



Beliefs underlying intentions to participate in group parenting education

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Abstract

The present study examined the underlying behavioural, normative and control beliefs related to intention to participate in group parenting education amongst 176 parents, using Ajzen and Madden's (1986) theory of planned behaviour as a theoretical framework. Participants completed a questionnaire to assess their behavioural, normative and control beliefs in regards to participation. To examine beliefs, a series of multivariate analyses of variance were conducted which revealed that behavioural, normative and control beliefs distinguished between parents intending to participate in group parenting education and those who did not intend to participate. Specifically, intenders and non-intenders differed in terms of beliefs regarding: the costs (e.g., restricted approach) and benefits (e.g., improving the relationship with their children); the perceptions of important referents (e.g., family) and factors inhibiting (e.g., cost) control over participation. Results of a multiple regression analysis revealed the most important predictors of intentions were behavioural beliefs. These findings provide important applied information that can be utilised to inform future strategies to increase participation rates.

Keywords

parenting, group parenting programs, parenting education, participation intentions, beliefs, theory of planned behaviour

Introduction

During the past decade, there has been increasing attention given to the value of supporting parents in their child-rearing role. Research indicating that disruptive behaviour disorders and emotional problems are increasing in young children has highlighted the critical importance of providing parenting education to support parents (Sanders & Markie-Dadds, 1996). Ample evidence has shown that teaching parents specific strategies to support their children's development can be effective in decreasing problem behaviour (Adams, 2001; Kaiser & Hancock, 2003; Sanders, Tully, Baade

et al., 1999). Unresponsive parenting has been found to be a precursor to psychological distress and other negative social outcomes for children (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Consequently, there is growing recognition of parenting education for its potential to address issues such as child abuse, adolescent social problems and child behavioural problems (Goddard, Myer-Walls & Lee, 2004), yet poor program participation rates continue to diminish the promise of parenting education (Sanders & Ralph, 2004; Spoth, Redmond & Shin, 2000). A survey conducted in Australia (N = 1,218) found that only 10% of parents had participated in any form of formal

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parent education (Sanders et al., 1999). Despite these findings, there is limited research investigating the psychological factors that influence parent participation in parenting education (McCurdy & Daro, 2001; Perrino, Coatsworth, Briones et al., 2001; Spoth & Redmond, 1995).

Parenting education

Parenting education is a generic term for a diverse range of learning opportunities for parents (Einzig, 1999). Terms such as parent training, parenting programs or groups and parent support are often used interchangeably with parent education. Barlow, Parsons, and Stewart-Brown (2005) define parenting programs as ‘focused short-term interventions, which are typically aimed at helping parents to deal with their children’s emotional and behavioural development’ (p. 34). The aim of parenting education is to assist parents to develop self-awareness and self-confidence and improve their capacity to support and nurture their children (Smith & Pugh, 1996). Delivery of parenting programs in a group format is generally preferred by parents and instructors (Einzig, 1999; Goddard et al., 2004) as it has been found to be more cost effective than individual parent training, potentially meeting the needs of large numbers of parents (Barlow et al., 2005; Lloyd, 1999). Studies have also found that group-based parent programs are more successful in the long term in improving the behaviour of children from 3-10 years of age (Barlow & Stewart-Brown, 2000; Richardson & Joughin, 2002) compared with individual programs (e.g., Barlow et al., 2005). Although research has shown that parents who participate in parenting programs have experienced positive short-term effects, such as improvements in children’s behaviour (e.g. Tomison, 1998), it should be noted that there are limitations of many parenting programs (e.g., lack of program relevance; deficit-based approach) and that the programs are not universally beneficial. Despite the potential benefits of parenting education and evidence of its need, the fact that only a proportion of parents who could derive benefits from parenting education groups attend them highlights the need for research to identify the motivational processes underlying participation.

Previous research has established that both positive and negative beliefs impact on decisions to participate in parenting education (e.g. Spoth & Redmond, 1995). Key beliefs shown to impact upon the decision to participate relate to perceived benefits and barriers of participation, problem susceptibility and severity (Spoth & Redmond, 1995). However, there is little research about the underlying beliefs that inform these more proximal determinants of behavioural intentions. Therefore the present study aimed to examine individual beliefs regarding participation in parenting education, using Ajzen and Madden’s theory of planned behaviour as a theoretical framework (Ajzen, 1988, 1991).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is an extension of the widely applied Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA: Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), that aims to predict and explain intentions and behaviour. According to these theories, behavioural intentions, what a person plans or intends to do, is the most immediate determinant of their behaviour. According to the TRA, there are two determinants of intentions: attitudes (the positive or negative evaluation of the behaviour) and subjective norm (an individual’s perception of whether other individuals/groups think they should perform the behaviour) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). A third determinant, perceived behavioural control (PBC) was added to the TRA model to form the TPB (Ajzen & Madden, 1986) to account for non-volitional behaviours. PBC refers to an individual’s perception of the amount of control they have over performing the behaviour and is proposed to influence intentions and actual behaviour especially when volitional control is low. Meta-analytic results indicate strong support for the model’s links across a broad range of behaviours (e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2001).

