

# Parents' perceptions of a group-based parenting programme in families with child protection and other family support services in a real-life setting

Piia Karjalainen<sup>1</sup>  | Olli Kiviruusu<sup>1</sup>  | Päivi Santalahti<sup>1,2,3</sup>  | Eeva T. Aronen<sup>4,5</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Public Health Solutions, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, Helsinki, Finland

<sup>2</sup>Department of Child Psychiatry, Helsinki University Hospital, Helsinki, Finland

<sup>3</sup>Department of Child Psychiatry, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

<sup>4</sup>Department of Child Psychiatry, Children's Hospital, Helsinki University Hospital and University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

<sup>5</sup>Laboratory of Developmental Psychopathology, Child Psychiatry, Helsinki Pediatric Research Center, University of Helsinki and Helsinki University Hospital, Helsinki, Finland

## Correspondence

Piia Karjalainen, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, B.O. Box 30, 00271 Helsinki, Finland.

Email: piia.m.karjalainen@thl.fi

## Funding information

Marjaniemi Lions Club Ladies; Emil Aaltonen Foundation; MLL Research Fund; Yrjö Jahnsson Foundation; Jalmari ja Rauha Ahokas Foundation; Alli Paasikivi Foundation

## Abstract

The aim of this study was to assess parents' satisfaction and perceived usefulness of the Incredible Years<sup>®</sup> (IY<sup>®</sup>) parenting programme in the Child Protection Services (CPS) context, where children's behaviour problems are common. Evidence-based programmes are rarely offered in CPS, and little is known about how they are perceived by parents. We compared parents ( $N = 62$ ) with ( $N = 43$ ) and without ( $N = 19$ ) CPS contact regarding their satisfaction with the IY<sup>®</sup> parenting programme, with information gathered from weekly and final evaluation forms. The attendance rate of parents to the weekly sessions (max 19) was also calculated. Comparisons between CPS and non-CPS clients were analysed using multilevel models. Satisfaction scores ranged between 5.8 and 6.2 (max 7) for all studied domains. Mean attendance rate to the group sessions was 11.5 ( $SD$  5.9), and 74% of participants attended at least nine out of 19 sessions. No group differences emerged in satisfaction or attendance between CPS and non-CPS parents. Parents in CPS committed well to the programme and found it as useful as parents without CPS contact. IY<sup>®</sup> appears to be acceptable to parents involved in CPS, and their engagement to the programme can be considered as reasonably good.

## KEYWORDS

parenting programme, incredible years, child protection services, satisfaction, perception, evidence-based practice

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Studies from the United States and Europe show that up to 20% of children in families covered by Child Protection Services (CPS) have oppositional defiant or conduct disorders (Bronsard et al., 2016) compared with 5.7% of children in population-based samples worldwide (Polanczyk, Salum, Sugaya, Caye, & Rohde, 2015). Parenting these children can be extremely challenging and stressful. When this challenge is added to the other stressors that families in CPS often experience, it is hardly surprising that parents may start using parenting behaviours that do not decrease the child's problems, instead creating more problem behaviours (Barth et al., 2005). While there is

less evidence for parenting interventions' direct impact on abuse and maltreatment (Barlow, Johnston, Kendrick, Polnay, & Stewart-Brown, 2006; Chen & Chan, 2016), meta-analyses have shown that in CPS families structured, group-based parenting support programmes based on theoretical models reduce ineffective parenting and enhance such protective factors as endorsement of appropriate child-rearing attitudes, positive parenting and parent-child interaction (Barlow et al., 2006; Chen & Chan, 2016; Mikton & Butchard, 2009). Despite their effectiveness, these evidence-based (EB) programmes are rarely provided to families receiving CPS (Barth et al., 2005; Chaffin & Friedrich, 2004; Horwitch et al., 2010; Hurlburt, Barth, Leslie, Landsverk, & McRae, 2007).

## 1.1 | Parents' engagement in parenting programmes

Although EB parenting programmes have been shown to work, engaging and retaining parents can be difficult, especially in families in CPS. Recruiting parents can be challenging due to, for example, the presence of multiple stressors and limited resources in families, the need for multifaceted, sensitive and tailored interventions or parents' lack of motivation (Azar & Wolfe, 1989; Hansen & Warner, 1992; Hansen, Warner-Rogers, & Hecht, 1998; Pote et al., 2019; Wolfe, Edwards, Manion, & Koverola, 1988). In parenting programme studies among the general population, low family income, low education or occupation, minority group status and single parenthood have been shown to be associated with dropout (Reyno & McGrath, 2006). A systematic review of predictors and strategies to increase engagement by Finan, Swierzbiolek, Priest, Warren, and Yap (2018) showed a lack of consistent evidence for predictors of parental engagement. Only one of 11 predictors (child mental health symptoms) demonstrated a reliable association with enrolment. Morawska and Sanders (2006) suggest in their review that also the way the intervention is organized (e.g., transportation difficulties, distance from services, timing of sessions, techniques used and homework), the child's age, gender and level of problem behaviour, the therapeutic relationship and parents' motivation may have an effect. However, findings have been inconsistent across studies (Morawska & Sanders, 2006). In a study conducted in the CPS context (McWey, Holtrop, Stevenson Wojciak, & Claridge, 2015), parents who had high problematic parenting scores and levels of parenting stress and low social support were more likely not to complete the intervention. In addition, studies have reported that 30%–50%—in one study up to 80% (Wolfe, Aragona, Kaufman, & Sander, 1980)—of parents in CPS drop out from parenting programmes (Marcynyszyn, Maher, & Corwin, 2011; McWey et al., 2015; Miller & Prinz, 2003; Stewart-Brown et al., 2004).

