

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

## Mothers' online message board questions about parenting infants and toddlers

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**Abstract**

**Aim.** To report a study conducted to explore childrearing concerns through an analysis of online parenting message boards managed by popular parenting magazines.

**Background.** Increasingly, mothers appear to be turning to the Web for childrearing advice and support. However, no previous studies have examined the childrearing concerns of mothers of infants and toddlers through the analysis of online message board postings.

**Design.** Ethnographic content analysis methods were used to analyse the online postings.

**Methods.** A total of 120 messages posted in 2007 by mothers of 0–2 year olds on the websites of two best-selling parenting magazines in the United States were submitted to ethnographic content analysis. Each message pertained to one or more of six childrearing domains: Feeding/Eating, Sleep, Development, Discipline, Toilet-Training and Mother–Child Relationships.

**Results.** Questions and pleas for support were most prominently centred on feeding/eating and sleep issues. Mothers expressed concerns about when and how their children should begin to sleep and eat independently. In addition to the themes specific to particular domains, across-domain themes were identified involving mothers' parenting stress, questioning of advice from families/paediatricians and worries that children were not developing normally.

**Conclusion.** Online forums have become a space where mothers can openly describe their own negative emotions towards parenting and ask questions or gain reassurance to resolve mixed messages about how one should rear infants and toddlers. Paediatric nurses should be aware that mothers are confused about conflicting messages, especially in the domains of sleeping and eating. Reviewing parenting message boards occasionally would give nurses continuing insight into common parenting concerns.

**Keywords:** childrearing, mothers, nurses, nursing, online forums, social support

## Introduction

Living in an era of socioeconomic mobility, globalization, and powerful technological advances in the ability to communicate across the miles, today's parents are exposed to multiple, sometimes conflicting messages about how one should rear infants and young children (Connell-Carrick 2006, St. James-Roberts *et al.* 2006, Cornelius *et al.* 2008). In the West, for example, ideas inspired by Asian and African practices such as co-sleeping, proximal care and nursing after the first birthday have led some paediatricians to advocate for these practices, despite their divergence from the traditions of most Western European and North American parents (e.g. Hewlett *et al.* 1998, Karp 2003, Sears & Sears 2003, St. James-Roberts 2007). Others, however, encourage a return to the sterner childrearing practices of past generations (e.g. Rosemond 2006). Elsewhere in the world, similar diversity of opinion has arisen as the voices of childrearing 'experts' in the USA and Western Europe dialogue with those of local professionals and long-standing tradition (Ispa, 2002, Kagitcibasi 2007, Porter 2008). Parents are thus faced with a variety of options.

These trends, together with modern-day job-related relocations that lessen connections with family and friend networks, may help explain mothers' increasing turn to the Web for childrearing advice and support (Drentea & Moren-Cross 2005, Sarkadi & Bremberg 2005, Hall & Irvine 2008, Plantin & Daneback 2009). As noted by Rothbaum *et al.* (2008), the Web is attractive because it is 'always available, it is up to date and it is fast' (p. 119).

Although several researchers have begun to address parents' use of online resources, we know of no previous studies examining childrearing concerns through the analysis of online message board postings. Parenting message boards can provide rich information about the childrearing challenges that parents face on a daily basis. As message board participants have the option of posting anonymously, it is possible that parents express their honest feelings and concerns more openly than they would in response to conventional data collection methods such as interviews.

## Background

It is a worldwide trend for parents to go online to seek childrearing information. Studies from Sweden (Sarkadi & Bremberg 2005), Canada (Statistics Canada 2009) and Japan (Toyama *et al.* 2010) have demonstrated that many parents use the Internet daily. According to a 2004 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, accessing the Web is also the 'new normal' in American life. According to that survey, 85% of women who go online search for health

information and 63% go to support-group Web sites (Rainie & Horrigan 2005).