In addition to articulating the major determinants of intentions and behaviour, the TPB proposes that the determinants of intention are informed by underlying beliefs (Ajzen, 1988; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). According to the model, attitude is determined by behavioural beliefs, the costs and benefits associated with performing the behaviour. Subjective norm is based on

normative beliefs, whether an individual feels pressure to comply from relevant referents (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). PBC is determined by control beliefs, the factors that inhibit or encourage behavioural performance. A major advantage of the TPB, then, is its ability to identify the underlying behavioural, normative and control beliefs that distinguish between individuals intending and not intending to perform a specified behaviour. Numerous studies have conducted belief-based analyses using the TPB framework to understand health behaviours including ecstasy use (e.g., Conner, Sherlock & Orbell, 1998) and binge-drinking (e.g., Johnston & White, 2004).

The present study

Considering that the underlying beliefs of parenting education participation are still unknown, the current study aimed to explore the beliefs distinguishing between individuals with differing intentions to participate in parenting education, using the TPB as a framework. Specifically the present study examined high and low intenders' beliefs regarding: the costs and benefits, the perceptions of important referents and the factors that inhibit control in relation to participation. Analyses were also conducted to identify the set of beliefs (behavioural, normative or control beliefs) which contributed most to the prediction of intentions.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 176 (138 female, 38 male) parents aged between 25 and 56 years with at least one child under 12 years of age. Parents of children aged up to 12 years were targeted on the basis of research suggesting that parenting programs are more effective with parents of younger children, prior to adolescence (Sanders et al., 1999). Participants were recruited through a range of public and private kindergartens, childcare centres, public and private primary schools in the metropolitan area of Brisbane, Queensland. Approximately 1,000 questionnaire packs were distributed, although due to the nature of the questionnaire dissemination process via teaching and administration staff, the exact number of questionnaires distributed is unclear.

One hundred and seventy-six questionnaires were returned (17.6% return rate). The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Measures

Elicitation study

In accordance with the procedures outlined by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), an elicitation study was conducted to identify the modal salient beliefs, which served as the basis for the belief-based items in the main questionnaire. A convenience sample of 12 parents aged between 32 and 42 years ($M = 36$ years, $SD = 3.25$), with at least one child under the age of 12 years, participated in the pilot study. Sample characteristics were largely representative of participants in the main study.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (N=176)

Variable	Mean	SD	n	%
Age in years				
Mothers	40.70	5.43	138	78.4
Fathers	39.00	4.48	38	21.6
Child	6.33	2.93		
Number children per family	2.04	.83		
Eldest child under 12 years				
1 st	7.13	3.19		
2 nd	5.56	3.57		
3 rd	3.70	3.32		
4 th	2.92	1.65		
5 th	1.00			
Relationship status				
Married/ De facto			149	84.6
Separated/Divorced/ Widowed			25	14.2
Education level				
Year 10			9	5.1
Year 12			22	12.5
Apprenticeship/Trade			20	11.3
Undergraduate degree			52	29.5
Post-graduate degree			73	41.4
Work status				
Full-time			70	39.7
Part-time			63	35.8
Full-time home duties			70	39.7
Student			6	3.4
Unemployed			6	3.4
Household income				
\$20,000 or less			8	4.5
\$20,001 - \$40,000			8	4.5
\$40,001 - \$60,000			21	11.9
\$60,001 - \$80,000			23	13.0
Over \$80,001			106	60.2

The elicitation study consisted of an open-ended questionnaire to elicit salient behavioural, normative and control beliefs for participation intentions. Respondents were asked to list the advantages and disadvantages of participating in parenting education. The three most frequently reported advantages of participating (e.g., learning new parenting skills) and the three most commonly reported disadvantages (e.g., feeling embarrassed) formed the behavioural beliefs in the main questionnaire. Respondents were asked to list the people or groups of people who would approve or disapprove of their participating in parenting education. The four most common referents (e.g., friends) were used as a measure of normative beliefs in the main questionnaire. Respondents were asked to list any factors or circumstances that might discourage or encourage them participating in parenting education. The six most frequently reported barriers to participating in parenting education (e.g., cost, fatigue) formed the measure of control beliefs in the main questionnaire for the behaviour.

