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# Analysing empowerment-oriented email consultation for parents: development of the Guiding the Empowerment Process model

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## ABSTRACT

Online consultation is increasingly offered by parenting practitioners, but it is not clear if it is feasible to provide empowerment-oriented support in a single session email consultation. Based on the empowerment theory, we developed the Guiding the Empowerment Process model (GEP model) to evaluate text-based consultation. By content analysis of the email advice ( $n = 129$ ; 5997 sentences in total), we investigated the feasibility of the newly developed model (inter-observer agreement, internal consistency and factor structure) and its validity. Concurrent validity was evaluated by comparing coding results using the GEP model and a Social Support model that partially intersects with empowerment. Results showed good inter-observer reliability and internal consistency of the GEP model. The results provided evidence for its concurrent validity by a significant correlation of the coding results from the GEP model with the Social Support model, although it was also distinctive. All described techniques which practitioners may employ to guide the parental process towards empowerment were observed in the sample. Also, guidance was provided in all components of the empowerment process. Feasibility of the GEP model for content analysis of email consultation in parental support from a theoretical empowerment perspective has been demonstrated.

## INTRODUCTION

Extant literature has claimed that the Internet can be a tool for delivering parenting support in an accessible and beneficial way (Daneback & Plantin 2008; Funderburk *et al.* 2008; Self-Brown & Whitaker 2008; Plantin & Daneback 2009; Ritterband & Palermo 2009; Nieuwboer *et al.* 2013b). Internet World Stats (2013) reports a penetration of Internet access by 34.3% of the worldwide population and 63.2% of the European population in June 2012. Single session email consultation is increasingly employed as an instrument

by private and community-based organizations to provide parenting support and counselling. A recent review suggests that email consultation is offered in a third of all online parenting support programmes (Nieuwboer *et al.* 2013a). Parenting practitioners are generally trained to employ empowerment-oriented methods in their work. However, it is not known if and how an orientation on empowerment can be applied in single session email consultation, which is a very brief kind of interaction between a parent and a practitioner, characterized by only one question and one reply. In this study, we report the theoretical basis for the newly developed Guiding the Empowerment Process model (GEP model), investigate its reliability and validity and use it as an instrument to

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

analyse the level of empowerment-oriented guidance in email consultation.

The concept of empowerment has been adopted by most family support programmes as one of the key concepts since the 1980s (e.g. Dunst *et al.* 1988; Shepard & Rose 1995; Akey *et al.* 2000; Dempsey & Dunst 2004; Fordham *et al.* 2012; Andrews & McMillan 2013). The need for an empowerment-oriented attitude in parenting practitioners has been well documented (e.g. Teti *et al.* 1996; Dunst *et al.* 2002, 2007; Dunst 2009). Representatives of this paradigm suggest that improvement of family functioning is found in the development of personal and family strengths and competencies and access to helpful resources, rather than in expert steering or modification of behaviour, emotions and/or cognitions (e.g. Cochran 1992; MacLeod & Nelson 2000; Turnbull *et al.* 2000).

In counselling relationships, empowerment can be perceived as a process both from the client's perspective, i.e. from a certain degree of powerlessness towards more influence (e.g. Cattaneo & Chapman 2010), and from the practitioner's perspective, i.e. guiding the client in an empowering way (e.g. Dunst *et al.* 2002). Several empirical studies suggest that supportive help-giving practices are a significant predictor of parent empowerment (Dempsey *et al.* 2001; Dempsey & Dunst 2004), despite demographic differences between families. Empowerment-oriented support consists of both relational practices (e.g. active listening, empathy, respect, responsiveness) and participatory practices (e.g. support decision-making, provide access to resources) (Dunst *et al.* 1996, 2002). It involves a high degree of non-judgmental, non-directive, warm and respectful communication (e.g. Byrne *et al.* 2012). Furthermore, an empowerment-oriented approach has been claimed to involve a strong focus on family strengths and even changes in the family context (for an example see August *et al.* 2001). Single session email consultation is a very brief interaction in which the parent submits a question through a web-form or email address on a website and the practitioner responds through email only once. Therefore, in single session email consultation, in which the number of turns in professional-client interaction is limited, it is a challenging task to communicate in an empowerment-oriented way.