Many benefits of online support for mothers have been reported. Drentea and Moren-Cross (2005) noted that mothers have started to turn to online communities for network capital, a type of social capital provided by network members who help each other by giving emotional support, information, and even material resources. Online networks allow mothers to look for others who share the same life transitions and who will listen to complaints and frustrations, offer sympathy, and allow exploration of ideas related to parenting. Some mothers may prefer the anonymity of online interactions and the freedom to post or not post a response without feeling guilty about burdening someone. Such support in cyber space may increase mothers' sense of empowerment in their parenting roles (Dunham *et al.* 1998, O'Connor & Madge 2004, Madge & O'Connor 2006, Na & Chia 2008).

There is some question as to whether or not contemporary Web-users are a select group. Some studies suggest that mothers who have regular access to a computer are more economically advantaged than mothers who do not have such access (Drentea & Moren-Cross 2005, Rothbaum *et al.* 2008, Plantin & Daneback 2009). However, there are also some findings that show no clear link between demographic characteristics and Internet activity. For example, a Swedish study indicates that parents' sociodemographic status is not associated with frequency of internet use (Sarkadi & Bremberg 2005). It seems that the trend for Internet users to be affluent and educated has diminished over the years (Quan-Haase *et al.* 2002).

The purpose of the current study was to explore the childrearing concerns expressed on online message boards. We focused on mothers' concerns about infants and toddlers under the age of 3 because previous research has suggest that mothers of this age-group perceive more parenting challenges than mothers of older children (Fuligni & Brooks-Gunn 2002). We attended specifically to mothers' questions about feeding, sleep, cognitive, language, physical and socioemotional development, discipline, toilet training, and the mother-child relationship. Our choice of domains was based on the prominence of these issues in childrearing books for parents of this age-group in the USA, UK, France, China, and Japan (Tsuneyoshi & Boocock 1997, Connell-Carrick 2006).

## The study

### Aim

The aim of the study was to explore childrearing concerns through an analysis of online parenting message boards managed by popular parenting magazines.

## Design

Ethnographic content analysis methods (ECA, Altheide 1987, 1996) were used to analyse the postings. ECA combines inductive searches for constructs using the recursive constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to identify constructs of interest and count their frequency in the documents. In accord with ECA, we developed some categories (the parenting practices domains) prior to data collection, the themes describing parenting concerns in those categories emerged during data analysis. In ECA, categories are often differentiated into two types, those that identify content and those that identify themes, or patterns of tone and perspective in the content areas (Carpenter 2001, Laird *et al.* 2007).

## Sample

Two online message boards maintained by popular parenting magazines in the United States, *Parents* and *American Baby*, were used for the study. In 2006, Amazon.com rated them as among the five top-selling parenting magazines. *Magazines for Libraries* describes these magazines as providers of childrearing advice to parents of young children, particularly those aged 2 and under, and as targeted to a general audience (i.e. they are not affiliated to specific religious or ethnic groups or aimed at parents of special needs or gifted children). Both message boards are organized according to the age of the child (e.g. infant, toddler, pre-schooler). For the current study, we read only messages posted in the infant and toddler categories. If the child's age was not clear, the message was excluded from the sample.

As indicated above, based on our review of prominent issues in parenting books and magazines, we also limited the sample of postings to those pertaining to feeding/eating, sleep, children's development, discipline, toilet training and/or the mother-child relationship. Sub-themes in these concerns and additional, unexpected, themes in each domain were allowed to emerge through an interactive process of open coding. All messages from an individual were included if they pertained to any of these domains. Eight parents posted to more than one domain. If a parent posted more than once in a domain, only the first posting was included in the sample.

The postings were written by 112 parents. Forty-three per cent of the posters ( $n = 48$ ) shared biographical information, including their gender and age and the number, age(s) and gender of their child(ren). All who listed demographic information indicated that they were mothers and many posters who did not share biographical information had

usernames that included words such as 'mommy' 'mom' or female first names. There was one poster who did not list demographic information and used the username 'newdaddy'. This was the only poster who clearly was male. Data presented by the posters indicated that their average age was 26.8. Fifty-seven per cent had only one child. Slightly more than half of the postings (54.9%) pertained to sons.

