varied. Those interviewees who did comment upon the existence of safety concerns had a mixed experience of the group SPIP session in particular. So, whereas some felt that the session was not capable of accommodating their 'special' circumstances so its content was of limited relevance to them, others felt that the group sessions afforded a valuable opportunity to learn about new ways of communicating to minimise conflict.

"it was like they were giving ideas of how to get round the situation, but they didn't do any of the situations I'd been put in. It really was no good for me... you're not allowed to really talk much about your own situation." (Mother, Area B)

I wasn't very keen on going on the group one. The situation that I had, that I still have, was different to other people, other people on the course. (Mother, Area A)

Some participants reported being pushed into participating in the Plus sessions with their former partner, in spite of initial assurance from a judge or lawyer that they would only have to attend the group sessions.

" the court had said to my barrister that I only had to attend the first part …because it was an abusive relationship […] and then I got information through about having to attend the second one, so I phoned up the people who were arranging it, and they said no that I have to go, and I did explain that I'd talked, my barrister had said that the court said I didn't and then they contacted the court and apparently I did then have to go, which was kind of awkward […] (Mother, Area C)

The interviewee above made numerous attempts to avoid the joint sessions by postponing and rescheduling but eventually had to face being in the same room with her partner, as well as being left to wait in the same waiting area with him prior to the meeting. Other participants with safety concerns similarly reported stress associated with the joint Plus meetings.

I personally think people shouldn't be forced to go on joint sessions... to be put with someone who you don't really get on with I didn't think it was appropriate to my case, I think it should be a session individually because of the history of things I felt very uncomfortable with it all... I felt very intimidated (Mother, Area A)

[The Plus] was quite difficult because the day we turned up he was not in a good mood... I knew I had to be very careful with what I was to say. I kind of felt a bit awkward on that. (Mother, Area B)

I suppose if it was a relationship where you know we'd just parted normally it would have been fine but that fact that he'd been violent and abusive it was just, it just wasn't very nice sat there with him" (Mother, Area C)

8.4 Summary

- Screening for risk before referral to SPIP did not appear to be consistent or adequate and a high percentage of participants in both the SPIP only and the Plus samples reported current safety concerns.
- Screening for risk by SPIP providers appeared to be rudimentary and reactive and, often, insufficient for both the SPIP group session and the Plus meeting.
- Some of the parents where there had been a history of violence had to go through very difficult joint sessions due to inadequate screening.

9. The experience of the programme as a whole

9.1 Introduction

In this section we draw together the experiences of the whole programme as a means to understand the outcome data presented in Section 2 above. Our sources in this section are primarily the parent survey, provider focus groups and the 25 in depth qualitative interviews conducted with mothers and fathers who had completed SPIP Plus.

9.2 Overall reactions

The SPIP Plus programme was designed both to improve parental relationships and to assist with getting contact arrangements in place. We noted in Section 2 above that, other than a perception that the other parent was more likely to stick to arrangements, the SPIP Plus programme appeared to have limited or no impact on parental relationships when compared to the previous PIP and non-PIP samples. However, we also asked the SPIP parents some *subjective* questions about what impact they thought that SPIP had had on them. The responses suggested that parents thought that they had greater awareness of children's needs and that about a third thought they had implemented changes to how they dealt with their former partner. A majority (77%) of parents reported that the programme had improved their own understanding of their children's feelings. About half of parents reported that they had a better understanding of their partner's point of view and that the programme had helped them improve the way they discussed issues about their child with their ex partner. However, only just over a third of parents thought that they had been able to make improvements in how they were sorting out difficulties or arguments.

There were different reactions to the different elements of the programme, with a range of views about which, if any, element was most useful. Asked during the survey which programme element had played the greatest role in helping them reach an agreement, 24% of parents responded that it was the group SPIP sessions, 15% thought the Plus Session was the most helpful, and 9% the MIAM. Half of the respondents (50%), however, thought that it was a combination of all the elements that had helped them in reaching agreement.

The qualitative interviews largely reaffirmed the survey results. With few exceptions, the parents we interviewed reported that the group sessions were moderately to very useful. In particular, parents valued the emphasis placed on children's needs and perspectives through the video material and group discussions and the encouragement to understand the other parent's perspective, which was fostered through the mixed gender group format.

The joint Plus and MIAM sessions provoked a much more mixed response. For some parents the joint sessions offered additional benefits that could not be achieved in a group session with strangers. These were related to bringing parents together (sometimes for the first time after separation) and requiring communication, providing a safe and neutral space to meet and having a mediator to facilitate negotiation and conflict resolution.

> The best things that came out of it, is that the two of us without the pressure of a court, judges, solicitors. We spent an hour in the same room talking. The limit of our communication before that was three-word text messages. (Father, Area C)
>
> The mediation meeting is the key, if you can get the two people in a room together, talking, and then I do think that does help. (Father, Area B)
>
> The only thing that it helped on was the fact that was probably the first time we've been in a room together (Mother, Area B)

The qualitative interviews with parents provided detail on the nature and extent of any relationship changes that followed the joint sessions. For some parents simply being able to say hello or be in the same room as the former partner was a major achievement and represented a marked improvement in how they communicated.

> Communication between us has improved a thousand-fold (Father, Area C)
>
> No [change] in the contact, the amount of contact, but in the way it was happening, the fact that we could actually talk about the children's appointments, … we could say 'hello', rather than just ignore each other. (Mother, Area C)
>
> We're both in that stage where you know it's about the children, forget our past, forget our history, forget our own gripes, it's all about the children. We do discuss the children a lot now. (Father, Area C)
>
> Conflict reduced because it was very clear in black and white, this is what's happening when. (Mother, Area B)

In addition, it appeared that some parents had managed to establish some level of commitment to co-parenting which assisted initial progress towards agreement and also laid the foundations for sustaining or constructively developing the agreement.

