ParentChat: An online adaptation of Parenting for Lifelong Health delivered via videoconferencing and chat sessions.

Research goal: To test the feasibility of ParentChat in reducing child maltreatment and improving parent–child relationships and child wellbeing in Montenegro.

Participants: 54 parents with children aged 2 to 17

Timeline: 2021

Intervention: ParentChat aims to promote playful parenting and prevent violence through online support groups for parents of children aged 2 to 17. The content is adapted from the Parenting for Lifelong Health programmes for young children and adolescents into a support group programme delivered via online text messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp.

Our whole family environment has improved. Simply said, our relationships at home are better after the time we spend with our children and family. Of course, there is more love and harmony, and all this leads to harmony and progress in general.

Montenegrin father
The programme content includes text/audio messages, video messages, illustrated comics, and home-activity assignments. The content focuses on spending time with children, positive reinforcement, keeping children safe, and coping with difficulties.

ParentChat was delivered by trained facilitators to groups of about 8–11 parents over an eight-week period with one video session and one chat session per week and daily messages to support engagement.

**Study design:** All parents completed surveys before and after the programme. Ten parents and six facilitators were also interviewed by a trained researcher. This data was analysed to determine whether the programme had an impact on harsh discipline and positive parenting.

**KEY MESSAGES:**
- A [2018 study](#) found that 66 per cent of Montenegrin children between the ages of 1 and 14 had been exposed to violent discipline in the past month.
- Child abuse has a severe and lasting impact on children’s physical and mental health, with knock-on effects at the economic and societal levels.
- In countries like Montenegro, online parenting support groups show promise in reducing child maltreatment, increasing positive parenting, and improving parental mental health.
- Online parenting interventions have lower costs, enable greater beneficiary reach, and can be implemented even during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

**KEY FINDINGS:**
- Average attendance rates were high: 80 per cent attended 11 sessions or more out of the 16. Female caregivers, caregivers who had a daughter and who had finished university education had a higher attendance. Once started, only two participants dropped out of the programme, suggesting good levels of acceptability.
- Compared to pre-programme levels, parents reported that positive parenting increased by 6 per cent, child maltreatment was reduced overall by 57 per cent, and parental depression and stress decreased by 22 per cent and 33 per cent, respectively.
● Caregivers who reported higher child misbehaviour before the programme and female caregivers who had experienced intimate partner violence, had a greater reduction in child maltreatment. Given the sample size, such results should be interpreted with caution. Other caregiver and child characteristics did not impact the programme outcomes. No harmful effects were reported.

● Analysis of the interview data showed that parents found ParentChat to be acceptable and effective. Parents reported that the programme resulted in a positive difference in the way they approach parenting and their family relationships.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE:

● ParentChat, a digital parenting programme, shows promise in reducing child maltreatment and improving child wellbeing in Montenegro.

● In Montenegro, digital parenting programmes can be implemented successfully at a low cost by local partners, and should be made more widely available.

● Implementing partners should be encouraged to collect monitoring and evaluation data on digital programming to inform the strengthening of these interventions and enable successful delivery.

● Further research on digital parenting programmes in Montenegro is highly encouraged.

“\nMy children are good, but sometimes they are mischievous, and I was constantly looking for a way to calm them down, persuade them to tidy up their toys, and teach them what is positive and what is not. One day, I learned about UNICEF’s parenting programme and decided to apply to acquire skills that will help me in raising my children.

Milos Rajkovic – ParentChat participant\n”