

Adapting men's behaviour change programs online: A developmental evaluation approach

Research summary

Men's behaviour change programs (MBCPs) are an important and widely-used family violence intervention. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions heightened the risk of family violence for many, and increased demand for support. Concurrently, restrictions often prevented in-person MBCPs.

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) has more than 30 years' experience providing family violence programs for men, and is one of the largest, most experienced providers of MBCPs in Victoria. RAV also provides a wide range of family safety support services for victim-survivors.

As part of our commitment to ensuring ongoing access to services during COVID-19, we rapidly shifted to delivering many of our programs through videoconferencing (telepractice). For our MBCPs, we used a developmental (or adaptive) evaluation approach to adapt programs online.

Our evaluation indicated that after incorporating adaptations, the objectives of MBCPs were met and positive group dynamics were achieved through online program delivery. Our full evaluation demonstrates the application and utility of a developmental evaluation approach in rapidly adapting social services to be delivered online.

What we did

A developmental evaluation approach supported the rapid adaptation of existing, face-to-face MBCPs to effective online programs. The evaluation involved systemic data collection aligned with key program objectives (Patton et al., 2015).

Developmental evaluation applies evaluative thinking and evidence to the development and implementation of innovations in complex and dynamic environments (Patton, 2011). It emphasises learning, adaptation and continuous improvement during program development, and is particularly well suited to adapting programs in response to crises (Fagen et al., 2011; Patton, 2011).

This distinct approach uses guiding principles to provide direction but can also be adapted to specific contexts (Patton et al., 2015). It involves asking evaluative questions, applying evaluative logic and gathering data to provide program developers with timely feedback which informs adaptations and practice improvements.

Method

- Developmental evaluation approach.
- Qualitative and quantitative participant, facilitator and external observer data.
- Practice development and enhancements, informed by regular collaborative reviews.

Challenges of online MBCPs

- Mitigating risks, time pressures and technology issues.
- Enhancing participant engagement.
- Keeping participants in view on screen.

Positive online MBCP adaptations

- Use of break-out rooms for activities.
- Regular RAV contact with participants between groups.
- Individual assessments via telepractice.

Key learnings

- With adaptations, the key aims and objectives of MBCPs were achievable when delivered online.
- Developmental evaluation supports program adaptation and innovation in social services.

Published work & more information

Visit rav.org.au/news/MBCP-Online-Research

Developmental evaluation principles

Developmental evaluation is guided by these 8 key principles.

Timely feedback	Utilisation focused	Co-creation
Complexity perspective	Developmental purpose	Evaluation rigor
Innovation niche	Systems thinking	

(Patton, 2011)

Why we did it

Although there is robust evidence of the benefits, effectiveness, and risks of using technology in health and medicine, similar evidence on telepractice for family and relationship services is still emerging (Joshi et al., 2021). As COVID-19 developed, there was increasing demand and need for MBCPs that enhanced the safety of women and children.

With limited evidence to guide the adaptation of MBCPs for online delivery, RAV transitioned to online programs while simultaneously embedding an evaluation strategy. Adapting MBCPs in this way enabled RAV to continue delivering much-needed services during COVID-19, while remaining focused on risk management, safety and accountability.

What we found

The collaborative learning that underpinned the developmental evaluation of the first online MBCP resulted in numerous practice recommendations and adaptations. Subsequent online programs in 2020 and ongoing program delivery continue to provide additional learnings and enhancement opportunities.

In keeping with developmental evaluation principles, recommendations from weekly review sessions were discussed with program and family safety team members, and where appropriate, adaptations were implemented concurrently with the evaluation.

Consequently, numerous changes were made to online MBCPs to suit the delivery method and address related challenges.

These included adapting content and activities for an online environment, use of break-out rooms for small group activities, and regular one-on-one contact with participants between groups. We also considered technical challenges, information and consent processes, and establishing group rules and participant agreements. Ongoing data collection and evaluation ensured that changes were implemented effectively.

The key aims and objectives of MBCPs are informed by the Victorian peak bodies; Family Safety Victoria and No to Violence. Overall, despite the rapid shift in delivery format necessitated by the pandemic, evaluation data collected during the transition to online delivery indicates that these key aims and objectives were achieved.

This is evidenced by responses from participants, facilitators and external observers, which indicate that men in the programs expressed that they felt accountable for their behaviour, were challenged in their beliefs and were appropriately motivated towards change.

What can we learn?

Our research demonstrates the utility of a developmental evaluation approach in supporting the rapid adaptation of our MBCP to online delivery.

Evaluating our online MBCP provided extensive initial observations and learnings that facilitated practice adaptations for effective delivery.

An article published in the Evaluation Journal of Australasia further details our research outcomes, and contributes to the evidence about the efficacy of MBCPs. It contributes to the emerging literature on family and relationship service telepractice, and the adaptations to support it.

The evaluation also supports the emerging view that, with additional safety measures and strategies to mitigate the challenges of online delivery, best practice can be maintained. Furthermore, telepractice through videoconferencing can be an appropriate method for delivery for MBCPs.

Key recommendations & adaptations

Challenge	Recommendations & adaptations
Practical application/ activities limited	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase session duration from 1 to 1.5 hours.• Adapt course content where needed.
Technology issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Test technology in advance with participants.• Provide technical training for facilitators.
Engaging & retaining participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regularly contact participants between group sessions.• Provide break-out rooms and opportunities for participants to engage with each other casually.• Establish a system for clear communication between co-facilitators, given reduced opportunities to observe eye contact and body language.
Risk & safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Update participant agreements and consent forms to reflect online delivery.• If living together, ensure partners/ family members of participants consent to online format.• Ensure that children are not in participants' care during sessions.
Respect for group rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To maintain engagement, participants should not use other devices or browser windows during sessions.