## 1.2 | Parents' satisfaction with parenting programmes

Few previous studies have evaluated client satisfaction or clients' views of usefulness of EB parenting programmes in the CPS context. However, satisfaction of clients seems to be associated with retention (Tilbury & Ramsay, 2018), although we do not know which is the cause and which the consequence (Fawley-King, Haine-Schlagel, Trask, Zhang, & Garland, 2012). Some qualitative studies on the Triple-P parenting programme in families with CPS contact have been conducted (Garcia, DeNard, Ohene, Morones, & Connaughton, 2018; Lewis, Feely, Seay, Fedoravicus, & Kohl, 2016; Petra et al., 2010). The findings have suggested that most parents find the intervention to be useful and relevant (Lewis, 2016); the parents appreciate the diverse methods (e.g., group discussions, group practices and homework) employed and the variety of parenting techniques (e.g., spending time with child and encouraging good behaviour) taught in the programme,

leading to enhanced parenting skills and better home life (Petra et al., 2010).

## 1.3 | Incredible Years® parenting programme

The Incredible Years® (IY®) parenting programme is a structured, EB programme. It has been shown to work also in the CPS context (e.g., Hurlburt, Nguyenb, Reid, Webster-Stratton, & Zhang, 2013; Karjalainen, Kiviruusu, Santalahti, & Aronen, 2019; Kleve et al., 2010) to reduce child behaviour problems. Parent satisfaction has generally been high with IY® (Axberg, Hansson, & Broberg, 2007; Azevedo, Seabra-Santos, Gaspar, & Homem, 2013; Larsson et al., 2009), but little is known about how parents view this programme in the CPS context, although there are some indications of its suitability for these parents (Marcynyszyn, Maher, & Corwin, 2011; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). Also, there seems to be a fairly common belief that these interventions are not acceptable for this target group, which may partially be due to biased assessments by caseworkers or the lack of suitable and effective EB programmes in CPS (Horwitz, Chamberlain, Landsverk, & Mullican, 2010).

## 1.4 | Aims of the study

The primary aim of this study was to investigate parents' perceptions of the IY® parenting programme in families with child protection and other family support services in a real-life setting. We compared parents with and without CPS contact. Specific questions covered (1) parents' attendance and retention in the IY® parenting programme and factors related to it and (2) participating parents' overall evaluation of the IY® parenting programme, including its usability and usefulness, as well as their satisfaction with programme content and teaching methods. The secondary aim was to describe whether there were changes in participants' self-reported parenting practices from preintervention to postintervention among parents with and without CPS contact.

# 2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

## 2.1 | Study design

This is a subanalysis of a randomized controlled trial (RCT) on the effectiveness of the IY® parenting programme conducted in families using child protection and other family support services. The study was carried out in seven municipalities across Finland. Originally, 102 children (aged 3–7 years) with behaviour problems and their parents ( $N = 122$ ) attended the study in which children were randomly assigned to an intervention ( $N = 50$ ) or control group ( $N = 52$ ). The intervention was an adapted version of a group-based IY® Preschool Basic parenting programme (Webster-Stratton, 2011; Webster-

Stratton & Reid, 2010) for CPS families, with 19 parent group meetings and four additional home visits not usually included in the programme delivered in local family counselling centres in collaboration with CPS. Data were collected at baseline (T0) and at 3 months (T1) and 12 months (T2) after the intervention.

This study focused on the intervention participants ( $N = 50$  children,  $N = 62$  parents), especially on their perceptions of and attendance in the intervention. These data were gathered after T0 and before T1 during the intervention sessions. Also, data from T0 and T1 were used in the analyses.

The original study protocol, including description of the randomization procedure as well as Materials and Methods, has been described in detail in Karjalainen et al. (2019).

## 2.2 | Participants

In Finland, CPS include preventive CPS (e.g., strengthened in-home family help, family counselling and parenting groups), noninstitutional care (child living at home) and institutional care (emergency placement of the child or child living in, e.g., a foster home or children's home). In this study, we included families whose child had behavioural problems, who received preventive CPS or noninstitutional care and whose child was living at home. To be invited to the study, the parents needed to be motivated and able to participate in the intervention and also evaluated to benefit from parenting support. Social workers and family workers assessed parents' eligibility. Parents who had severe, untreated mental health problems or an untreated substance abuse problem that would have prevented them from engaging in the intervention were not eligible for the study. Also, an acute, unresolved child protection issue involving child removal in the near future was an exclusion factor.

Local CPS workers recruited eligible families after the researchers had informed workers about the research protocol and the intervention. Due to difficulties in recruiting enough families among CPS clients, also families from other family and child services (non-CPS) were recruited. This was done in order to make IY<sup>®</sup> groups viable and also to reach target numbers for the RCT study. The participating parents of the non-CPS group were part of the trial from the beginning.

Participants comprised 50 children assigned to the intervention group and their parents ( $N = 62$  of which 12 were couples). The children and their families were currently (1) clients of CPS or receiving preventive CPS (37 children and 43 parents) or (2) clients of social services indicated to need support in parenting (non-CPS; 13 children and 19 parents). Of the children in CPS ( $N = 37$ ), six were in preventive CPS, and of the non-CPS children ( $N = 13$ ), nine were clients of family counselling centres and four were clients of other social services.

## 2.3 | Procedure

The study period was from September 2015 to June 2017. The researchers contacted 11 municipalities in which the family counselling centres had provided the IY<sup>®</sup> intervention to their families. They

inquired about the willingness of family guidance centres and local CPS to participate in the study. One municipality declined participation at an early stage, one left the study just before the recruitment due to personnel cut-backs and two were unable to find eligible participants for the study. In the end, seven municipalities, mainly from southern Finland, took part in the study.