Target behaviour

The target behaviour was participating in parenting education. Parenting education was defined as any course, workshop or training program offered by a school, church, hospital, child health centre, community group or other organisation that is explicitly concerned with helping parents to improve parenting skills, uses a group work approach and is relatively structured and formalised (see Smith & Pugh, 1996). It should be noted that this definition omitted a wider range of parent support such as individual parenting sessions with a health professional, seminars, talks, parent support groups or alternative resources such as parenting websites and parenting books.

Drawing on methodology adopted by Spoth and Redmond (1995), a general measure of intention to participate in parenting education was used in the study rather than a specific type of parenting program. It was not known what parenting programs would be available to individual parents during the study and it was not a primary interest of the study to assess parent reactions to specific parenting programs. The predictor and

criterion variables were measured at the same level of specificity in relation to action, target, time and context to maximise predictive power (Ajzen, 1988; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

Main questionnaire

The main questionnaire assessed participation intentions and measured behavioural, normative and control beliefs for intentions to perform the behaviour of participation. Most belief items were positively worded with some negatively worded items included to reduce participant response bias. All TPB items were scored on 7-point Likert scales.

Intention. Two items were used to assess the strength of participants' intention to perform the target behaviour (e.g., 'I intend to participate in parenting education during the next 6 months'; *strongly disagree* [1] to *strongly agree* [7]). The measure of intention was reliable with an alpha co-efficient of .87.

Behavioural belief. The measure of behavioural belief was comprised of six behavioural belief items. Participants were asked to indicate how likely it would be that three benefits (e.g., 'learning new parenting skills and information') and three costs (e.g., 'being exposed to a restricted parenting approach') obtained from the elicitation study, would result if they participated in parenting education during the next 6 months, ranging from *extremely unlikely* [1] to *extremely likely* [7]. To obtain an overall measure of attitude belief, participants' responses on the behavioural belief items were averaged.

Normative belief. The measure of normative belief was assessed by four normative belief items. Participants were asked how likely they thought four different referents, identified from the elicitation study (e.g., friends and peers), would think that they should participate in parenting education during the next 6 months, scored from *extremely unlikely* [1] to *extremely likely* [7]. The participants' scores on the normative belief items were averaged to provide an indirect measure of subjective norm.

Control belief. The measure of control belief was obtained from six control belief items. Participants were asked to rate how likely four external (e.g., location) and two internal factors

(e.g., fatigue) obtained from the elicitation questionnaire were to prevent them from participating in parenting education during the next 6 months, scored *extremely unlikely* [1] to *extremely likely* [7]. Participants' scores on the control belief items were averaged to provide the indirect measure of PBC.

Results

Multivariate analyses

On the basis of TPB research, three separate MANOVAs were performed to examine the belief-based differences between parents intending to participate in parenting group education and those not intending to participate (see Fishbein & Stasson, 1990). In each analysis, the set of beliefs (i.e., behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs or control beliefs) was examined in an exploratory manner to identify those beliefs differentiating between individuals intending and not intending to participate in parenting education. Preliminary analyses tested for any demographic differences (i.e., sex, participant age, household income, level of education, marital status, work status, previous parenting education participation, number of children and mean child age) between intending and non-intending groups. Those participants intending to participate in parenting education were more likely to be married and be parents of younger children than those not intending to participate in parenting education. Analyses were also conducted with the demographic/background factors serving as covariates in the MANOVA analyses. The same pattern of results for the beliefs was evidenced after controlling for demographic variables indicating that the belief-based results were not affected by demographic differences within the sample. Three one-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted with intentions as the independent variable and the belief-based measures as the dependent variables. A dichotomous independent variable was computed by dividing the intention scale at its midpoint (i.e., 4). Therefore, the distributions for the behaviour were split into intenders and non-intenders.

Analyses examining beliefs differentiating intenders and non-intenders

Overall, Wilk's Lambdas were significant for the three MANOVAs ($p < .001$), on measures of behavioural, normative and control beliefs (see Table 2). To further explore differences between the groups, the dependent variables were examined at the univariate level. Bonferonni adjustments were used to control family wise Type 1 error.