The supportive process towards more empowerment is often described as a process of some duration, in which the quality of the relationship between parents and practitioners is an important factor (e.g. Dunst *et al.* 2002; Popp & Wilcox 2012). Although

several authors have drawn up lists of characteristics of empowerment-oriented professional behaviour (Baumann *et al.* 2006; St-Cyr Tribble *et al.* 2008) and other researchers have measured the professional orientation using questionnaires, such as the Helping Practices Scale (Trivette & Dunst 2005), the Therapy Process Code (Harwood & Eyberg 2004) and the Therapy Procedures Checklist (Weersing *et al.* 2002), these lists and questionnaires all require a face-to-face relationship between clients and practitioners over a period of time and are therefore not directly applicable in the assessment of single session email consultation. In contrast, single session email consultation consists of a short textual communication only and is restricted to one question and one reply. Several studies report that counsellors find it difficult to provide emotional support and to convey empathy in text-based communication (Oravec 2000; Bambling *et al.* 2008; Danby *et al.* 2009). Indeed, Chardon *et al.* (2011) found that single session email consultation showed a low level of counselling depth compared with established face-to-face counselling models. Several authors suggest that the quality of online counselling depends on the way the practitioner understands the helping process and on the competence to use the medium in a skillful manner (Childress 1999; Stofle & Chechele 2004; Barak *et al.* 2008; Bagraith *et al.* 2010; Harris *et al.* 2012).

Practitioners who provide single session email consultation are challenged to use text-based skills and techniques to support the process towards empowerment. However, content analyses of advice are lacking and a comprehensive model to assess the level of empowerment-oriented guidance in the email advice is also not yet available.

### Theoretical framework

We developed the GEP model, intended to assess the empowering level of the email advice, on the basis of both the Empowerment Process model (Cattaneo & Chapman 2010) and the tradition of empowerment-oriented parenting programmes described by Turnbull *et al.* (2000). Both sources summarise and integrate a vast amount of literature on empowerment in help-giving practices.

Drawing on the scholarship of different perspectives and disciplines, the Empowerment Process model was constructed as an overarching model with implications for both research and practice. Cattaneo & Chapman (2010) described the process of empowerment as a process of four components: *goal setting*,

*action-taking* and *reflecting*, within the *social context*, leading to more influence, particularly in social relations. It is a comprehensive and recent model, combining psychological and community aspects of empowerment, and theoretically based on the empowerment literature. Furthermore, it is a model which describes the process towards an increase in empowerment in a concrete manner, suitable for research and practice.

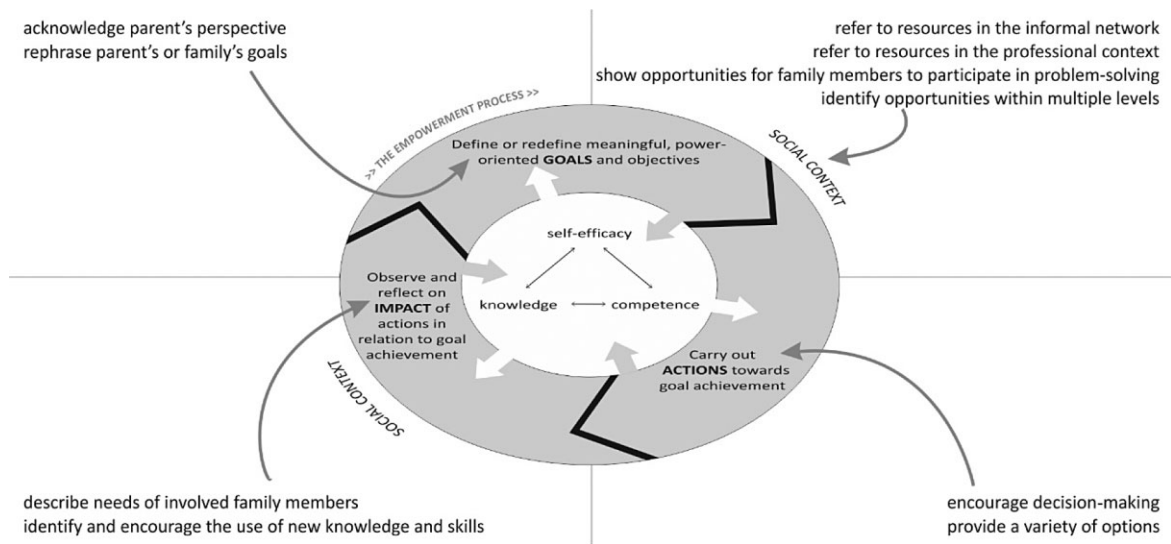
Turnbull *et al.* (2000) described the development of orientations in family support practice over the last few decades, with a strong focus on assumptions about the orientation on empowerment as ‘best practice’. These assumptions are directed at the centrality of the family, family choices as the basis of decision-making, family strengths and capabilities as the focus of intervention, access to resources, participation and changing community ecology.