Baseline assessments were conducted face-to-face with the participants during the 3 months prior to the intervention at the agencies' offices in different municipalities. The postassessments were conducted within 3 months after the intervention; some of these assessments were conducted in participants' homes. For their participation, participants received a small gift certificate (40 €) to a swimming pool, cinema or activity park, after both the baseline assessment and the postassessment.

## 2.4 | Intervention

Participants attended the manualized IY<sup>®</sup> Basic Preschool parenting programme (Webster-Stratton, 2011), which consisted of 19 2-h weekly group meetings supported by four additional 1- to 1.5-h structured home visits of the IY<sup>®</sup> Home Coaching programme, which were delivered approximately every 4 weeks. The home visits are not part of the Basic Preschool Programme protocol but were added for the sake of this study to give extra support to the families. This is also the recommendation of the programme developer for families in CPS (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). The duration of the IY<sup>®</sup> Basic Preschool programme is usually 14–16 sessions, but the longer version is recommended to be offered to families at high-risk (e.g., socioeconomically disadvantaged families and families in CPS; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). It gives parents more time to practice and take the newly learned skills into use. It also provides more emphasis on positive relationship building between parents and children, which these families were considered to need. There were 10–12 parents in each parenting group.

This manualized intervention is based on well-known theories, mainly Bandura's cognitive social learning theory and theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), Patterson's coercion hypothesis of negative reinforcement (Patterson, 1982), especially a 'coercive interaction cycle,' attachment theory by Ainsworth (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974; Bowlby, 1982), and operant conditioning by Skinner (Skinner, 1938). Parents are educated about Piaget's developmental cognitive learning stages and interactive learning method (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956) and children's brain development.

The intervention is based on principles of video modelling and observational and experimental learning. The goal of the intervention is to enhance and support parenting skills, to increase knowledge of child development and to improve children's positive behaviour and the parent-child interaction. Parents are taught to use more positive consistent strategies for reducing child misbehaviour by watching DVDs, rehearsing and having group discussions in a highly collaborative and interactive way. The intervention emphasizes parents' individual weekly goal-setting, self-

management, self-reflection and cognitive self-control. During home visits, group leaders enhance skills that the parents have learned in the group and provide additional vignettes and practice exercises on an individual basis. Also, weekly phone calls were made to the parents to further support learning as part of the normal procedure of the programme. Children did not attend parent group meetings but were present during home coaching sessions if they were at home at that time.

The emphasis of the programme is on building a positive foundation and enhancing positive behaviour before introducing discipline strategies. Positive parenting strategies, such as play, attention and involvement, are the basic building blocks for supporting child development and should be used frequently. Other strategies, for example, introducing consequences for aggression such as time-out, are also important for optimal child development, but should be used less frequently.

Three trained group leaders, two from family counselling services and one family worker from CPS who also conducted family visits, were running the groups. The third group leader from CPS was added to the intervention protocol to conduct home visits to CPS clients.

Programme fidelity was ensured by structured supervision and coaching as well as through the group leader's self-monitoring.

## 2.5 | Measures

### 2.5.1 | Sociodemographic background

Sociodemographic questions at baseline included background information on the children, the mothers and the fathers (age, marital status, education) and the family circumstances, that is, unemployment, financial worries and major incidents affecting the family.

### 2.5.2 | Programme attendance

The attendance rate of parents was based on whether weekly evaluation forms, which were collected at each group session (max 19 sessions), had been completed. In the analyses, attendance rate was used as a continuous variable (range 0–19). For descriptive purposes, also a four-category variable was constructed (0–3, 4–8, 9–14 and 15–19 attended sessions).

### 2.5.3 | Parent weekly evaluation form

Parents in the intervention group filled in the IY<sup>®</sup> Weekly Evaluation Form after each session as part of the programme procedure. Parents were asked how helpful they found the session content, DVD examples, group leader's teaching, group discussions and role practices. The items are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*not helpful*) to 4 (*very helpful*). For each of the five variables, a

mean score was calculated across all available sessions (max 19) for each participant with at least one Weekly Evaluation Form completed ( $N = 55$ ).

### 2.5.4 | Parent programme satisfaction questionnaire

Parents filled in the IY<sup>®</sup> *Parent Program Satisfaction Questionnaire* (PPSQ) on the last session of the programme ( $N = 43$ ). The questionnaire includes sections for *Teaching Format*, *Parenting Techniques*, *Overall Program Evaluation* and *Evaluation of Group Leaders*. Items are rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*very negative/not useful at all/considerably worse, etc.*) to 7 (*very positive/extremely useful/greatly improved, etc.*). A mean score of the items in each section was calculated for each participant ( $N = 43$ ).

In the *Teaching Format* section (five items), parents evaluated the usefulness of different working methods in the group. It consisted of the items of group discussions, practicing skills at home, session content, handouts and DVD examples. The *Parenting Techniques* section included eight items. Parents evaluated the usefulness of different strategies taught in the programme, namely praise, child-directed play, tangible rewards, ignoring, positive commands, consequences, coaching and time-out. The *Overall Program Satisfaction* section included 10 items. Parents evaluated whether they would recommend the programme to others, how they had achieved their goals, how the child had progressed with, for example, social and emotional skills, how the child's problem behaviour had changed and how confident the parent was in managing future behaviour, among others. In the *Evaluation of Group Leader* section (five items), parents evaluated the group leader's teaching, preparation, interest and concern in him/her and with his/her child, and helpfulness as well as personal feelings towards the group leader (Table 5).