Behavioural beliefs

According to Wilk's criterion, there was a significant multivariate effect of intentions on behavioural beliefs for participating, $F(6,158) = 10.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .29$. Univariate analyses revealed that intenders and non-intenders differed significantly on their assessment of positive and negative outcomes, apart from one belief, being perceived as a bad parent, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean beliefs for non-intenders and intenders in parenting education (measured on 7-point Likert scales)

Beliefs	Non intenders	Intenders	Sig
Behavioural belief	n = 85	n = 80	
Learning new parenting skills	5.02	5.65	
Feeling embarrassed	3.04	2.15	***
Improving relationship with children	4.86	5.91	***
Restricted approach	3.40	2.60	***
Perceived as a bad parent	2.85	2.26	
Supportive environment	4.82	5.89	***
Normative belief	n = 89	n = 81	
Friends/peers	2.07	3.09	***
Spouse/partner	2.37	3.88	***
Own children	2.27	3.21	***
Extended family	2.19	3.32	***
Control belief	n = 88	n = 83	
Cost	3.44	3.69	
Time restraints	5.69	5.25	
Location	4.43	4.42	
Inability to arrange childcare	4.68	4.52	
Lack of awareness of appropriate course	4.42	4.08	
Fatigue	4.56	3.71	**

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis predicting participation intentions

Variable	R	R ²	F	df	β
Prediction of Intentions	.61	.37	33.09	3, 166	
Behavioural beliefs					.42***
Normative beliefs					.33***
Control beliefs					-.11

*** $p < .001$. Weights provided are those in the final step of the analysis.

Intenders were more likely to report that improving the relationship with their children and being in a supportive environment would result if they participated in parenting education during the next 6 months. Non-intenders were more likely to report that feeling embarrassed, and being exposed to a restricted parenting approach would prevent them from participating in parenting education.

Normative beliefs

The second MANOVA examined normative beliefs on participation intentions. According to Wilk's criterion, a significant multivariate effect was found between the groups for normative beliefs, $F(4,165) = 8.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$. Univariate analyses revealed that non-intenders and intenders differed significantly in their perceptions of people who would approve of their participating in parenting education, as shown in Table 2. Intenders were more likely than non-intenders to report that friends and peers, spouse or partner, own children and extended family would think they should participate in parenting education during the next 6 months.

Control beliefs

Finally, a significant multivariate effect was found between the groups for control beliefs, $F(6,164) = 2.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$. Univariate analyses revealed that non-intenders and intenders significantly differed on one control belief, as shown in Table 2. Non-intenders were more likely than intenders to report that fatigue would prevent them from participating in parenting education during the next 6 months.

Regression analyses examining the role of beliefs in participation intentions

While the MANOVA analyses determined the beliefs that differentiated between those intending to and those not intending to

participate in group parenting education programs, the beliefs predicting intentions were not identified. Therefore, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine which of the behavioural, normative and control belief sets contributed most to the prediction of intentions (in a similar vein to other TPB belief based studies; see e.g., Fielding, Terry, Masser et al., 2005). Three scales comprising behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs and control beliefs were created. The independent variables of behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs and control beliefs, and the dependent variable of intention, were then entered into a regression analysis for the behaviour.

As shown in Table 3, the belief based measures accounted for a significant 37% (36.3% adjusted) of the variance in participation intentions, $F(3,166) = 33.09$, $p < .001$. Examination of the beta weights revealed two significant predictors; behavioural beliefs emerged as the strongest predictor of intentions, followed by normative beliefs. Control beliefs did not significantly predict participation intentions.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine the beliefs differentiating parents who intended to participate (intenders) and parents who did not intend to participate (non-intenders). The findings of the study suggest that intenders and non-intenders differed significantly on measures of behavioural, normative and control beliefs. The most important predictor of participation intentions was behavioural beliefs. Therefore, the results of the study provide information regarding beliefs to target in formulating strategies to increase participation amongst those currently not intending to participate in parenting education.

For behavioural beliefs, intenders and non-intenders differed significantly on beliefs regarding both the benefits and costs of participating. Intenders were more likely to report that improving their relationship with their children and experiencing a supportive environment were likely to result from participating in parenting education whereas non-intenders were more likely to focus on the

costs (e.g., feeling embarrassed). This finding is in accordance with previous research suggesting that both costs and benefits predicted participation (Spoth & Redmond, 1995).