We transferred all assumptions about the family-professional partnership to web-based textual techniques in parenting support. For instance, a practitioner may focus on the centrality of the family by describing the needs of all family members; she or he may stimulate participation by showing opportunities for all family members to participate in problem-solving and she or he may attribute to change in community ecology by identifying opportunities within multiple levels in the family context. This resulted in the description of 10 concrete techniques which, hypothetically, can be used to assess the way

practitioners guide parents towards empowerment in textual interactions with parents.

Integrating the theoretical model of Cattaneo & Chapman (2010) and the description of ‘best practice’ of Turnbull *et al.* (2000), both on client and professional empowerment, we propose a model of 10 techniques which identify the way a practitioner may guide a parent in all components of the empowerment process: the GEP model (see Fig. 1).

With regard to *goal setting* (component 1), the practitioner may rephrase the parent’s or family’s goals (e.g. stressing more general goals such as health instead of eating green beans) and acknowledge the parent’s perspective (e.g. describing a mother’s wish for more peace and quiet in the family). Related to *action-taking* (component 2), the practitioner may provide a variety of options (e.g. reading a story, singing a song or playing some relaxing music can all be helpful in getting a child to sleep) and encourage decision-making related to the described goals (e.g. stimulating some form of communication with an ex-partner). Concerning reflection on *impact* (component 3), the practitioner may explore the needs of involved family members (e.g. a 14-year-old boy needs some space to choose his own friends) and identify and encourage the use of (new) knowledge or skills (e.g. mirroring a child’s behaviour may calm him down). Finally, in order to *mobilize the social context* (component 4), the practitioner may show opportunities for all family members to participate in