### 2.5.5 | Parenting measures

The *Parent Practices Interview* (PPI), a parent-rated questionnaire, was used to assess the disciplinary style of the parent or caregiver (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). The PPI consists of several subscales and is rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). In this study, we used the *Appropriate*, *Inappropriate*, *Harsh*, *Inconsistent Discipline*, *Praise* and *Incentives* scales (Karjalainen et al., 2019). PPI scales from preintervention (T0) and postintervention (T1) were used.

## 2.6 | Statistical methods

The unit of analysis was the reporting parent. Means and standard deviations of outcome measures were presented for CPS and non-CPS clients. Due to the clustered nature of the data (within parenting programme groups, within family units), associations between

background factors and attendance as well as comparisons between CPS and non-CPS clients in programme attendance and parents' evaluations of the IY<sup>®</sup> programme were analysed using multilevel models. In each analysis, the variance of an outcome due to different levels (parenting group, family unit) was examined, and only the levels that presented significant variance were modelled in the given analysis. Comparisons between CPS and non-CPS clients in changes in parenting measures from T0 to T1 were analysed using time  $\times$  client group interaction terms in multilevel models, with time as an additional level in the analysis. All analyses were conducted using SPSS 25.

### 3 | RESULTS

#### 3.1 | Baseline characteristics

Baseline sociodemographic characteristics of the family are presented in Table 1. The mean age of participating children was 5.3 years. The

majority (65%) were boys, and 54% were from single-parent families. Of the participating mothers, 94% were Finnish-speaking, 10% had no vocational education and 27% were not currently employed. No significant differences emerged between CPS and non-CPS families in sociodemographic characteristics.

#### 3.2 | Programme attendance

Of the 62 parents allocated to the intervention, 46 (74%) attended nine or more of the 19 sessions, whereas 36% attended at least 15 sessions (Table 2). The mean rate of attendance was 11.5 (SD 5.9), with no significant difference between CPS and non-CPS families (11.2 vs. 12.0; fixed effect estimate  $-1.83$ , SE 1.90,  $p = 0.339$ ). Of the sociodemographic background factors of the child, family and parent, being a non-Finnish-speaking parent ( $p = 0.043$ ) and having no professional training ( $p = 0.031$ ) were associated with a lower number of attended sessions (Table 3).

**TABLE 1** Sociodemographic characteristics of participants at baseline ( $N = 50$  children)

Variable	Total ( $N = 50$ ) <sup>a</sup>		CPS ( $N = 37$ )		non-CPS ( $N = 13$ )		$p^b$
	$n$	%	$n$	%	$n$	%	
Child							
Age (years), mean, SD	5.3	1.2	5.2	1.2	5.6	1.3	0.301
Boy	32	64.0	24	64.9	8	61.5	1.000 <sup>c</sup>
Family							
Single-parent family	27	54.0	21	56.8	6	46.2	0.509
Difficult to cover expenses with current income	14	28.6	11	30.6	3	23.1	0.731 <sup>c</sup>
Life events in the family (3 or more)	16	32.0	13	35.1	3	23.1	0.508 <sup>c</sup>
Mother							
Age <30 years	11	22.9	10	27.8	1	8.3	0.248 <sup>c</sup>
Non-Finnish-speaking	3	6.0	2	5.4	1	7.7	1.000 <sup>c</sup>
No professional training	5	10.2	4	11.1	1	7.7	1.000 <sup>c</sup>
Unemployed	13	26.5	11	30.6	2	15.4	0.467 <sup>c</sup>

Abbreviation: CPS, Child Protection Services.

<sup>a</sup>Number of cases varies between 48 and 50 depending on the measure.

<sup>b</sup>Test for differences between CPS and non-CPS groups;  $t$ -test for continuous measures and Chi-square or Fisher's exact test for categorical measures.

<sup>c</sup>Fisher's exact test.

**TABLE 2** Parents' attendance in the intervention by client group ( $N = 62$  parents)

Number of attended sessions	Total ( $N = 62$ )		CPS ( $N = 43$ )		non-CPS ( $N = 19$ )	
	$n$	%	$n$	%	$n$	%
0–3	10	16.1	6	14.0	4	21.1
4–8	6	9.7	6	14.0	0	0.0
9–14	24	38.7	18	41.9	6	31.6
15–19	22	35.5	13	30.2	9	47.4

Abbreviation: CPS, Child Protection Services.

**TABLE 3** Child and family background factors predicting number of attended sessions ( $N = 62$  parents).

Variable	Estimate for fixed effect <sup>a</sup>	SE	$p$
Child			
Age (years)	-0.38	0.70	0.595
Boy	-0.50	1.76	0.779
Family			
Single-parent family	2.81	1.65	0.095
Difficult to cover expenses with current income	0.38	1.94	0.845
Life events in the family (3 or more)	-2.55	1.77	0.156
Parent			
Age <30 years	-3.11	1.98	0.122
Non-Finnish-speaking	-3.70	1.72	0.043
No professional training	-3.36	1.47	0.031
Unemployed	-0.89	1.52	0.559

<sup>a</sup>Estimates are from multilevel models taking into account the non-independence of observations within the family unit.

### 3.3 | Programme evaluation and satisfaction

Parents evaluated the weekly session's content, DVD examples, the group leader's teaching, group discussions and role practices as helpful; on the scale from 1 (*not helpful*) to 4 (*very helpful*), the mean scores of the evaluations varied between 2.8 and 3.3 depending on the evaluated domain (Table 4). CPS families found DVD examples to be more helpful ( $p = 0.017$ ), but no other significant differences emerged between CPS and non-CPS families.