When issues have come up, we've talked to each other, discussed things (Father, Area C)

I'll just talk to him, and then at the end of the day, it's up to the children really (Mother, Area C)

I would probably try and broach it with their mum first. (Father, Area D)

Hopefully in that situation [if current arrangements are not working] we'd be able to go through mediation rather than back through the court (Mother, Area A)

In some cases there was an immediate impact on contact arrangements and parent-child relationships.

He [son] spends three weeks out of the six with his dad, whereas before I would be lucky if I got two it was more like one. So he is seeing more of his dad (Mother, Area B)

My relationship with my daughter appears to improve each time I see her (Father, Area C)

They [children]'re a lot happier, a lot more settled, and they feel they can talk about it – the other parent … without us getting angry (Mother, Area C)

However, as we saw with the outcome data (Section 2) and the subjective responses to SPIP reported above, for many parents the programme did not result in any lasting change. The qualitative interviews with parents suggested that for some parents the positive effects of the programme were fairly short-lived and only lasted for a few months before they returned to previous habits. There were other parents who saw no change to their circumstances or any improvement either as a result of entrenched conflict or, in some cases, where the parents were already getting along reasonably well before SPIP Plus. Parents in conflictual relationships who reported little or no change in their circumstances attributed this exclusively to the attitudes and hostility of the other parent. This may be objectively accurate or it might demonstrate a limited awareness of their own resistance and entanglement in the conflict.

We were already at the stages of where people wanted to be at the end of the course but we were already there before the course (Mother, Area A)

He went back to his old ways in […] only a couple of months (Mother, Area C)

I was hoping it was gonna have a positive impact on my situation, and it was definitely good that we did it. However, it didn't really change my ex-wife's opinion (Father, Area B)

My ex-partner put her back up and said 'No. I'm not agreeing to this; no I'm not agreeing to that' (Father, Area C)

9.3 Pathways and outcomes

We noted above the wide range of responses to the varying elements of the programme and the range of quantitative outcomes reported, with the SPIP programme having some impact on key indicators like case closure and contact but no impact on others such as decision-making and parental friendliness. The quantitative data provides insight into overall outcomes but is less effective at facilitating understanding of the different types of case. We therefore used the 25 in depth interviews with mothers and fathers to generate a typology of the different case pathway and outcome combinations.

The analysis of the 25 interviews produced 11 different combinations according to whether or not the referral appeared to be appropriate; the parent's view of the helpfulness or otherwise of the group and then the joint Plus session; whether or not the parents took up the offer of mediation after the MIAM; how any subsequent agreement or outcome was reached and the impact on the quality of the parent's relationship. The 11 combinations are set out in Table 9.1 by the stage completed, starting with those cases where only the SPIP group session was completed or completed fully, then the cases where the parents did the group and Plus sessions (and MIAM) but did not go on to mediate and finally the cases where the parents completed the full programme of the group session, Plus and MIAM and then went on to mediate. Given the small size of the sample we do not think it is appropriate to give precise numbers of how many of the cases fall into each category other than to say that the 25 cases were fairly evenly distributed across all the 11 combinations. The other point to note is that our typology is based on the perspective of one parent only. Of course, the other parent might see the outcome very differently.

We can draw a number of observations from Table 9.1. First, the sheer number of case combinations perhaps underlines why the data on outcomes is so mixed. It is important to note, for example, that each stage could be associated with positive and negative outcomes. It was possible, for example, for the group session alone to generate very positive changes if one party took the initiative. Similarly, attending the Plus was

associated with a very wide range of impacts on parental relationships from making things worse (the ‘conflict-inflaming’), to failing to improve poor relationships (including the ‘I don’t need to change’ cases where the respondent focused on their own goals and saw no reason to change their own behaviour), to temporary improvements through to hugely improved relationships (the ‘transformative DIY’). Equally, those cases that did opt for mediation could end in agreement and improved relationships (the ‘positive full pathway’) or continuing proceedings and no change in relationships (‘negative full pathway’).

Table 9.1. Case pathways and outcomes typology, by completed stage of the programme

Stage completed	Case type	Appropriate-ness of the referral	Group experience	Plus experience	Uptake of media-tion	Method of agreement/ decision	Parent relationship
SPIP group session only	*Non-starter*	Ok	Positive	No joint meeting – father insisted on separate rooms	No	Court	No change (poor)
	**Group-session generated change*	Ok	Positive	Resident parent (RP) only attended	No	RP-initiated private agreement	RP-initiated improvements
SPIP and Plus	*Conflict-inflaming*	Ok	Ok	Argumentative	No	Court	Worse
	Inappropriate DV	Inappropriate - DV	Ok or irrelevant	Unhelpful or oppressive	No	Court	No change (poor)
	I don't need to change	Ok	Limited relevance	Negative - patronising or do not listen	No	Court	No change (poor)
	Short-term improvements	Ok	Positive	Ok, some attempted communi-cation	No	Court	Temporary improvements only
	**Court-ordered but improved*	Ok	Positive	Restarted or improved communication	No	Court	Improved or hugely improved
	Already sorted	Inappropriate – effective communication	Ok	Too basic	No	Private agreement	Already effective
	**Transformative DIY*	Ok	Positive	Restarted communication	No	Private agreement	Improved (hugely)
SPIP Plus and mediation	*Negative full pathway*	Ok	Ok	Ok	Partial agreement	Consent order but ongoing proceedings	No change (poor)
	**Positive full pathway*	Ok	Positive	Positive	Agreement	Mediated	Improved

* Indicates an apparently successful outcome.

