

Introduction

Safe and Understood: Collaborative Research on Embedded Parenting Interventions for Mothers and Fathers is a five-year project that is currently partnered with three universities and six not-profit organizations in Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick. The overall aim of Safe and Understood is to improve outcomes for young children at-risk because of domestic violence exposure. Projects include: 1) a cluster randomized control trial of *Mothers in Mind* (MIM) and *Caring Dads* (CD) programs with families referred to child protection services; 2) mixed methods implementation, process and outcomes research on MIM and CD expansion in rural and French-speaking contexts; 3) Participatory action research in partnership with Indigenous child welfare; and 4) a national scan of policy and practice frameworks addressing the needs of young child victims of DV.

Scan of Policy and Practice

Safe and Understood undertook a “Canadian Scan of Provincial Treatment and Intervention Services for Children Aged 0 to 4 Years Who Have Been Exposed to Domestic Violence”. This report involved conducting a Canada-wide scan on policies and services to uncover to what extent available interventions incorporate the best practice principles (i.e., dyadic, specialized, relational) for mothers and young child victims that have been exposed to domestic violence (DV).

This provincial scan revealed the following: 1) therapeutic intervention with young child victims of DV exposure and their mothers is occurring in a structured way with MIM and in a less structured way with some practitioners across the country; 2) although many more services are available for children over the age of 4, there is a general census that therapeutic services for child victims of DV are lacking; and 3) while all provinces and territories have DV/family violence prevention coordinating bodies affiliated with the government, specific policy attention to the need of child victims of DV is variable and seldom an explicit component. These findings reinforced the need for Safe and Understood, which aims to provide clear and DV-focused leadership, at the national level, to promote better outcomes for children.

Cluster Randomized Control Trial

A cluster randomized control trial of the efficacy of providing embedded mother and child focused (MIM) and father focused (CD) intervention for preventing recurrence and reducing impairment associated with child exposure to DV is currently underway in partnership with the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto. Approximately 130 social workers are involved and have been randomly assigned to one of four conditions—MIM intervention, CD intervention, MIM & CD intervention, or no intervention. These social workers have received “Round 1” intervention model training on their assigned interventions and are in the process of receiving “Round 2” training, which focuses how the MIM and CD parenting interventions could be most effectively embedded within child protection practice. As of April 2017, three group cycles of CD and four group cycles of MIM have been completed—as a result, 159 parents of 390 children have received support from MIM or CD through Children’s Aid Society of Toronto. Currently, three more group cycles of CD and three more group cycles of MIM are in progress at the three Children’s Aid Society of Toronto locations.

Implementation and Outcomes Research

Quebec and New Brunswick sites were chosen to explore the successes and barriers to quality implementation of MIM and CD in French-speaking and rural contexts. Both provinces have clinical sites that are either running or planning to run MIM and CD. The collaboration with these clinical sites has allowed for the exchange of resources (i.e., French materials for groups), and the exchange of ideas and strategies for better program implementation and recruitment.

Participatory Action Research

In partnership with Native Child Family Services Toronto (NCFST), Safe and Understood research partners have been exploring the potential applicability of the MIM intervention to Indigenous child welfare services. Over 2016, U of T, CDI and NCFST worked in partnership to offer and examine two cycles of MIM groups. Based on feedback from clients, facilitators, practice leaders and the broader advisory group, a number of changes and adaptations to the MIM program were made to better accommodate the needs of the mothers and their children at NCFST. For example, cultural adaptations, such as smudging and specific cultural self-care strategies (i.e. cedar tea, sweet grass, medicine bundles) have been integrated. Additionally, more detailed training and support around preparing facilitators and clients for MIM in-take assessments was provided.

Currently, a paper that explores the applicability of MIM within Indigenous populations is being written. This paper will reflect the MIM implementation findings at NCFST. Dr. Angelique Jenney and a co-presenter from NCFST will be presenting this paper at the II European Conference on Domestic Violence, held in Porto, Portugal from Sept. 6th–9th 2017.

Project Expansion

Safe and Understood is currently planning to provide greater outreach by expanding to Western Canada—namely Calgary, Alberta. A partnership between the University of Calgary, Wood’s Homes Children’s Mental Health Centre, and CDI is being formed to run two MIM groups and conduct research on tools to support successful program implementation. As part of this work, an online implementation monitoring system will be developed to evaluate training and ongoing skill levels of MIM facilitators, as well as to track fidelity, obtain facilitator feedback regularly and monitor potential programmatic risks.