## Data collection

The dates of the postings ranged from 14 March 2007–14 May 2007. In April and May of that year, the first 20 Internet postings per age group (infants, ones and twos) were downloaded from each website, for a total of 120 messages. The unit of analysis was a posting that reflected a parent's concern related to childrearing; it did not include responses to the parent.

## Ethical considerations

This study was considered exempt by the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board.

## Data analysis

Themes and subthemes within and between the domains were allowed to emerge through an interactive process of open coding. This process involved juxtaposition of the theme in each posting with previously identified themes to determine if the meaning of the new one fit in a previously identified one or seemed to be in a class of its own. The content in 97 of the 120 postings was relevant to just one domain, the remaining 23 postings each included content that was relevant to two domains, yielding a total of 143 domain-specific items ( $97 + [23 \times 2]$ ). Ninety-four postings were assigned to only one theme, 26 contained content relevant for two themes. The percentages shown below were calculated in relation to the total number of postings in a domain. For example, there were 51 postings in the Feeding/Eating domain. Thirty-six postings were about 'nutrition'. Therefore, the percentage of postings fitting this theme was  $(36/51) \times 100 = 70.6\%$ .

## Inter-rater reliability

The two authors independently coded the domain(s) fitting each of the 120 postings. Cohen's kappa was calculated to establish inter-rater agreement. Almost perfect agreement was obtained for the domain of Sleep ( $\kappa = 0.98$ ). Substantial agreement was obtained for the domains of Feeding/Eating

( $\kappa = 0.86$ ), Toilet Training ( $\kappa = 0.91$ ), and Mother–Child Relationship ( $\kappa = 0.85$ ). Good agreement was obtained for the domains of Discipline ( $\kappa = 0.76$ ) and Development ( $\kappa = 0.71$ ). All coding disagreements were resolved through discussion. The authors agreed that 23 of the 120 postings applied to multiple domains.

## Results

The domain with the largest number of postings concerned Feeding/Eating ( $n = 51$ , 42.5%). The domain with the second-highest number of postings was Sleep ( $n = 29$ , 24.2%). The rest of the postings concerned Discipline ( $n = 23$ , 19.2%), Development ( $n = 19$ , 15.8%), Toilet-Training ( $n = 14$ , 11.7%), and the Mother–Child Relationship ( $n = 7$ , 5.8%).

Table 1 shows the age and gender of the children that mothers were concerned about in relation to each domain. The number of postings about girls and about boys was similar in each domain. The age distributions of the posters' children indicate that concerns related to Feeding/Eating and Sleep were mostly about infants. In contrast, concerns related to Discipline and Toilet-Training pertained to 2-year olds and some 1-year olds, but infrequently to infants.

In this article, we report only on themes represented by at least four posters. Illustrative quotations pertaining to each domain and theme are shown in Table 2. Grammatical and spelling errors are left exactly as they appeared on the message boards. Corrections in brackets have been added only where they may be needed to aid the reader's understanding.

**Table 1** Number of postings by child gender and age in each domain.

Domain	Gender of child			Age of child in years		
	Girl	Boy	Unknown*	Baby†	One	Two
Feeding/Eating	22	29	0	24	17	10
Sleep	11	18	0	12	9	8
Development	7	11	1	7	9	3
Discipline	14	9	0	0	9	14
Toilet-Training	6	8	0	1	3	10
Mother–Child relationship	4	3	0	1	2	4
Totals‡	64	78	1	45	49	49

\*Children whose gender was not evident from the posting were coded as 'unknown'.

†Infants under 12 months.

‡The totals sum to 143 because, although 120 postings were downloaded, 23 contained content that applied to multiple domains.