The forum for achieving resolution is also worth remarking upon. While the explicit goal of the programme was to divert cases into mediation, in practice that occurred in relatively few cases and not always with success. In some cases the group and Plus sessions appeared enough to equip parents to make their own arrangements, e.g. the 'SPIP group-session generated change' and 'transformative DIY'. Similarly, whilst a return to court was associated in some cases with negative outcomes, for others the return to court (instead of mediation) enabled a clear order to be worked out and a real

improvement in parental relationships. Finally, there were cases where the referral to SPIP Plus was not appropriate, either because of safeguarding concerns or because the parents were already communicating effectively and had an arrangement in place.

9.4 The length of the programme

SPIP Plus contained more elements and more stages than PIP. For some parents each element made sense and they appreciated the structure of the whole programme.

> It worked well. I understand the logic […] it all makes perfect sense (Mother, Area B)
>
> I thought it was pretty good, it worked in fact really well, it was really well structured, and I got a lot from it. (Mother, Area C)

However, both the parents and providers reported that the entire programme did take some time to complete. The providers noted that, compared to the previous PIP, the additional sessions of the SPIP Plus programme could mean longer periods of waiting until both parents attended the group sessions and could be booked for the joint meetings. The longer waits sometimes meant that the positive effect of the group sessions was not utilized.

> People then really have forgotten what they did (SPIP Provider, Area B)
>
> I had been denied contact with my son for a period of six months between that point and the point she eventually attended the course so that any advice […] that I could have learned from the course had been a complete waste of time (Father, Area C)

The providers related the variations in the programme to the difficulties in bringing people back a few times for the different meetings, as well as acknowledging the need to be more flexible and to accommodate individual needs. From the point of view of parents, making arrangements to attend these additional meetings seemed to create difficulties for some, particularly in relation to provision of childcare, taking time off work, and long-distance travel. Having the flexibility to be able to have the joint meetings on the same day was therefore evaluated positively by parents.

9.5 Summary

- The experience of the SPIP Plus programme was diverse with some parents being able to achieve significant changes, some parents being able to take away from

learning points and some parents reporting that the programme had not helped or was not relevant.

- As a broad generalisation, the group session was useful in raising awareness, whilst the joint Plus session could be useful in changing communication patterns for some parents. The online Getting it Right for Children programme or mediation could be useful for those parents who used them.
- Many parents reported that the programme as a whole was helpful, but that has to be balanced with the disadvantages of having a multi-stage process where not all elements are useful to all parents.
- The progress parents made within and after the SPIP programme was linked to their ability and willingness to engage with the aims and skills of the programme and their preparedness to apply them in practice. Building some trust in the other parent and mutual reliability was key for maintaining the progress.
- It is difficult to isolate which cases were most likely to benefit from the programme. People who were in very entrenched conflict found the programme less useful although those cases could make real progress.
- Going back to court was not necessarily seen as a negative. Parents often appreciated the clarity and enforceability of private or mediated arrangements confirmed by court orders. Similarly, arrangements agreed or ordered at court instead of mediation could also result in very positive outcomes.

10. Enhancing the effectiveness of SPIP

10.1 Introduction

The evaluation of SPIP Plus produced some intriguing findings. The intervention was associated with more children having more contact, and reports that the children and the other parent were happier with arrangements, although rather limited evidence of greatly improved parental relationships. Similarly, whilst parents continued to rate the group programme very positively, many parents failed to access the online programme or attend the joint session and even fewer went on to mediation. That said, for some parents, the joint Plus session was a transformative experience that changed how they were able to communicate and co-parent. The programme therefore produced very mixed results, working extremely well for some, raising awareness for others but having no impact or appearing to cause anger and delay for a further group of parents. That said, we should recognise that not all parents did receive the full intervention. In particular, some providers did not deliver the Plus session as planned. We cannot know whether the lack of programme integrity would have made a difference but it is reasonable to assume that rather more parents could have benefitted from the Plus session if the providers had had more training and more confidence in its use.

The results of the evaluation therefore suggest that currently SPIP Plus does have a modest impact compared to the previous PIP or the standard court pathway. But, as with the previous PIP programme, it is clear that SPIP Plus is not the final product and that it could be refined and developed to be a more effective programme. The elements that will need further work are: the identification of suitable cases, including but not confined to safeguarding issues, clarification of the aims of the programme, preparation and briefing of parents, ensuring more effective transitions between each element, and ensuring the programme is relevant to the parties. We outline these further below.

That said, it is important to recognise that however well developed and delivered, SPIP Plus will never be a complete solution. Not all parents will be able to see the relevance of communication and co-parenting or be able to put that into practice. Equally, it is important to recognise that complex multi-stage and multi-agency processes such as SPIP Plus do elevate the risk of drop out and attrition. There is a balance to be struck, therefore, between the ideal intervention and one that is sustainable and achievable in the real world.

10.2 Referral and screening

It is disappointing that the courts continue to make inappropriate referrals to SPIP and that providers continue to fail to screen effectively. This was an issue addressed in the 2011 evaluation but little progress appears to have been made. Indeed, given that the joint Plus session makes safety issues even more salient, it could be argued that any

progress has gone backwards. Very careful consideration must be given at the referral stage to the appropriateness of the group element of SPIP and especially the Plus session. There is an important role for Cafcass, in particular, to educate courts about why SPIP group sessions and SPIP Plus sessions would be inappropriate in safeguarding cases. There is also a responsibility on providers to systematically review their screening tools and procedures and to make sure that all staff – from first contact administrators to deliverers of Plus sessions – are fully trained in those procedures. It is the responsibility of providers to ensure that they proactively risk assess rather than rely on the court's prior screening or leave it to the client to raise concerns. If concerns are identified then it is critical that effective risk management procedures are implemented, including immediate referral of the case back to court. Again, there may be a role for Cafcass in quality assuring the risk screening and management of providers.