In the final evaluation form (PPSQ), parents evaluated teaching format, parenting techniques, the programme overall and group leaders in general as useful/good/positive; on the scale from 1 to 7, the scores ranged between 5.8 and 6.2 points for the means of the evaluated domains (Table 4). No significant differences emerged between CPS and non-CPS families.

Of the items in the teaching format, parents liked group discussions the most (mean 6.5); 51% of parents rated them as extremely useful (Table 5). On the other hand, DVD examples were liked the least (mean 5.5), with 43% of parents rating them as somewhat useful or less useful. Parents found praise and encouragement to be the most useful parenting technique (mean 6.5); it was rated as extremely useful by 58% of parents. However, they found using time-out to calm a child to be the least useful (mean 4.5); 18% of parents rated it as extremely useless, useless or slightly useless, whereas 38% rated it as a neutral technique.

Overall, parents were quite satisfied with the programme; 86% would recommend (38%) or strongly recommend (48%) it to others (mean 6.3). They thought that the approach used to enhance their child's behaviour was appropriate (appropriate 54%, greatly appropriate 33%; mean 6.3), and they felt positive (positive 63%, very positive 28%; mean 6.2) in how they had achieved the goals that they had set for themselves in the programme.

Regarding the group leaders, parents found them helpful (52%) or very helpful (43%; mean 6.4). Overall parents liked their group leaders (48% liked him/her, 45% liked him/her a lot; mean 6.4).

### 3.4 | Parenting outcomes

With the exception of appropriate discipline, the use of positive parenting practices seemed to increase and negative parenting practices to decrease in all studied PPI subscales when compared before and

**TABLE 4** Means (SD) of parents' weekly (averaged) and final evaluations of the IY<sup>®</sup> programme by client group

Weekly evaluations <sup>a</sup>	Total (N = 55) Mean (SD)	CPS (N = 39) Mean (SD)	Non-CPS (N = 16) Mean (SD)	$p^c$
Session content	3.2 (0.4)	3.2 (0.3)	3.2 (0.5)	0.918
DVD examples	2.9 (0.4)	2.9 (0.4)	2.8 (0.3)	0.017
Group leader's teaching	3.2 (0.4)	3.2 (0.4)	3.1 (0.5)	0.462
Group discussions	3.3 (0.4)	3.3 (0.4)	3.3 (0.6)	0.736
Role practices	2.8 (0.5)	2.8 (0.5)	2.7 (0.4)	0.790
Final evaluation <sup>b</sup>	Total (N = 43) Mean (SD)	CPS (N = 30) Mean (SD)	Non-CPS (N = 13) Mean (SD)	$p^c$
Teaching format	5.9 (0.5)	6.0 (0.5)	5.8 (0.6)	0.337
Parenting techniques	5.8 (0.6)	5.8 (0.6)	5.8 (0.6)	0.755
Overall programme evaluation	5.9 (0.4)	5.9 (0.4)	5.8 (0.5)	0.314
Evaluation of group leader	6.2 (0.6)	6.2 (0.6)	6.0 (0.5)	0.313

Abbreviation: IY<sup>®</sup>, Incredible Years<sup>®</sup>.

<sup>a</sup>Average score of 19 weekly sessions; evaluation scale: 1 = not helpful, 4 = very helpful.

<sup>b</sup>Evaluation scale: 1 = very poor, 7 = very good.

<sup>c</sup> $p$  values are from multilevel models taking into account the nonindependence of observations (within IY parenting group and family unit) where appropriate.

**TABLE 5** Means (SD) and distributions of final programme evaluation items reported by parents in IY parenting groups (N = 43 parents)

Measure	n	Mean (SD)	Distributions of response categories <sup>a</sup> , %					Total %
			Values 1–3	Value 4	Value 5	Value 6	Value 7	
<b>Overall programme</b>								
Recommend to others	42	6.3 (0.9)	2.4	0.0	11.9	38.1	47.6	100.0
Goal achievement	43	6.2 (0.7)	0.0	2.3	7.0	62.8	27.9	100.0
Approach used to enhance child's behaviour	43	6.2 (0.7)	0.0	2.3	11.6	53.5	32.6	100.0
Social, emotional, academic development	42	5.9 (0.7)	0.0	2.4	19.0	61.9	16.7	100.0
Original problems for attending the programme	43	5.8 (0.6)	0.0	0.0	25.6	65.1	9.3	100.0
Behaviour problems	43	5.8 (0.7)	0.0	2.3	25.6	58.1	14.0	100.0
Confidence in parenting	43	5.8 (0.8)	2.3	0.0	25.6	58.1	14.0	100.0
Confidence in managing future misbehaviour	43	5.7 (0.9)	2.3	2.3	25.6	60.5	9.3	100.0
Expectations for good results from programme	43	5.7 (1.0)	2.3	4.7	20.9	60.5	11.6	100.0
Other family problems	43	5.6 (1.1)	2.3	11.6	27.9	41.9	16.3	100.0
<b>Teaching format</b>								
Group discussions	43	6.5 (0.6)	0.0	0.0	4.7	44.2	51.2	100.0
Practicing skills at home	43	6.0 (0.9)	2.3	4.7	11.6	53.5	27.9	100.0
Content of information presented	43	5.9 (0.6)	0.0	4.7	9.3	76.7	9.3	100.0
Weekly handouts	43	5.7 (0.8)	0.0	11.6	18.6	62.8	7.0	100.0
DVD examples	42	5.5 (0.9)	4.8	7.1	31.0	52.4	4.8	100.0
<b>Parenting techniques</b>								
Praise and encouragement	43	6.5 (1.0)	2.3	0.0	0.0	39.5	58.1	100.0
Child-directed play	43	6.1 (0.9)	0.0	7.0	11.6	41.9	39.5	100.0
Tangible rewards	42	6.0 (0.8)	0.0	2.4	21.4	45.2	31.0	100.0
Ignoring	43	6.0 (0.8)	0.0	2.3	20.9	48.8	27.9	100.0
Positive commands	43	5.8 (0.9)	2.3	4.7	20.9	51.2	20.9	100.0
Loss of privileges, consequences	41	5.8 (0.9)	0.0	7.3	31.7	39.0	22.0	100.0
Coaching	43	5.6 (1.0)	0.0	20.9	16.3	46.5	16.3	100.0
Time-out to calm down	40	4.5 (1.4)	17.5	37.5	12.5	30.0	2.5	100.0
<b>Evaluation of parent group leader</b>								
Group leader's helpfulness	42	6.4 (0.6)	0.0	0.0	4.8	52.4	42.9	100.0
Liking on a personal level	42	6.4 (0.6)	0.0	0.0	7.1	47.6	45.2	100.0
Interest/concern in participant and his/her child	42	6.2 (0.8)	0.0	7.1	2.4	52.4	38.1	100.0
Group leader's preparation	42	6.0 (0.8)	0.0	2.4	14.3	61.9	21.4	100.0
Group leader's teaching	42	5.9 (0.7)	2.4	2.4	7.1	73.8	14.3	100.0