## Postings about feeding and eating

The main themes that emerged in the eating/feeding domain revealed concerns about nutrition ( $n = 36$ , 70.6%), weaning from the breast ( $n = 6$ , 11.8%), and independent eating ( $n = 6$ , 11.8%). Parents of infants were particularly concerned about breast milk or formula amounts and schedules. Mothers of older infants and toddlers asked when to start feeding a particular food, how much to feed and ideas for meals, snacks or drinks appropriate for the particular ages of their children. Mothers sought advice as to when their children could be considered ready to move up to the next stage of eating. Some postings demonstrated that mothers were aware of the need for a healthy diet from early on and therefore worried when their children did not eat what they were offered.

Questions about weaning from the breast were found mostly in reference to 1-year-olds. The mothers considered various factors in their weaning decisions, those related to the child (i.e. 'She won't go to sleep without me nursing,' and those related to the mother (e.g. 'Am I losing my milk?'). Other concerns were about sleep schedules. Mothers sometimes nursed children to put them to sleep and this created sleep routine challenges.

The concern about helping children become independent eaters or drinkers applied mostly to mothers of infants and toddlers aged 9 months to 2 years. Half of the mothers with independence-related concerns asked how to help their children drink out of a 'sippy' cup.

## Postings about sleep

The most common questions mothers posed in the sleep domain were about how to help children wake up less frequently at night ( $n = 9$ , 31.0%), how to help children fall asleep or go to bed ( $n = 7$ , 24.1%), how to put children down for naps ( $n = 6$ , 20.7%), and how to help them sleep alone ( $n = 7$ , 24.1%). Most pertained to infants, but some pertained to toddlers.

Mothers' questions about night-time waking pertained to infants as young as 3 months of age. Among the mothers who posted questions about night-time waking, it is noteworthy that a majority (seven out of nine) were concerned about their children currently not sleeping through the night even though they had done so before. Five of the mothers were especially concerned because their children had started crying for a while in the middle of the night.

Another concern was how to put children down for naps or at night. Mothers expressed their struggles and frustration when their strategies to put their children to sleep didn't seem to work. They used various techniques such as dropping one