10.3 Case management

Although SPIP Plus was a court-ordered programme, nonetheless large numbers of parents failed to complete key elements, including the online programme and the Plus and MIAM sessions. Even where parents did attend, administrative staff often spent considerable effort explaining the programme and persuading parents to attend each element. It may be unrealistic to expect parents, who are often reluctant participants in the first place, to navigate multiple processes, often with multiple providers, without an individual to take them through the process. If multiple stages are needed, and the evaluation suggests that it was the combination of stages that parents reported making an impact, then it is probably necessary to have a case manager or 'shepherd' to take people through. In the recommendations below we suggest that consideration should be given to appointing a case manager who would facilitate and monitor the progress of the case through each stage of the process.

10.4 Tailoring the programme

There are challenges in this field in designing a programme that can be delivered to a large and diverse audience whilst still maintaining relevance. The redesign of SPIP did result in positive feedback although there remain issues about the relevance in all cases. The relevance issue was particularly key in relation to the Plus meeting. The script was predicated on the idea that parents were not communicating. In practice, the level of communication was very variable. As a result, both parents and providers raised concerns that the Plus was not relevant or patronising. Some providers adapted the script although not in systematic ways.

There is scope, however, to develop the Plus meeting so that providers can select an appropriate approach for the particular case. A range of scripts could be developed for the Plus meeting that would more accurately reflect the existing patterns of communication and seek to build from that point. Such an approach would require more

extensive training for providers before they run Plus sessions, including case assessment to enable providers to select the appropriate approach to the Plus.

Further, rather than SPIP being viewed as a single programme applied to all cases, it is worth considering whether the four constituent elements of groupwork, online programme, joint Plus meeting and MIAM should be viewed as a menu of options that could be selected to provide a tailored package for the individual case. Responsibility for identifying an appropriate package might be best placed with Cafcass.

10.5 Dispute resolution processes

The programme had a greater uptake of mediation as one of its goals. The results clearly show that SPIP Plus did result in more parties attending a MIAM and mediating than the previous PIP or standard non-PIP court routes. However, only a minority of cases did take up the offer of mediation despite very clear encouragement to do so. Indeed, for some cases, the repeated attempts to persuade the parties to try mediation were a real source of frustration. At the same time, there were some parents who refused mediation but were able to reach their own private agreements or who returned to court and reached agreement. Those cases could result in very positive changes. It may be more appropriate therefore for the programme to support a range of dispute resolution processes, including but not necessarily privileging mediation, which may alienate some parties. We recommend below, therefore, that a further MIAM is not compulsory in those cases where the parties have already attended a MIAM and/or attempted mediation and where one or both indicates opposition to mediation during the Plus meeting. In those cases the aim of SPIP Plus could quite helpfully be to help parents implement an order in a child-centred way rather than to focus on negotiating an agreement.

10.6 Making SPIP Plus available outside of the court process

There is scope to develop SPIP Plus as a community intervention. It is very difficult to extrapolate results from a litigating population, however it is plausible that the intervention could have more effect with a lower conflict/less entrenched population.

That said, the implementation of SPIP Plus with a non- litigating population does raise a range of questions that will require careful consideration if the intervention is to be used more widely. Those questions include: when and how non-litigating cases would access the intervention; how screening would be achieved; how to engage the second (non-initiating) parent without the authority of the court; who would case manage; and, crucially, who would pay for the service.

10.7 List of recommendations

- The constituent elements and overall sequence of SPIP Plus should continue to be developed and tested to maximise its relevance and effectiveness.

- SPIP Plus should be made more widely available as a court-based Contact Activity in suitable cases.

- A range of information materials should be developed for parents and professionals that set out the aims and stages of SPIP Plus in a brief but clear fashion.

- More rigorous and consistent initial screening, using clearer criteria and procedures, is necessary on the part of Cafcass and judicial officers.

- Providers must utilise a rigorous and consistent screening tool in each case and refer cases back to court where safeguarding issues arise. There should be clear and consistent guidelines in place for all staff who have any contact with the parties. All staff should be trained to follow these guidelines. Administrative staff should not be responsible for final decisions on screening.

- The script for the Plus meeting should be developed so that providers are able to choose from an appropriate script or package to suit the existing level or type of communication in the particular case, i.e. an 'icebreaker' script where there has been no communication and a more advanced level script where parties are able to communicate.

- More extensive training, including access to online or video resources, should be available for providers before they run Plus sessions. The training should include case assessment to enable providers to select the appropriate approach to the Plus.

- The parties should not be required to attend a further MIAM where (a) they have previously attended mediation or (b) attended a MIAM in the current proceedings, if one or both parties indicates opposition to mediation during the Plus meeting.

- Rather than as a single programme applied to all cases, it is worth considering whether the four constituent elements of groupwork, online programme, joint Plus meeting and MIAM should be viewed as a menu of options that could be selected to provide a tailored package for the individual case. Responsibility for identifying and recommending an appropriate package might be best placed with Cafcass.

- Whether a standard SPIP Plus or a tailored package is devised, there is a need for a more effective mechanism to ensure that parties attend each phase of a programme to reduce attrition and delay. Consideration should be given to

appointing a case manager who would facilitate and monitor the progress of the case through each stage of the process.