**Figure 1** Guiding the Empowerment Process model. After Cattaneo & Chapman (2010), with permission.

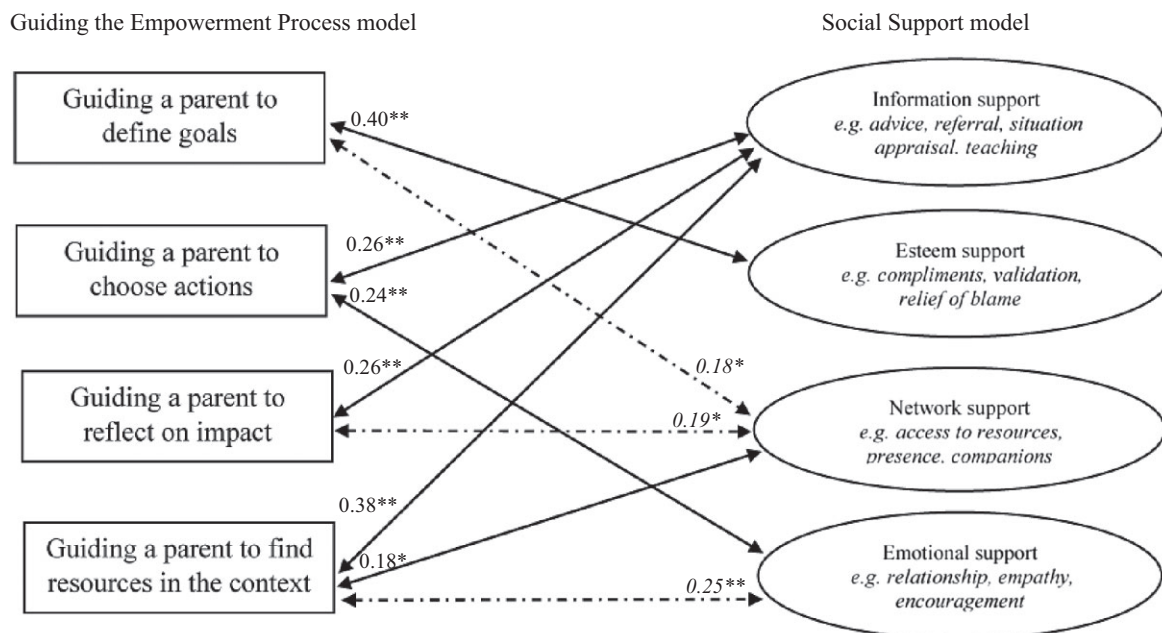
problem-solving (e.g. young children can come up with some useful rules about sharing toys), refer to resources in the informal network (e.g. maybe family members or neighbours can share some second-hand children's clothes), refer to resources in the professional context (e.g. a teacher can provide some insight in how to encourage a shy child) and identify opportunities on multiple community levels (e.g. parents and teachers can arrange for a local alderman to explain anti-drugs policy at the school).

These 10 techniques are all related to the parental process towards empowerment. The practitioner can highlight specific elements, depending on the parenting question at hand. These 10 techniques are identifiable in the email advice, do not depend on face-to-face contact and are closely linked to the parental process towards empowerment. Thus, the GEP model is theoretically suitable to analyse the level of empowerment guidance in the email advice.

A related concept which has been used to analyse online communication is social support, which bears resemblance to empowerment-oriented behaviour. Help-giving practices are often described in terms of formal social support, of which empowerment is a goal (e.g. Rodrigo *et al.* 2007; Fordham *et al.* 2012). Similar to an empowerment-oriented approach, social support involves attention to strengths and helpful

resources. Social support has been a topic of study in several studies on online programmes for parents (Nieuwboer *et al.* 2013a). Social support in an online setting has also been investigated in the previous studies in other domains, such as health-support groups (Braithwaite *et al.* 1999; Coulson *et al.* 2007), web-based mentoring for young people with special needs (Shpigelman *et al.* 2009) and an adolescent peer-support chat service (Fukkink 2010, 2012). All these studies have used a coding system, derived from the Social Support Behavior Code (Cutrona & Suhr 1992) adapted by Braithwaite *et al.* (1999) for online contexts. The Social Support model is the dominant model currently available for analysing online communication, involving information support, tangible support, esteem support, emotional support and network support.

We hypothesise that the GEP model is in part conceptually related to the Social Support model (as in Braithwaite *et al.* 1999, see Fig. 2). It is to be expected that the guidance of a parent to define goals is associated with esteem support. For instance, by complimenting a parent on his intentions to prepare healthy meals for his family and confirm its importance, a parent may be more determined to hold on to preparing healthy meals as a goal in family functioning. The guidance to choose actions is likely to be associated



**Figure 2** Profile of associations between the Guiding the Empowerment Process model and the Social Support model. Note: Extended arrows represent expected correlations. Dotted arrows represent unexpected correlations. \*\* significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed); \* significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).