**Table 2** Examples of postings by theme in each domain.

Domain	Theme	Quotations from Postings
Feeding/Eating	Concerns about nutrition	'I want to start feeding him rice cereal with a spoon and maybe some oatmeal. He still has been on a bottle until now. '(6 months) 'DS [Dear son] is 20 months old and not a very good eater. As much as I offer certain foods, he has yet to develop a taste for them. .... I think he gets enough protein and calcium, but I'm worried about the other vitamins and nutrients'
	Weaning from the breast	'How do you turn a boobie monster into a weaned toddler??' (1 year)
	Independent eating	'I introduced finger foods to my 9 month old about a month and a half ago and he's really reluctant to pick the food up and feed himself. He'll pick up the food and look at it, but doesn't get that he can put it in his own mouth..... Nor does he drink out of a sippy cup'
Sleep	Waking up at night	'My son starting sleeping thru the night once he hit 5 months, he is NOT a sleeper. He was good till about 7 months and now at 9 months he keeps waking up at night.'(5 months)
	Trouble falling asleep or going to bed	'She refuses to go to bed at night. It usually takes me 45 minutes to an hour sometimes longer to get her settled down.' (35 months)
	Nap trouble	'he won't take naps in the day time unless someone is holding him and as soon as i put him down he is awake in a matter of seconds i try to let him cry himself back to sleep but it dont work his crys just get worse and worse so my question is how can i put him down for a nap when he wont lay down' (2 months)
	Sleep alone	'In the past couple weeks, when I lay him in his bed (even w/his favorite movie on) he screams bloody murder the second I leave the room. I know it's probably an attachment thing but I can't handle it!'(2 years)
Discipline	Disobedience	'...he is so awful...Timeouts don't seem to always work and i doubt this is just terrible twos he's going through. He isn't good at listening and he hits a lot-something he picked up at daycare. Anyone have some great, effective ways of disciplining him?' (2 1/2 years)
	Hurting others	'My son is behaving soooooo badly. He knocks things over or throws things when you tell him no or to stop it. He drops stuff on his sister for the heck of it... He even started pushing and hitting the other kids in his MDO program..... HELP!!!!!!' (33 months)
Development	Physical	'...at 9 months, he still doesn't sit independently. everytime i tried to let him sit, he pushes himself up. he refuses to crawl too. we leave him in the walker and he stands and take a few steps'
	Language	'My DD is 2 1/2 and her speech is not very clear. Some words she says very clear like 'mommy', daddy, baby, doggy. But other words its like she mumbles. I really don't know what to do. We work with her every day and her daycare does the same thing. I had her ears cleaned and her ped didn't seem very concerned'
	Socioemotional	'My DD is 14 months old and just yesterday started carrying a blankie around, I dont know if it is just me but I just think this is odd that she all of a sudden started carrying a blanket around, does anyone have any comments or suggestions?'
Toilet-training	Effective toilet-training strategies	'Does anyone have any good hints on how to get it to click in her little head? I bought some new panties, some training pants (cloth) and I have tried pull ups and not much for luck' (24-5 months)
	Signs of readiness	'help iam not sure if my son is ready for potty training or not. He doesn't like to leave his diapers on, but won't go pee on the potty' (21 months) 'My son is 14 months and tomorrow we are starting potty training!!!! i was wondering if anyone else started this young with their kids'
Mother-child relationship	Attachment issues	'...when I lay him in his bed (even w/his favorite movie on) he screams bloody murder the second I leave the room. I know it's probably an attachment thing but I can't handle it!' (2 years)
Across the domains	Parenting stress	'My son is behaving soooooo badly. He knocks things over or throws things when you tell him no or to stop it. He drops stuff on his sister for the heck of it. He talks back (don't tell me he doesn't know how, he does and he's good at it)' (2 years)
	Advice from others	'My son's primary Dr. said we should start him on rice cereal, but another Dr. in the practice told us we should NOT do that because he's so young.....Any suggestions?' (5 months)
	Normality of child development	'Am i just being overly paranoid about all this, or is she a little off the normal track?' (8-5 months)

of the naps, keeping a standard bedtime routine, or leaving the child alone to learn to sleep.

Promotion of independence by encouraging children to sleep alone was another parenting challenge addressed on the message boards. Mothers wrote that they were worried that their children were too scared to sleep alone. Some cited attachment issues as reasons for feeling torn about making infants or toddlers sleep by themselves in a separate room.

### Postings about discipline

All of the mothers' concerns in the discipline domain were about their 1- and 2-year olds and focused on disobedience ( $n = 13$ ), hurting others ( $n = 13$ ), and/or how or whether to punish. The concerns related to disobedience were mostly about children believed to be in the 'terrible twos'. Mothers indicated that they were desperate for advice after unsuccessfully trying out various strategies.

The mothers' most frequent reason for wanting advice on discipline stemmed from concern that toddlers might hurt parents, siblings, or other children by biting, hitting, or using other aggressive behaviours. Aggressive behaviour appeared to produce a lot of stress for mothers.

### Postings about children's physical, language, and social-emotional development

The fourth most frequent category of postings involved questions about child development, especially physical, language, and social-emotional development ( $n = 8$ , 42%,  $n = 5$ , 26.3%, and  $n = 5$ , 26.3%, respectively). The majority of concerns related to physical development were about motor skills (six out of eight postings) such as not being able to sit, walk, or drink from a sippy cup independently. Mothers expressed worry when they perceived their children's development to be off-track. Concerns about language delays were expressed by four times as many mothers of boys as mothers of girls. Concerns about social-emotional development were focused especially on finger sucking, screaming or fussing, and fighting over toys.