- Consideration should be given to how SPIP Plus can be made available outside of the court process, including access to a freestanding Plus session. That debate will need to address when and how non-litigating cases would access the intervention, screening, how to engage the second (non-initiating) parent without the authority of the court, who would case manage and, crucially, who would pay for the service.

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Appendix 1

A1. Technical Appendix

A1.1 Aims, Objectives and Research Questions

The overall aim of the study was to measure the additional impact of the SPIP Plus programme being trialled in four areas as an effective and value for money intervention for parents with disputes over parenting arrangements compared to the basic SPIP programme, as well as to the previous PIP programme and to standard court pathways. The evaluation responded to the recommendations of the Family Justice Review for the continued development of PIP, particularly as a pre-court intervention. Survey data from the follow up study was matched to earlier data from the original study (Trinder et al 2011) which was the base for non PIP and previous PIP pathways.

To achieve this overall aim there were three specific research objectives:

1. To understand the court and non-court pathways undertaken by parents attending SPIP Plus, and how this compares to the experiences of comparable non-PIP cases and cases where parents attended the current SPIP or previous PIP (pathways and packages).
2. To measure the impact on families of SPIP Plus compared to SPIP alone, and to non-PIP and previous PIP interventions (impact).
3. To understand in depth precisely how the SPIP Plus programme is being explained as well as delivered to parents, why SPIP Plus might work better in some circumstances than others (including what parents and professionals perceive to be helpful and unhelpful about SPIP Plus) and what changes may be required (process and changes).

Objective 1: Pathways and intervention packages

Findings from this element of the research will enable Cafcass to see where and how SPIP Plus will fit within the range and sequence of services and interventions for litigating cases. It also clarifies the case pathway and case events leading to a SPIP Plus referral and from a SPIP Plus referral, and how that compares to non-PIP and PIP alone pathways. That gives an understanding of how SPIP Plus was being used by the courts (e.g as either an *alternative* or a *supplement* to 'standard' interventions) and will show how the educational intervention of the PIP course, the coparenting 'coaching' of the SPIP Plus meeting together with the MIM as a complete package could be incorporated into existing dispute resolution services (mediation/collaborative law).

The research questions for this element of the study were:

- What were the type, number, sequence and duration of court and non-court based interventions that precede and follow attendance at SPIP Plus and how did these compare with non-PIP and PIP alone cases?
- Was SPIP Plus attendance associated with longer or shorter average case durations from first directions hearing to case closure/research interview compared to non-PIP and PIP alone cases?
- Did SPIP Plus attendance influence the choice of subsequent interventions, for example, greater uptake of mediation or resolution by the parties themselves?

The work undertaken as part of the mapping of pathways also underpinned the analysis of impact (objective 2).

Objective 2: Impact of SPIP Plus

Findings from this element of the research were designed to identify whether families where parents attend a SPIP had better outcomes, a number of months later, on a number of key policy objectives than families where parents had attended the previous PIP or not attended a SPIP. The evaluation designs allows for the separate measurement of the impact of SPIP versus the impact of SPIP Plus.

For each of the key policy objectives or impact domains set out below the research measured outcomes for parents attending SPIP (either with or without the Plus) compared to parents who did not attend PIP or who attended the previous PIP. The questions on impact centred on two primary issues, (a) the relationship between SPIP/SPIP Plus attendance and subsequent decision-making processes and (b) the impact of SPIP/SPIP Plus on contact arrangements and family relationships. In more detail, these are:

Decision-making and use of family justice system resources

- *Reaching agreement.* Are parents who attend SPIP/SPIP Plus more or less likely to reach agreement rather than reach no agreement or a court-imposed outcome?
- *Increasing the uptake of mediation/private ordering.* Does attending a SPIP/SPIP Plus result in greater use of private ordering and mediation?
- *Reducing demand for family justice system resources.* Does attending a SPIP/SPIP Plus result in the use of fewer and less coercive/expensive family justice system interventions in the present application?
- *Reducing delay.* Does attendance at a SPIP/SPIP Plus reduce or increase the overall time required to conclude the case and by how much?

- *Reducing relitigation.* Does attending a SPIP/SPIP Plus make it more or less likely that families end up using or intending to use further professional or court intervention approximately six months after the initial intervention?

Contact and coparenting

- *Quantity of contact/shared care.* Are parents who attend SPIP/SPIP Plus more or less likely to end up with more frequent contact or shared care arrangements?
- *Quality of contact.* Is SPIP/SPIP Plus attendance associated with greater or less satisfaction with arrangements, perceived workability for parents and for the child?
- *Compliance and reliability.* Are parents who attend SPIP/SPIP Plus more or less likely to implement decisions about parenting arrangements and to stick to arrangements?
- *Flexibility and adaptability.* Are parents who attend SPIP/SPIP Plus more or less likely to report being able to adapt and renegotiate arrangements over time without further professional help?
- *Co-parental relationship/joint decision-making*. Does attending a SPIP/SPIP Plus improve parents' capacity to co-parent and make joint decisions on issues concerning their children?
- *Child maintenance.* Does SPIP/SPIP Plus attendance increase the likelihood of families having effective maintenance arrangements in place?
- *Child and parent wellbeing.* Does attending a SPIP/SPIP Plus improve the wellbeing of children and parents?

Objective 3: Process and changes

Findings from this element of the research helped in understanding precisely how all the component parts of SPIP Plus are being implemented locally, how that is experienced by parents and professionals and enable government to see whether and how the intervention might be improved or adapted and how it might be best rolled-out beyond the pilot areas.