with information and emotional support: information support may inform the parent about which actions to choose from, whereas emotional support may encourage the parent to do so. For instance, rules for computer gaming may be agreed upon by all family members involved and encouragement may enable the parent to monitor these rules in an authoritative way. Guiding a parent to reflect on impact may be associated with information support as well. A parent can reflect on the way his shouting has caused his child to disobey even more and a practitioner may teach him about more positive ways to communicate about rules in the family household. Finally, guidance towards resources in the context is expected to be related with information support and network support, as they involve referral and suggesting helpful resources in the context. A parent suffering sleepless nights may be supported by a neighbour or a relative by cooking a meal so that the parent can sleep for a few hours. Parents in a divorce procedure may be guided towards a special programme to help children cope with divorce. Tangible support, which according to Cutrona & Suhr (1992) include offers to provide needed goods and services (such as a loan, food or baby-sitting), is not commonly found in online contexts of social support (Braithwaite *et al.* 1999) and we expect this to be similar in our sample.

#### *Goal of this study*

In this study, we investigate the feasibility and reliability of the newly developed GEP model, which aims to determine the level of empowerment-oriented guidance in single session email consultation. We also aim to assess its concurrent validity by comparing it to the Social Support model.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

#### *Practitioners*

In 2011, we contacted 30 Dutch organizations providing free-of-charge single session email consultation on parenting. Forty-five parenting practitioners, working in 22 community-based and private practices throughout the Netherlands (73%) showed interest in the study. Participating professionals gave their consent by completing an online questionnaire with questions about their previous experience in providing email consultations and their profession, resulting in a 89% participation rate (40 practitioners).

#### *Parents*

During the research period, 1 March to 1 June 2012, participating professionals offered single session email consultation to parents as part of their regular services.

Parents were enabled to choose freely any participating professional and discuss any topic within the area of parenting. Two hundred and eight parents submitted a parenting question. Practitioners were not aware if a parent participated in the study or not and all questions were answered within 2–5 days. Immediately after submitting their question, parents received information about the research project and a consent form through email. As an incentive to participate in the study, parents were informed that four tickets to a renowned Dutch family theme park were to be allotted to one participant after the research period.

#### *Emails*

Forty practitioners provided email advice to 208 parents in total. After selecting the parents who agreed to participate and after a minimum of 5 days, allowing the advice to be delivered to the parent, we requested the parenting practitioner to send both question and advice for content analysis. After screening for admissibility (parental consent; availability of both question and advice), 129 email advice (62%), written by 40 professionals, were coded for analysis (mean: 2.84, minimum–maximum 1–8; in total 5997 response sentences).

#### *Ethical issues*

In the Netherlands, non-medical and informative email consultation is allowed, and by signing the research consent form which contained information on these rules, participating practitioners took full responsibility for the acquisition of parenting questions, for the provision of single session email consultation and also for storing and archiving data in a responsible manner (see Mallen *et al.* 2005). Also, parents participated in this research by agreeing to an 'informed consent' form. The study adheres to the legal requirements of the study country and all data are available in Dutch and accounted for (first author). The data were used for different analyses which resulted in three research articles, of which this is the second one. The research procedure was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of

Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam (reg.nr. 2013-EXT-2811).

## Measures

### *Content analysis: coding system on the basis of the GEP model*

The GEP model comprises 10 techniques describing parenting supporting behaviours of professionals and can be used as a coding system to assess the amount and types of empowerment-oriented techniques in the email advice. Of all sentences (5997 in total) 39.1% were assigned a code (2349 sentences), which means that in these sentences a GEP technique was observed. We determined a score for each advice, based on event sampling: if a technique was observed (either once or more), we assigned one point; we followed this procedure because the length of the emails showed significant variation which seriously affects the raw frequencies of the various techniques. Scores range, theoretically, from 0 to a maximum score of 10. Inter-coder reliability (see Procedure section) for the GEP score was estimated by determining the intraclass correlation (*ICC*, two-way random, absolute agreement) on a random sample of 20% of the email advice. Reliability between three trained coders proved to be good with *ICC* ranging from 0.81 to 0.88 (mean = 0.84). In the case of divergent codes, final codes were established by discussion.