<sup>a</sup>Evaluation scale: 1 = very poor/not useful at all/considerably worse, ..., 4 = neutral, ..., 7 = very good/extremely useful/greatly improved.

after the intervention (Table 6). When comparing these changes between client groups, the only significant difference was in the use of incentives ( $p = 0.031$ ), indicating that use of parenting measures within this domain increased more in the non-CPS group from preintervention to postintervention.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate parents' perceptions and attendance of a structured, manualized, EB parenting

programme (IY<sup>®</sup>) delivered in group format to CPS and non-CPS families. The results showed that this intervention was well-accepted by both CPS and non-CPS clients. The attendance rate was fairly high, as were satisfaction rates, across all researched domains. There were no group differences in attendance or perceived usefulness of the programme. Low educational level and being a non-Finnish speaker were associated with lower attendance. For the most part, the parenting practices changed in the right direction. The use of incentives (e.g., giving stickers, stars, treats or doing something fun with the child) increased more in the non-CPS group.

**TABLE 6** Means (SD) of PPI subscales preintervention and postintervention by client group

PPI subscale	CPS		Non-CPS		<i>p</i> <sup>a</sup>
	Pre (N = 41)	Post (N = 41)	Pre (N = 18)	Post (N = 17)	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Appropriate discipline	5.1 (0.7)	4.6 (0.9)	4.8 (0.6)	4.8 (0.8)	0.097
Inappropriate discipline	2.1 (0.7)	2.0 (0.8)	1.8 (0.4)	1.6 (0.5)	0.902
Harsh discipline	4.3 (1.1)	3.6 (1.2)	4.0 (0.8)	3.2 (0.9)	0.893
Inconsistent discipline	2.8 (0.8)	2.5 (0.7)	2.6 (0.8)	2.3 (0.7)	0.711
Praise	5.1 (0.7)	5.5 (0.9)	5.2 (0.5)	5.8 (0.6)	0.208
Incentives	3.6 (0.8)	4.0 (0.9)	3.1 (0.7)	4.0 (0.7)	0.031

Abbreviation: CPS, Child Protection Services; PPI, Parenting Practices Interview.

<sup>a</sup>*p* values are for time × client group interaction term from multilevel models taking into account clustering within the family unit (variance in outcome variables due to parenting group was nonsignificant).

#### 4.1 | Parents' attendance

In our study, 74.2% attended approximately half or more than half of the sessions and 35.5% attended 15 (out of 19) sessions or more. This is quite close to the retention rate of 71% reported in another IY<sup>®</sup> study conducted in child welfare services (Marcynyszyn, Maher, & Corwin, 2011). In the study by McWey et al. (2015), of the 31 parents who began the parent training group, 65% (*N* = 20) completed the intervention and 35% (*N* = 11) did not. In other intervention studies conducted in CPS, the dropout rate has been somewhat higher, over 40% (Miller & Prinz, 2003; Nock & Kazdin, 2005; Patterson, Mockford, & Stewart-Brown, 2005; Stewart-Brown et al., 2004). While comparisons of the attendance rates between studies are rather difficult due to different definitions of dropout and retention, the attendance rate in our study can in any case be regarded as reasonably good. Moreover, parents in CPS attended the groups as much as parents without CPS involvement.

The reason behind the relatively high retention rate in our study can only be speculated. It might be that the voluntary participation in the programme or parent's initial motivation to participate (one of the intake criteria) has contributed to the attendance rate. The participants also had face-to-face meetings with group leaders prior to groups and also during home visits, which, as Chaffin and Friedrich (2004) suggest, might be a factor increasing motivation among parents. Also, Lees, Frampton, and Merry (2019) found in their study that adding home visits supports attendance and reduces dropouts. Moreover, studies have suggested that additional support from providers (e.g., group leaders), such as weekly check-up calls to parents, might be a factor in parents' motivation and engagement (Petra & Kohl, 2010; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010).

Research has demonstrated a number of known risk factors associated with attendance of parents involved in CPS. In many studies, low family income, low education/occupation and single parenthood have been cited as indicators for dropout or low retention rate,

although findings have been somewhat inconsistent across studies (Morawska & Sanders, 2006; Reyno & McGrath, 2006). We found no correlation between attendance rate and family income, occupational status or single parenthood, whereas educational level and language correlated with attendance. Thus, there seems to be a lack of consistent evidence for predictors and strategies to increase engagement (Finan et al., 2018), and more research is needed especially in CPS to provide targeted services to these clients.