### Postings about toilet-training

Postings about toilet training were dominated by questions about effective strategies ( $n = 8$ , 57.1%) and signs of readiness ( $n = 5$ , 35.7%). Mothers asked how to start toilet-training, how to help their children learn to use the toilet consistently and how to schedule toilet time.

Most of the toilet-training postings (10 out of 14) were by mothers of children who were around age 2. Although most

looked for readiness signs, a few mothers considered toilet training quite early because they were preparing for the arrival of a new baby or had decided to try out a new approach for infant toilet training known as Elimination Communication.

### Postings about the mother-child relationship

The main themes that emerged in the mother-child relationship domain concerned attachment issues ( $n = 6$ ). Mothers seemed especially worried about clinginess and separation and stranger anxiety. Children's strong preference for mothers over fathers worried some mothers.

### Across the domains

In addition to the themes that were specific to a particular domain, there were additional themes that cut across domains. They reflected mothers' parenting stress, questioning of advice from families/paediatricians, and worries that children were not developing normally.

#### *Postings revealing parenting stress*

About a sixth of mothers ( $n = 20$ ) wrote postings explicitly expressing stress, frustration, or exhaustion. In their posts, these mothers used terms such as 'crazy' 'so tired' 'so worried' to express their intense feelings. These negative emotions stemmed from a wide variety of issues, including perceived feeding, sleeping, toileting, disciplinary and dependency problems, and concern that children may have developmental delays.

Some posting titles were in and of themselves telling. Examples included titles such as 'HELP Tantrums from Hell!!! Help!', 'I almost wanna cry', 'Picky picky picky', 'Help! I need some sleep!', 'She is out of control', and 'Ds will NOT sleep in own bed!!!' Twelve mothers used the word 'help' in their titles. In addition, 23 of 120 mothers used multiple exclamation marks in their titles (e.g. 'I need advice!!! Fast!!!').

#### *Postings questioning advice from family members and paediatricians*

Twenty-two of the postings indicated that mothers received child care advice from husbands ( $n = 3$ ), their own mothers ( $n = 3$ ), a sister ( $n = 1$ ), a mother-in-law ( $n = 1$ ), a sister-in-law ( $n = 1$ ), other family members ( $n = 1$ ), or paediatricians ( $n = 12$ ). Many of these posters wrote because they wanted to get a second opinion because they did not agree with what they had been told. It is noteworthy that advice from paediatricians was especially frequently questioned. Advice from experts created confusion especially when it contradicted another professional's advice. For example, one

mother wrote that a paediatrician had told her to start feeding her child rice cereal, while another paediatrician had told her that he was too young for solid foods.

#### *Postings asking if children are normal*

Twenty-seven of the 120 mothers expressed concerns related to their children's development or behaviour in questions along the lines of, 'Is my child normal?' Mothers sometimes referred to their children's behaviour in comparison with that of other child(ren). In eight cases, the other children were the child's older siblings. In all but one of these postings, mothers perceived their older children to be more developmentally advanced or well-behaved compared with the younger child about whom they were posting.

## Discussion

### Feeding and sleep: areas of greatest childrearing concern

Through an analysis of infant and toddler caregiving concerns expressed on online message boards maintained by popular parenting magazines, we found that questions and pleas for support were most prominently centred on feeding/eating and sleep issues. Similarly, analysing the self-reports of 413 parents of infants and toddlers in the USA, O'Brien (1996) found that most childrearing concerns were centred on discipline issues such as whining and non-compliance and refusals to eat or to go to bed. More recently, Connell-Carrick (2006) found that sleep, eating, and toilet training were the most prominent topics addressed in seven bestselling parenting books written for parents of infants and toddlers. Paediatricians, psychologists, and others writing for parents of this age-group most likely draw on their clinical experiences showing that these domains consume much of parents' time and energy.