### *Content analysis: coding system on the basis of the Social Support model*

Given the extensive body of evidence of the value of social support in an online context and its conceptual kinship with empowerment, the Social Support model (Braithwaite *et al.* 1999) was chosen to assess concurrent validity of the GEP model. This classification of social support distinguishes between 22 techniques and can be used as a coding system to establish the amount and types of social support in the email advice. Of all sentences (5997 in total), 45.4% were assigned a code (2723 sentences), which means that in these sentences a Social Support technique was observed. If a technique was present at least one time in the email, we assigned a score of 1. Thus, the Social Support scores ranged, theoretically, from 0 to 22. In this model, the techniques are classified in five categories, i.e. information support, tangible assistance, esteem support, network support and emotional

support. Inter-coder reliability (see Procedure section) was estimated by determining the *ICC* (two-way random, absolute agreement) on a random sample of 20% of the email advice. Reliability proved good to excellent, with *ICC* ranging from 0.85 to 0.97 (mean = 0.91). When necessary, final codes were agreed upon after discussion.

## Procedure

In their handbook on the methodology of text analysis, Titscher *et al.* (2000) have pointed out that the central tool for any content analysis is its system of categories. Categories are operational definitions of variables; they should be explicit, mutually exclusive and complete. We developed a clear coding system, suitable to analyse the texts on a sentence level, and also illustrated every category with a textual example. Furthermore, in two-coder training sessions, we tested the coding systems by using textual material which was similar to the sample in this study to clarify interpretations and define the exclusiveness of all categories. This procedure results in a qualitative semantic content analysis, combined with a quantitative frequency analysis, in which the amount of categories is counted, respecting total text integrity (as opposed to paraphrasing or reducing text). All advice were randomly assigned to the three coders, i.e. two Master students and the first author, using only one coding system (i.e. GEP or Social Support) per advice to avoid bias. As a consequence, each advice was independently coded twice. Following these procedures, we aimed for the research methodology to be stable, replicable and precise.

## RESULTS

### Email consultation and parental empowerment

In almost all the email advice (97%), one or more techniques of the GEP model were applied (see Table 1). All distinguished techniques were observed, although there were differences in frequencies. On the low end, *encouraging decision-making* was observed 15 times in total, in 8.5% of the texts. On the high end, *providing a variety of options the parent can choose to act on* was observed 993 times in total, in three quarters of the advice. Most advice included *identification and encouragement of the use of knowledge or skills* (643 times in total, 88.4%). In almost half of the email advice, five or more techniques of the GEP model were applied (44.9%). Despite the variety of

**Table 1** The Guiding the Empowerment Process model

	Frequency	Occurrence in % of emails
Component 1: Goal setting		
Repeat parent's perspective	31	19.4
Repeat parent's or family's goals and needs	56	21.7
Component 2: Action taking		
Provide a variety of options the parent can choose to act on	993	76
Encourage decision-making	15	8.5
Component 3: Reflection on impact		
Describe needs (of several family members)	233	58.9
Identify and encourage the use of knowledge or skills	643	88.4
Component 4: Mobilizing the social context		
Show opportunities for all family members to participate in problem-solving	97	42.6
Identify and refer to resources in the informal network	23	17
Identify and refer to resources in the professional context	193	62
Identify opportunities within multiple levels	65	41

techniques within categories, all four components of the GEP model were represented in our sample. Practitioners guided parents with regard to action-taking, reflecting on impact and mobilizing the social context in most of the email advice (77.9%, 92.6% and 84.6%, respectively). Goal setting was incorporated in only 36% of the texts and seemed a less consistent part of the model in our sample. A quarter of the email advice comprised all four components of the GEP model.

In four email advice, none of the GEP model techniques were observed. Three of these were characterized by promoting dialogue, with the practitioner asking questions about the parenting situation and not providing any kind of advice ('Before I can help you, I would like to know. . .'). The other text was directive, describing one solution for the question at hand without further comments ('You should make a weekly planner for your family'). The content of the majority of the email responses can be characterized as supportive advice, which guided parents in multiple components of the process towards more empowerment.