These questions had three main purposes. The first is to understand precisely how SPIP Plus was being implemented locally to gain an understanding of programme fidelity and to inform any future rollout of the programme. The second was to develop a more in-depth understanding on why SPIP Plus may be more or less effective in some cases and what does and does not work with the programme, based on the perspectives of parents and professionals. The third was to identify areas of the programme that could be developed or improved again based on the perspectives of parents and professionals and the observations of the researchers.

The specific questions that will be answered for this element of the study are:

- What is the nature of the individual components of SPIP Plus, in particular, how is the SPIP Plus meeting similar to and different from the PIP group meetings and the MIM in its purpose, process and format?
- What appears to work and not work about (a) the individual components and (b) overall SPIP Plus programme in terms of waiting times, preparation, continuity and building upon earlier phases, clarity of purpose, content (both implicit and explicit messages), intensity and level of support and format and tone?
- What changes may be required in referral processes, timing, content and delivery of the SPIP Plus programme and its components as well as its linkage with other court and non-court based interventions?
- What if any variation is there in how the SPIP Plus components and the whole programme are being delivered in the three pilot areas?

A1.2 Overall design

The research design involved the following elements –

1. *A telephone survey of SPIP Plus parents.* The telephone survey was designed to provide data to measure the impact of SPIP (with or without Plus) versus PIP alone or non-PIP court routes on separating families. For the latter two groups we used the data collected previously for the PIP evaluation (Trinder et al 2011). The main outcomes of interest focused on case settlement and further case events, contact arrangements and a further set of related outcomes around relationship quality, well-being and maintenance. In addition, the telephone survey was used to collect data on the experiences of parents going through SPIP Plus in order to better understand what elements of SPIP may or may not lead to better outcomes for families.
2. *In depth qualitative telephone interviews with 25 SPIP Plus parents.* The qualitative interviews focused on more in depth exploration and understanding of people's feelings and perceptions from their SPIP Plus experience, with a focus in particular on reactions to the SPIP Plus meeting and perceptions of the overall SPIP Plus process.
3. *Focus groups with PIP providers*. The focus groups held in each of the pilot areas explored with providers their perceptions of the issues and challenges and possible added value of the SPIP Plus meeting and SPIP Plus process compared to their experience of the basic PIP.

A1.3 Telephone survey

Sampling of Parents for the SPIP, PIP and Comparison Groups

The data from which our impacts of PIP and SPIP are derived are based on four independent samples:

- A sample of 554 parents who had completed SPIP Plus, of whom 192 completed the telephone interview. The 192 were selected from Cafcass records of claims made in the period November 2012 to June 2013;
- An additional sample of 197 parents who completed SPIP in the same period, but for whom there was no record on the Cafcass database of their having attended a Plus session. Of these, 59 completed the telephone interview;
- A sample of 991 parents for whom a claim was made for PIP attendance in the period April to August 2010. Of these 349 completed a telephone interview (in February 2011);
- A matched comparison sample of 959 parents who did not attend PIP[8]. 292 of these completed a telephone interview, again in February 2011.

The third and fourth of these samples were used in the original evaluation of PIP (Trinder et al, 2011), and the technical appendix of that report includes the full details of the sampling - https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/181695/DFE-RR140.pdf.

For the two new, SPIP, samples the sample design was straightforward. All parents recorded as having attended a SPIP session were selected as long as a phone number was available. The sample of parents who attended SPIP but not a Plus session was selected as a systematic random sample (i.e. every nth) from a list sorted by case number. Sorting the list in this way prior to sample selection minimised the number of occasions when both parents from a case were selected for interview.

Questionnaire Design, Fieldwork Procedures and Response Rates

The technical appendix of the original evaluation of PIP (referenced above) provides full details of the design and implementation of the telephone survey conducted as part of that evaluation (interviewing sample groups 3 and 4 above). Below, we provide details of

[8] The matched comparison sample was taken from parents using courts that did not routinely refer to PIP.

the telephone survey conducted in 2013 with sample groups 1 and 2 (SPIP Plus attenders and non-attenders).

Questionnaire design

The questionnaire had been designed and piloted as part of the original PIP evaluation in 2011. The SPIP evaluation questionnaire included a few additional questions on parents' experiences of the Plus and MIAM sessions, plus the online programme 'Getting it right for children'.

Fieldwork

The fieldwork took place between 2nd September and 10th November 2013. During this time 251 interviews were achieved (from a sample of 751 issued to the telephone interviewers[9]). The average interview length was 34.3 minutes. Calls were mostly made in the afternoons and evenings, both in the week and at weekends, although respondents were called in the morning if they requested this.

Interviewers who worked on the survey were briefed by telephone by a member of the TNS-BMRB research team. The briefing gave interviewers some background information about the purpose of the survey and the source of the sample, as well as instructing them about their task. One objective of the briefing was to ensure interviewers were aware of the potential sensitivities of interviewing separated parents.

A week before the start of fieldwork letters were sent to all individuals included in the sample for the telephone survey. The letters explained what the research was about and informed respondents that they would soon receive a telephone call regarding the survey. The letters also provided contact details for researchers at TNS-BMRB in case sample members had any queries or concerns they wished to discuss before taking part in the research.

Response

Overall, 251 interviews were achieved from a sample of 751, this equates to a response rate of 33%. However, if cases that could not be interviewed are excluded (bad telephone numbers, ineligible for the survey, and incapable of completing an interview), then the overall response rate was 41%.

[9] Additional sample (353 cases) added 7 weeks in to fieldwork

The table below shows response figures, broken down by sample type.