Some childrearing concerns expressed on the message boards were related to infant and toddler developmental limitations, needs, and abilities. Examples included requests for help regarding infant sleep/awake cycles that are imperfectly matched to adult sleep patterns, dietary needs that change significantly over the course of the first 2 years of life, separation anxiety, and toddlers' emerging ability to control elimination. Infancy and toddlerhood involve frequent turning points and, as suggested by Goodnow (2002), it may be during such turning points that parents are most likely to seek advice from others. This tendency may be exacerbated by advice from paediatricians, printed materials, and parenting websites alerting parents to be aware of 'milestones' their infants and toddlers should reach at specific ages (Murkoff 2008). It is not surprising that even slight deviations from 'normal' progressions cause parents to worry.

### Mixed messages about childrearing

We found that the concerns posted on online forums reflected a wide range of childrearing beliefs and approaches. As intercultural contacts have become more frequent and diverse opinions permeate childrearing advice publications, parents must confront, perhaps now more than ever before, uncertainties that follow from exposure to multiple, conflicting messages about how one should rear children (Furedi 2002).

In the current study, such mixed messages were especially found in the domain of sleep. Family and expert views on effective and safe sleeping strategies differ widely, as evident in the diversity of beliefs regarding practices such as leaving infants alone to cry themselves to sleep, responding (or not responding) to their cries at night, co-sleeping, and allowing (or not allowing) babies to fall asleep while breast-feeding (Ball *et al.* 1999, Connell-Carrick 2006). Our findings similarly indicate that mothers are worried about children having trouble falling asleep, waking up frequently at night, not wanting to sleep alone, and falling asleep at the breast. Confusion, guilt, and worry regarding sleep habits seem to be a consequence of both lack of consensus on a 'right' way to handle sleep and fears that one's practices are unusual and harmful.

As found in previous studies, we saw that advice from paediatricians was frequently both quoted and questioned by the participants in the current study. Mothers passed along information delivered by doctors and nurses, especially when the advice did not make sense to them, did not work for them, or contradicted other advice they had received. Thus, mothers used information gained from the online community to resist the traditional diagnostic authority of medical professionals. Studies conducted in European countries have produced similar findings (O'Connor & Madge 2004, Madge & O'Connor 2006, Brandy & Guerin 2010). Mothers may perceive the information from the Internet as 'better' or 'more realistic' than information from medical professionals (Brandy & Guerin, O'Connor & Madge).

### Promotion of independence and autonomy

The large number of postings about trouble getting infants and toddlers to fall asleep by themselves, sleep alone, and drink or eat by themselves can be plausibly explained by the great emphasis put on the development of self-reliance in the United States (Harkness *et al.* 1992, Rutherford 2009). In their analysis of parental ethnotheories in six cultures, Harkness and Super (2006) reported that parents in the USA were more focused on independence than parents in other Western countries (Australia, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden).

### What is already known about this topic

- In this era of globalization, mothers are exposed to a variety of professional views about infant and toddler care. Some of these views originated in other countries.
- The multiplicity of childrearing ideas has led many mothers to struggle over decisions as to whether to use traditional parenting strategies or adopt (or adapt) alternative strategies, including those used in other countries.
- Many mothers use online networks to look for others who share the same life transitions and who will listen to frustrations, offer sympathy, and allow exploration of parenting ideas.

### What this paper adds

- Mothers' questions and concerns in online forums about parenting infants and toddlers are most prominently centred on feeding/eating and sleep issues.
- Across childrearing domains, postings reflect questions concerning the correctness of paediatrician's advice, what is 'normal' in infant and toddler behaviour, and finding a proper balance between relatedness and autonomy-promotion.
- It is clear from the words and punctuation used in some messages that some mothers are highly stressed and feel in urgent need of information and advice.