#### 4.2 | Parents' satisfaction

All parents were satisfied with the programme according to both weekly and final evaluations in all domains (5.8–6.2 points out of 7). The results were in line with another IY<sup>®</sup> study conducted in a CPS context (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010), where evaluations from parents were very positive, with all scores for variables averaging 5.7 or more. Also, in a study of another structured, group-based programme (Triple-P) delivered in CPS, most parents found the intervention useful and relevant (Lewis, 2016). This was also the case with other IY<sup>®</sup> studies carried out in non-CPS contexts in which the assessment of parents' satisfaction with IY<sup>®</sup> was rated as high and very positive (Axberg et al., 2007; Azevedo et al., 2013; Larsson et al., 2009). In an IY<sup>®</sup> study conducted in diverse clinical settings in Sweden (Axberg et al., 2007), 97% of parents had positive (31%) or very positive (66%) overall ratings of the treatment programme for their child and family. In a similar IY<sup>®</sup> study in Norway (Larsson et al., 2009), 93.8% of mothers and 83.7% of fathers considered the treatment programme as good or very good at the one-year follow-up.

In this study, 85.7% of parents would recommend or strongly recommend the programme to others, which is consistent with studies carried out in Sweden (18% recommend, 80% strongly recommend), Portugal (96% strongly recommend) and Norway, where 93.8% of mothers and 95.4% of fathers would recommend or strongly recommend the programme even 1 year after the programme (Axberg et al., 2007; Azevedo et al., 2013; Larsson et al., 2009).

Parents also assessed achieving their goals in the intervention for their child and family as high (mean 6.2 points out of 7). Similar results have been reported for the programme Pathways Triple-P (Lewis, 2016). Garcia et al. (2018) emphasized individual goal setting in the groups, which also makes parents more cooperative with the programme.

The greatest problems that had prompted parents to initially take part in the intervention had gotten better (mean 5.8 points out of 7). The same finding was made in another study of IY<sup>®</sup> in the CPS context (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010), with a similar mean score (5.7). In this study, parents reported that the major problems that had motivated them to attend the programme had greatly improved (9%) or improved (65%). In other IY<sup>®</sup> studies conducted in non-CPS contexts (Axberg et al., 2007; Azevedo et al., 2013), the child's initial problems had greatly improved (31%–44%) or improved (40–58%). Furthermore, parents reported that their child's behaviour problems had gotten better (58%) or significantly better (14%). The same was found in a Portuguese study (Azevedo et al., 2013), where 89% of mothers felt that their child's behaviour improvements were slightly positive (36%) or very positive (53%).

Most of the parents (86.1%) felt that the approach used to change the child's behaviour problems in the programme was appropriate (53.5%) or very appropriate (32.6%). Parents in other, non-CPS IY<sup>®</sup> studies (Axberg et al., 2007; Azevedo et al., 2013) felt similarly (29%–33% appropriate, 55%–71% very appropriate). Also, in this study, parents felt that the IY<sup>®</sup> programme had helped them with other personal and family problems not directly related to the child (mean 5.6, *SD* = 1.1), which is in accord with the Portuguese study (mean 6.14, *SD* = 1.0) conducted by Azevedo et al. (2013). Most of the parents felt confident (58%) or very confident (14%) in managing current behaviour problems (mean 5.8) or future behaviour problems (61% confident, 9% very confident; mean 5.7) at home by using the strategies from IY<sup>®</sup> on their own. Another study on IY<sup>®</sup> in CPS (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010) found also that parents' confidence in handling behaviour problems was rated highly (mean 6.2). In the Portuguese study, 89% of mothers felt confident or very confident in managing current (78% and 11%) or future (82% and 7%) behaviour problems (Azevedo et al., 2013).

Parents in both CPS and non-CPS groups were quite satisfied with the teaching methods, especially the group discussions, as well as the usefulness of parenting techniques taught in the programme, which made them feel more confident in parenting and managing their child's misbehaviour. They also felt that the intervention had helped them with other family problems. These findings are in line with the study of Triple-P (Petra & Kohl, 2010), according to which parents in CPS appreciated the variety of structural elements (group, phone calls) and teaching/learning methods (group discussions, workbook, DVD examples) utilized in the programme as well as the variety of parenting techniques taught, which led to enhanced parenting skills and better home life. The group provided an opportunity for discussion with other parents, normalizing the difficulties and struggles encountered upon seeing others in similar situations (Petra & Kohl, 2010). This was also the case in IY<sup>®</sup> studies

conducted in non-CPS contexts (Axberg et al., 2007; Bywater, Hutchings, Gridley, & Jones, 2011).

When evaluating the usefulness of the parenting techniques taught in the programme, 70% of parents rated them overall as useful or very useful, in accordance with the Swedish clinical study by Axberg et al. (2007), where parents perceived the techniques as somewhat useful (10%), useful (36%) or extremely useful (49%). Parents rated praise and encouragement as the most useful techniques and time-out as the least useful. This might be due to these types of parenting programmes emphasizing the enhancement of positive behaviour. Quite often, problem behaviour or aggression is reduced by using these techniques, diminishing the need to use restricting negative behaviour.

Both CPS and non-CPS clients rated the group leader's teaching, preparation, interest and concern for them and their child, the group leader's helpfulness and personal feelings towards the group leader as high, CPS clients rating all items higher. Almost all parents (95.3%) thought that the group leaders were helpful or very helpful, and 92.8% of parents liked or very much liked their group leaders. The alliance between participants and the group leader or therapist has been found to be an important factor for increasing satisfaction and improving parent's participation in the programme (Garcia et al., 2018; Hansen & Warner, 1992; Hansen et al., 1998).