	SPIP Plus		PIP only		All sample	
	No.	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**
Completed interviews	192	35	59	30	251	33
Refusals	96	17	38	19	134	18
Bad telephone numbers[10]	103	19	27	14	130	17
Ineligible	-	-	1	1	1	*
Not available during fieldwork	13	2	7	4	20	3
Incapable of interview[11]	3	1	1	1	4	1
No interview after 10+ calls	144	26	62	31	206	27
Other unproductive	3	1	2	1	5	1
Total	554		197		751	

Data preparation

There were eight questions on the survey that included an ‘other specify’ option. The verbatim answers given at these questions were examined and, where possible, allocated to one of the existing answer codes at that question. Where a number of respondents had given similar answers that could not be allocated into one of the existing codes a new code was created.

Once fieldwork had finished and all data had been coded an SPSS dataset, including all 251 interviews, was created. The dataset included all questionnaire data, and some sample information (anonymised case ID, sample type, date of application to court, date of first hearing at court, name of court, participant type, case application type and gender).

Additional derived variables were created using SPSS syntax.

10 These are cases where the telephone number either did not connect at all, or it did connect but not to the respondent.

11 A minority of respondents were unable to take part in a telephone survey, for example because they were deaf.

Matching of the SPIP, PIP and Comparison Samples

The main purpose of the three sample surveys (SPIP, PIP; and non-PIP comparison group) is as a source of data from which estimates can be derived of the impacts of the various models of SPIP/PIP on parental and child outcomes. In order to isolate out the impact of the programme from all other possible causes of differences in outcomes between the groups, the three groups have been matched. The matching ensures that the three groups are very similar in terms of a wide range of baseline characteristics around the circumstances of families at the point at which they approached the courts for assistance regarding their contact arrangements: contact and maintenance arrangements, relationship quality and previous court experience; socio-demographic profile of families at the point of separation; and length of separation. The intention of the matching is to weight both the SPIP sample and the original non-PIP comparison sample so that all three groups have the same baseline profile. Nevertheless, because the sample size of the SPIP group in particular is relatively small, achieving a good match is difficult. To deal with this the impacts presented in this report have been regression-adjusted for any residual observed differences between the groups.

The main steps involved are described below.

Step 1: Weighting of the SPIP sample to put the Plus attenders and non-attenders into their correct proportions

Cafcass records suggest that around 60% of SPIP attenders do not attend a Plus session. To generate survey estimates for SPIP from our two samples of 192 attenders and 59 non-attenders, the non-attenders have been weighted by a factor of five. This then yields the correct 40:60 split.

Step 2: Matching of the three groups (SPIP, PIP, and non-PIP) on the baseline characteristics

In order to ensure a close match between the three groups on their baseline characteristics, both the SPIP and non-PIP samples have been 'propensity score matched' to the PIP sample. The basic steps were:

- The differences between the PIP, SPIP and comparison samples on their baseline characteristics were modelled using logistic regression (forward stepwise);
- This generates an estimated 'probability of being in the PIP group' per person: the propensity score;
- The three samples are then matched so that the SPIP and non-PIP samples have the same propensity score distribution as the PIP group[12]. This matching involves

[12] A Gaussian kernel match was used with a bandwidth of 0.06 – the defaults in the Stata macro psmatch2.

weighting the SPIP and non-PIP samples to give the same profile of propensity scores as the PIP sample.

The baseline variables entered into the propensity score model were:

- Gender
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Qualifications level
- Number of children
- The gender of the ‘index’ child
- Age of the ‘index’ child
- Whether the respondent was an applicant or not
- Number of previous applications
- Whether previously lived together
- Time since separated
- Length of time between application and interview
- Reason for bringing the case

At the time of application:

- Whether respondent was a non-resident parent
- Where the child lived at the time (whether with respondent or ex-partner)
- The frequency of contact between the non-resident child and the non-resident parent
- Whether the index child ever stayed overnight with the non-resident parent
- Happiness with the amount of contact
- Friendliness of the relationship between the two parents
- Ease of discussing important discussions with ex-partner
- Reliability of the ex-partner about contact with the index child
- Happiness of the index child with contact arrangements
- Whether the respondent had any safety concerns around their ex-partner
- Whether any previous injunctions
- Maintenance arrangements at the time

At the time of separation

- Marital status
- Economic status of the respondent
- Economic status of the ex-partner
- Income group

After matching there were no significant differences between the PIP, SPIP, and non-PIP samples on this set of variables.

Step 3: Regression adjustment to control for any remaining observable differences

The propensity score matching does generate three samples that are very similar in terms of their baseline characteristics. Nevertheless some observable differences do remain, although none are statistically significant. Given that there is a small risk that some of these residual differences could bias the estimates of impact, each impact estimate has been regression-adjusted. That is, the 'PIP/SPIP' impact has been estimated per outcome after controlling, in a propensity-score weighted logistic regression, for any of the baseline variables that are correlated with the outcome of interest.

This regression stage was not used in the original PIP impact study. But including the third, relatively small SPIP sample generated more observable differences between the three propensity score matched groups than had happened previously. The regression stage was added in response to this.

Step 4: Regression analysis to estimate separate impact estimates for SPIP Plus attenders and non-attenders

Finally, the regression models fitted at Step 3 per outcome were extended to establish whether there are differences in any of the outcomes for SPIP Plus attenders and non-attenders. That is, after controlling for all of the baseline characteristics that are observed to be correlated with the outcome, we estimated separate 'SPIP' coefficients for the two groups: attenders and non-attenders. This analysis is not guaranteed to generate unbiased estimates: there could be strong self-selection effects between these two groups that the baseline data cannot fully control for. Nevertheless the results give some indication of the likely added value of the Plus session.

A note on significance testing

The p-values presented with the tables in this report have been calculated using the SPSS complex samples module. They take into account the propensity score matching and the up-weighting of the SPIP Plus non-attender group. They also take into account clustering of the data within cases in those instances where both parents were interviewed.