The finding that behavioural beliefs predicted participation intentions suggests that, to shift the perceptions of parents not intending to participate in group parenting education, future campaigns and strategies should consider the costs and benefits of participating. A primary focus could be to decrease perception of the costs (e.g., time restraints, accessibility to childcare) and increase the perceived benefits of participating (e.g., improving the relationship with their children).

Examination of normative beliefs identified in the study revealed that different sources of perceived normative pressure were apparent. Intenders were more likely than non-intenders to report that friends and peers, spouse and partner, their own children and extended family would think they should participate in parenting education. Individuals believed their spouse or partner and extended family were most likely to think they should participate in parenting education, suggesting family or next-of-kin as a potentially important source of normative influence. Thus, a potential strategy to encourage participation in parenting education programs is to remind individuals that their family or important others would want them to participate.

Examination of control beliefs, revealed a significant difference between intenders and non-intenders. However, results from the MANOVAs revealed that only one control belief distinguished between intenders and non-intenders. For control beliefs, non-intenders were more likely than intenders to report that fatigue would prevent them from participating in parenting education. Therefore, to increase motivation to participate, it may be useful to develop strategies or practical assistance to combat the impact of fatigue on program involvement (e.g., shorter sessions).

When considering the applied implications of the findings of the present study, it should be noted that failure to recruit parents to programs is often attributed to the parent rather than an inappropriate program. However, educators may

also increase participation rates by adopting a more flexible and responsive approach that is strength-based, rather than assuming some sort of parenting skills deficit. Instead of offering programs as a panacea, educators could allow parents to play a more active role in designing their training to support and match their desired outcomes (Goddard et al., 2004). This strategy would provide parents with the opportunity to consider the unique temperament, history and circumstances of their specific child and their own needs as a parent. Educators need to consider the existing strengths of parents and build on these. They also need to recognise that parent education, in isolation, is not able to address effectively entrenched patterns of inappropriate parenting or overcome the various pressures and problems (i.e., unemployment, poverty) that can affect family functioning.

Limitations of the present research and future research directions

There are a number of limitations in this study. The findings from a sample of predominantly female (79%) parents may not necessarily generalise to the wider community. Therefore, it would be desirable to include a larger male sample in future studies to allow for a more representative assessment of factors influencing participation in parenting education. Another limitation that should be noted is the relatively affluent population (60% > \$80,000 household income). Therefore, it is unknown whether the results would be generalisable across a broader range of socioeconomic groups. Inclusion of a more representative sample, particularly of those from lower socio-economic groups, would be critical to validating these findings across the population. It should be noted also that preliminary analyses indicated that those intending to participate in parenting education were more likely to be married and be parents of younger children than those not intending to participate in parenting education. The belief-based findings reported in the present study, therefore, should be interpreted with the consideration that the two groups were demographically different in this manner.

In addition, a relatively low response rate was obtained in the study, which raises questions about the representativeness of the views

reported. Also, as self-report measures were utilised in this study, caution is needed in interpreting the findings too widely, as the issue of positive self-presentation bias may be evident. A final limitation of the study relates to the method of data collection. Sending questionnaires home with school children is a cost-effective and efficient way of disseminating questionnaires to parents. However, there is no way of knowing how many questionnaires are delivered. Future research studies could utilise an interview style, or deliver questionnaires directly to parents via a research team.

The findings of the present study, along with the limitations noted, highlight several areas for future research. Firstly, replication of the study with a greater representation of fathers would improve the generalisability of findings, as well as determine the likelihood of any sex differences. Several authors (e.g., Lloyd, 1999) argue that more research is required to determine how to engage parents who have traditionally been less likely to participate in parenting education, such as fathers. Secondly, to reflect changes occurring within education generally (e.g., use of e-learning and the Internet), future studies could investigate other types of participation behaviour (e.g., use of parent websites, parenting literature, psychologists), other than participation in group parent programs. In addition, future research could include extending this study with specific subgroups (e.g., parents of children with behavioural problems) and matching the data of parents with similar demographics/family risk factors to examine differences in beliefs and intentions that are not due to background variables.

Conclusion

In conclusion, results of the present research highlight important knowledge deficits and provide support for the use of the theory of planned behaviour model as a framework for understanding differences in underlying beliefs that distinguish between individuals who intend and do not intend to participate in group parenting education programs. Given the need to increase rates of parents in parenting programs, the current study provides important applied information which can be utilised to inform

future strategies to increase participation rates. Overall, the results of the present study suggest that targeting identified underlying beliefs may serve to strengthen the intentions of parents to participate in parenting education programs.

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