### 4.3 | Parents' perceptions of their use of positive parenting practices

The use of positive parenting practices increased in the whole intervention group (both CPS and non-CPS families). Use of incentives increased more among parents in the non-CPS group. The reason for this might be the time and consistency needed to use them. There was some reduction in using appropriate discipline in the CPS group. It might be that parents became more aware of their inappropriate parenting skills during the intervention, therefore rating them more critically in postassessment. The reduction in use of harsh and inconsistent discipline and the increase in praise and incentives have been shown also in other IY<sup>®</sup> studies conducted in the CPS context (Kjellgren, Svedin, & Nilsson, 2013; Letarte, Normandeau, & Allard, 2010; Zhou et al., 2017). Furthermore, a Cochrane review (Barlow et al., 2006) concluded that group-based parenting programmes seem to impact outcomes that are associated with abusive parenting. In the study of McWey et al. (2015), parents who completed the group programme had higher scores on appropriate discipline, clear expectations, positive verbal discipline and praise and incentives, whereas those who did not complete the group programme tended to have higher scores on harsh and inconsistent discipline.

### 4.4 | Additional home coaching

In this study, we added four home-coaching sessions for each of the families to give extra support to parents in learning, to provide individual attention and to enhance attendance in groups. We do not

know whether this affected the results for parenting practices or attendance. However, Lees and Fergusson (2015) found that the addition of IY<sup>®</sup> Home Coaching alongside IY<sup>®</sup> Parent Group led to significant improvements in child behaviour and high levels of parent satisfaction. Extra support in the home helped the most vulnerable families to implement parenting strategies and remain engaged in the IY<sup>®</sup> parenting programme. However, any additional effectiveness of IY<sup>®</sup> Home Coaching over the IY<sup>®</sup> parenting programme could not be confirmed in their study (Lees & Fergusson, 2015).

#### 4.5 | Strengths and limitations

The study has some limitations that warrant mention. First, the low number of participants and the lack of parents with severe and untreated mental health problems or substance abuse problems might have affected the generalizability of the findings. Second, using the evaluation forms from each session might not be accurate for reporting attendance because some parents might have attended the group but for some reason did not fill in the form. Also, not all parents attended the final session, and therefore, did not fill in the final evaluation (PPSQ). However, when we compared the weekly evaluations between those participating ( $N = 43$ ) and not participating ( $N = 12$ ) in the last session, there were no significant differences between the groups (all  $p$  values  $> 0.05$ ; results not shown). This suggests that any bias due to missing PPQS forms from those not attending the last session would have been modest.

Strengths of the study include it being conducted in a real-life setting; results can thus be considered a reflection of how this type of group-based programme works in CPS, especially in the Finnish system. Data regarding parents' satisfaction were collected weekly, increasing the reliability of the results.

#### 4.6 | Conclusions

Our findings suggest that IY<sup>®</sup> as group-based parenting support is a good fit and is acceptable and satisfactory to parents involved in CPS. This supports the idea of using well-executed, EB parenting interventions also in CPS. These interventions seem to increase positive parenting practices, diminishing the risk of child maltreatment and reducing costly out-of-home placements (Barlow et al., 2006; Chen & Chan, 2016; Mikton & Butchart, 2009; Prinz, Sanders, Shapiro, Whitaker, & Lutzker, 2009). They also offer structured, low-cost parenting support to be used in these services.

The EB programmes are corroborated by the productiveness evaluation of CPS of the National Economy of Finland, which states that open care would be more effective if families are more effectively supported. At best, by increasing intensive family work, out-of-home placements could be prevented (Lastensuojelu – tulok sellisuustarkastuskertomus, 2012). However, the use of EB programmes in CPS is a novelty in Finland, whereas in other countries, it has started to gain ground, albeit rarely provided to

families in CPS (Barth et al., 2005; Chaffin & Friedrich, 2004; Hurlburt et al., 2007), which instead receive parenting support interventions that lack empirical research of their effectiveness (Barth et al., 2005; Chaffin & Friedrich, 2004; Hurlburt et al., 2007).

On the basis of the current findings, we propose that policy-makers put more efforts into delivering EB parenting programmes also to clients of CPS.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Alli Paasikivi Foundation, the Jalmari ja Rauha Ahokas Foundation, the Yrjö Jahnsso Foundation, the MLL Research Fund, the Emil Aaltonen Foundation and the Marjaniemi Lions Club Ladies.

#### ETHICS APPROVAL

The study protocol was reviewed by the Intermunicipal Hospital District of the Helsinki-Uusimaa Ethics Committee in February 2016, and the trial was registered in the ClinicalTrials.gov registry (NCT03239990).

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

#### FUNDING INFORMATION

This work was supported by the Alli Paasikivi Foundation, the Jalmari ja Rauha Ahokas Foundation, the Yrjö Jahnsso Foundation, the MLL Research Fund, the Emil Aaltonen Foundation and the Marjaniemi Lions Club Ladies.

#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Authors Olli Kiviruusu, Eeva Aronen and Päivi Santalahti have no conflicts to be declared. Author Piia Karjalainen gets paid in training occasionally daycare and school personnel in Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Program.

#### ORCID

Piia Karjalainen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7339-888X>

Olli Kiviruusu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4864-8378>

Päivi Santalahti  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7223-4071>

Eeva T. Aronen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8756-8894>

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**How to cite this article:** Karjalainen P, Kiviruusu O, Santalahti P, Aronen ET. Parents' perceptions of a group-based parenting programme in families with child protection and other family support services in a real-life setting. *Child & Family Social Work*. 2020;1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12787>