A1.4 Parent qualitative interviews

A total of 25 semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted between October and December 2013 with people who had attended SPIP Plus. The interviews lasted between 10 and 55 minutes with an average duration of 30 minutes and covered pre-enrolment information and expectations, experiences of the SPIP course and the Plus session, where applicable experiences of MIAM and further mediation, and finally post-programme arrangements. The main focus of the interviews was the Plus session, MIAM, and overall programme evaluation, hence these aspects of the programme were discussed in greater detail.

The overall sample included 13 women and 12 men with 9 interviewees living in Kent, 5 in Surrey, 5 in Hampshire, 2 in Cambridge and 4 in other areas, which broadly follows the geographical spread of those who agreed to be contacted. Seven out of the 25 cases, or slightly over a quarter, had harm issues (24 recorded as harm cases on the database, and 1 self-reported domestic violence).

The interviews were transcribed and anonymised (replacing names with relationship with the interviewee, and removing names of places and professions) and a thematic field analysis carried out for this report. A possible shortcoming of the analysis is that we able to contact and interview only one of the parents.

Interview guide for parent qualitative interviews

At court (Pre-PIP+) & Making contact with the SPIP provider

- Ok, I'd like to ask you about how you came to be on the Separated Parenting Information Programme and the follow up meetings. I understand that the court asked you to attend this. Can you tell me about what the court told you about the programme?
- What happened next? Prompt: Did you have to make contact with the provider or did they contact you?
- What did the provider say about the programme (format/aims etc)? Prompt: if understood what about at this point?
- Initial reaction to what they said? Prompt: Expectations? if aware about joint meeting with other parent? If aware about meeting to discuss mediation?

SPIP course

- Now I want to look at each part of the programme separately and see what you thought about it. First can we talk about the Separated Parenting Information Programme. This is where you went along to a group with other parents (but not

the other parent of your child) to talk about being a separated parent and how to help children best. Its usually done in 2x 2-hour sessions or 1x 4-hour session.

- How did the course turn out?
- What did you find helpful about the course for you in your situation? Prompt: unhelpful? Where was course held? If ex-partner went to a similar one?

SPIP Plus meeting

Let's talk about the first meeting after the group sessions. This is where you meet for an hour or so with the other parent and with somebody from the team who organized the group sessions.

- Can you talk me through what happened during the meeting? Prompts: how long? Where held? If ex-partner was there? What was covered? If discussed what learnt from groups sessions? If skills were discussed? If did any skills exercises (role-play)?

- How did you feel about it? Prompts: Why?

- What was helpful about the meeting? Prompts: not helpful? relevance to your situation? being in the same room as ex-partner? learned new skills? Anything that worked well? Why? Anything that didn't work? Why? What could have been done better? Confidence of the provider?

MIAM

Let's now talk about the last part of the programme – when you discussed the possibility of mediation.

- Can you talk me through what happened during the meeting? Prompts: on the same/different day as the other meeting? how long? What was covered? Where held? If ex-partner was there?
- What was helpful about the mediation (part of the) meeting? Prompts: not helpful? relevance to your situation? Anything that worked well? Why? Anything that didn't work? Why? What could have been done better?
- Did you go on to have mediation? Prompts: If yes, how did this go? If No, why not? Mediation before?

Getting it Right for Children

Where you told about online course ‘Getting it Right for Children When Parents Part’? Prompts: What info and by whom? Did you use it (and when)? (If yes) What did you think of it? If not, why?

Impacts

Let’s move on to when you finished the programme and meetings.

- What were you hoping might happen next? Prompts: ready for changes? feel about sorting out the child arrangements?
- Now thinking about your actual arrangements before and after the programme, were there any changes? Prompts: contact with child change? Why? Conflict with other parent change? Why? Back to court? Communication with other parent?
- Could you tell me a bit about the current situation with the other parent? Prompts: having a parenting agreement? Why/How reached? Current arrangements working? How child feeling compared to before? What will do if not working?

Overall programme – evaluation

- Now, think about the overall process (the programme and subsequent meetings as a whole), how well do you think it worked for you? Prompts: why? Which parts worked (for you/child/other parent)? Which parts didn’t (for you/child/other parent)? How long it took? What could be better?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience that I didn’t ask about?

A1.6 Professional focus groups

A focus group with providers was held in each of the four areas in the summer of 2013. Each focus group included between four and eight SPIP and Plus session facilitators and, in two cases, an administrator. Focus groups lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. The focus group guide covered the referral process, the Plus meeting, the MIAM and evaluation of SPIP Plus. The focus groups were transcribed and anonymised.

Guide for focus groups

Referral process

- how is possible referral communicated to/negotiated with parents
- what factors influence take up
- what are the actual mechanisms/logistics of referral

- Screening mechanisms and effectiveness

The SPIP Plus meeting

- Initial reactions to the idea of the meeting
- what is the nature of the meeting (and how compare to PIP, to mediation, to counselling)
- how have parents reacted
- what balance between reflection on PIP, skills devt and looking forward to parenting plan, mediation
- how are PIP messages/learning brought into SPIP Plus
- helpful and unhelpful features
- what is the value added of SPIP Plus
- how is the next transition handled

The MIAM

- Initial reactions to the prospect of the MIM;
- transfer mechanisms
- impact of SPIP Plus on mediation take up

Evaluation of SPIP Plus

- What works/doesn't work about the overall SPIP Plus programme?
- What is the value-added of SPIP Plus compared to PIP?
- What changes might be needed, e.g. content, delivery, link to other court and non-court based interventions? Screening and targeting
- How might SPIP Plus be used at a pre-application stage?

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