### Implication for practice and/or policy

- Healthcare providers' support to mothers of infants and toddlers may be enhanced if they keep in mind that conflicting messages about childrearing can lead to confusion and stress.
- Concerns about sleeping and feeding patterns need special attention and should be addressed in all well-baby check-ups.
- Healthcare providers can broaden their knowledge of the daily childrearing challenges that many parents experience by visiting parenting message boards.

Yet, it should be noted that the promotion of individualism and the promotion of relatedness co-exist in the USA. Parents in the USA tend to value both relatedness and autonomy, with the balance between the two goals shifting somewhat towards the latter as children grow older (Kagitcibasi 2007, Tamis-LeMonda *et al.* 2008). In the current study, mothers' struggle to find a proper balance between relatedness and

autonomy seems especially evident in their worries over children's sleep patterns and disobedience. The posts about disobedience were reminders that autonomy-seeking by toddlers is often stressful even for parents who value independence (O'Brien 1996).

### Promotion of healthy eating habits

Many of mothers' concerns and questions in this study were related to nutrition. The importance they gave to this domain is well-placed, given that research has consistently shown that children's eating styles and weights are influenced by parents' feeding styles (Faith *et al.* 2004). The vast amount of information related to healthy eating habits available to today's parents may serve to magnify parents' confusion about their feeding practices. Parental anxiety about feeding schedules and dietary intake may also be heightened in recent years because of societal awareness of rising obesity rates even among young children.

### Study limitations

One limitation of the study is that we cannot know the extent to which our sample of posters is representative of all mothers. In the current sample, only about half of the posters shared demographic information such as their gender, age, and number of children. Socioeconomic status, cultural background and race were never indicated. In addition, parents who do not have worries about childrearing may not participate in online message board communications.

Another limitation of the current study is that some of our domain-specific themes and subthemes each had a small number of postings. Future research may focus on culling larger numbers of postings from just one or two of the domains that we have found to be of most concern to parents. Gathering a large number of postings in just one domain would allow for further in-depth exploration of parents' challenges related to specific childrearing tasks or issues.

### Conclusion

The postings examined for this study indicate that message boards hosted by popular parenting magazines provide a valuable window into parents' concerns, especially about feeding, sleep, relatedness, and autonomy issues. Paediatric nurses should be aware that concerns about feeding/eating and sleep are common and, during well-baby check-ups, ask parents if they have questions specifically in those domains. Parents often leave these visits with lingering questions. In

addition, nurses should remember the central role that the internet plays in the lives of many parents (especially first-time parents). Nurses would be well-advised to occasionally check on-line forums maintained by organizations in their own countries to keep in touch with parents' concerns and questions, paying particular attention to messages about conflicting advice from healthcare professionals and family members. Moreover, nurses could encourage parents to access internet-based parenting forums to increase their sense of empowerment and reduce daily parenting stress. On-line parenting forums can provide virtual social support and bring confirmation to parents that their concerns are not unusual.

At the same time, a potential risk that should be monitored is the likelihood of occasional exposure to inaccurate information provided by e-cohorts. Nurses should tell parents that they may encounter misinformation on parenting message boards and that it would be a good idea to check with them also before deciding how to handle particular childrearing situations. Further studies are needed to explore the pros and cons of solutions such as oversight of online discussion forums by early childhood and health professionals. It should be kept in mind that while there are obvious benefits of such oversight, it is not clear that it would be welcomed by parents who are seeking advice and support specifically from their peers.

In future research, it may be profitable to also analyse the responses parents receive to posted questions. We expect that important insights could be gleaned from the childrearing advice that parents give to each other. It would also be useful to compare the advice that parents give one another with the advice given by health professionals.

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No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

## Author contributions

All authors meet at least one of the following criteria (recommended by the ICMJE: [http://www.icmje.org/ethical\\_1author.html](http://www.icmje.org/ethical_1author.html)) and have agreed on the final version:

- substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data;
- drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.

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