#### Internal structure of the GEP model

A principal component analysis for categorical data (CATPCA) of the GEP model showed two dimensions (see Table 2). The first dimension, which explained 24% of the variance, showed the highest positive loadings for eight out of 10 GEP variables. This dominant dimension can be interpreted as a family empowerment factor, involving techniques to mobilize family strengths. The second dimension, explaining 16%, was related to two remaining tech-

niques, i.e. *identify and refer to resources in the professional context* (factor loading: 0.74) and *identify opportunities within multiple levels* (factor loading: 0.61). This smaller dimension can be interpreted as a separate factor with a focus on external resources. Following this CATPCA solution, overall Cronbach's alpha is 0.83 (with values of 0.65 and 0.41 for the empowerment dimension and resources dimension, respectively). All item-total correlations were positive with a mean value of 0.30 (standard deviation = 0.10).

#### Concurrent validity

The total score of the GEP model showed a significant relationship with the total score of the Social Support model ( $r = 0.55$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Also, each of the four GEP components, goal setting, action-taking, reflection in impact and mobilizing the social context, were correlated with the aggregated score of the Social Support model ( $r = 0.63$ ,  $0.54$ ,  $0.54$  and  $0.79$ , respectively;  $P$ -values all  $< 0.01$ ). The total score of the GEP model showed a statistically significant relation with each subcategory of the classification of social support, i.e. information support, esteem support, network support and emotional support ( $r = 0.42$ ,  $0.31$ ,  $0.24$  and  $0.30$ , respectively, with  $P$ -values  $< 0.01$ ). Only the tangible support category, as distinguished by Braithwaite *et al.* (1999), was not significantly correlated with the score of the GEP model. This can be explained by the fact that this category was not frequently observed in our study, which is a common finding in online contexts (Braithwaite *et al.* 1999; Fukkink 2010).



	Family empowerment factor	Resources factor
Variance explained	0.24	0.16
Variables (factor loadings)		
Repeat parent's perspective	0.49	
Repeat parent's or family's goals and needs	0.58	
Encourage decision-making	0.28	
Provide a variety of options the parent can choose to act on	0.50	
Describe needs (of several family members)	0.63	
Identify and encourage the use of knowledge or skills	0.58	
Identify and refer to resources in the professional context		0.73
Show opportunities for all family members to participate in problem-solving	0.52	
Identify and refer to resources in the informal network	0.39	
Identify opportunities within multiple levels		0.61

**Table 2** Principal component analysis for categorical data of the Guiding the Empowerment Process model

Finally, expected associations between related components of the two models were largely confirmed (see Fig. 2), showing small to moderate correlations. As expected, the guidance of a parent to define goals is associated with esteem support (e.g. complimenting on intentions), guidance to choose actions is related to information and emotional support (e.g. providing options, encouragement), guiding a parent to reflect on impact is associated with information support (e.g. offering new knowledge) and guidance towards resources in the context is related with information support and network support (e.g. suggesting to involve relatives). The unexpected correlations showed that guidance regarding goals and impact can be associated with network support (e.g. involving meaningful others) and guidance regarding context can be associated with emotional support (e.g. encouraging to be of further assistance). Overall, the two coding models, with their different theoretical backgrounds, showed empirical congruence and were distinctive at the same time, as expected. Whereas the Social Support model captures typical *types* of support, the GEP model seems to outline the *process* of support.

## DISCUSSION

This study describes the development and validation of a model, which operationalises professional text-based techniques in order to guide the parent's process towards empowerment. Through content analysis of single session email consultation, the

model was also used to find empirical evidence for its feasibility. The literature on online counselling stresses the need for theoretical underpinning (e.g. Bagraith *et al.* 2010; Chardon *et al.* 2011) and this study is one of the first attempts to relate this relatively new daily practice to a key concept in parenting support. The GEP model is theoretically grounded in both the empowerment model of Cattaneo & Chapman (2010), which describes the main components that foster client empowerment, and in a description of assumptions on practitioner's orientation towards empowerment (Turnbull *et al.* 2000).

Empowerment in itself is not a clear cut concept. As many authors have pointed out, the concept has evolved in different disciplines and over periods of time (for recent critical reflections, see for instance: Anderson & Funnell 2010; Holmström & Röing 2010; Woodall *et al.* 2012). It is a concern that, although the notion of empowerment is a common belief statement in family support programmes, the adoption of empowerment principles in practice is not always operationalised. The application of such a help-giving style needs time, commitment and understanding, as well as indicators for implementation (Dunst 2009). With our present study, we contributed to practice by providing a model which describes specific professional techniques, deepening the understanding of the way an empowerment-oriented help-giving style can be applied in online consultation.

The reliability of the GEP model was good and the meaningful pattern of associations with the Social

Support model supports its validity. The GEP model enables the description of empowerment-oriented online communication from a theoretical perspective. All distinguished textual techniques were observed in the advice and all four components of the empowerment process were addressed, which indicates that the GEP model is a feasible method to identify empowerment-oriented techniques in email consultations.

An analytic model like the GEP model we proposed in this paper intrinsically drives the interpretation of communication between parents and practitioners to a more abstract level. The application of the proposed techniques may be difficult in cases where parenting questions are very short and information about the parenting situation is limited: a third of the parenting questions in our sample counted 100 words or less. Also, not every parenting question requires the extensive response involving all components of the empowerment process. Instead, a practitioner may have good reasons to focus on a specific component. Furthermore, other features of empathic and potentially helpful communication have not been included in the GEP model. A text with all the GEP elements in it, but without a warm introduction or goodbye would probably be conceived as unsympathetic. The GEP model should therefore be used as a tool to evaluate its orientation on the guidance towards more empowerment, rather than as a simple checklist for practitioners. Although the model was developed and used for evaluation purposes, it may potentially also be used as a tool to train practitioners in writing email advice, in order to advance their empowerment-oriented textual counselling skills.

The association of the GEP model with the Social Support model found in this study also provides empirical support for its distinctiveness. Related to the concept of empowerment, social support is an important notion in the domain of counselling and parenting support since the 1980s (e.g. Holahan & Moos 1981; Cohen & Wills 1985). Social support is often described as a classification of help-giving practices and although experimental studies are lacking, the benefits have been mentioned in several studies on online communication with parents (e.g. Hudson *et al.* 2008; Campbell-Grossman *et al.* 2009; Scharer *et al.* 2009). The Social Support model is a descriptive and fine-grained classification system focusing on the different types of support that are offered. The GEP model is a power-oriented model aimed at an improvement in self-efficacy, competence and knowledge of parents (see also Cattaneo & Chapman 2010).

Specifically with regard to information and resources in the family context, the two models were meaningfully related, as expected. Whereas both models can be used to analyse online communication, the Social Support model describes several types of support, while the GEP model is more closely linked to the paradigm of empowerment, guiding distinguishable components of the process towards more empowerment in a systematic way and identifying the dynamics between a parent and a parenting practitioner.

## LIMITATIONS

It must be noted that the sample of email consultations was the result of self-selection of both practitioners and parents: both groups of participants enrolled on a voluntary basis, valuing the opportunity of email consultation. Representativeness of these groups for all parenting practitioners and all parents is not assured and therefore, findings cannot be generalized.

Concurrent validity of the GEP model has been determined using the Social Support model. To our knowledge, and confirmed by Braithwaite, the latter model itself has not been tested for construct validity. Finally, empirical evidence for the GEP model in terms of effectiveness at parent level or in terms of its value from a parental point of view has not been provided. The claim that parental empowerment is enhanced by guiding the empowerment process in this manner requires further investigation.

The GEP model, which provides a brief description of only 10 techniques a parenting practitioner can integrate in his empowerment-oriented work, offers the opportunity to assess interactions between parents and parenting practitioners. It shows that a practitioner may guide a parent towards more influence, actively addressing both individual and contextual aspects of empowerment. While this study was limited to single session email consultation, the model may be used to evaluate multiple session online counselling and could also be useful to evaluate the empowerment-oriented level of face-to-face sessions. With the aim to further investigate its effectiveness, it may also be used as training instrument in advance.

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