

RESEARCH

Exploring mothers' experiences and perceptions in a group-based parenting program: A qualitative study

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Funding information

This project has received funding from the Fund of Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS, No. 40022618).

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study explored mothers' perceptions and experiences after following a group-based parenting program.

Background: Since parents play a critical role in fostering children's development, parenting programs have been widely implemented to enhance parenting practices and promote parental mental health. While substantial quantitative evidence supports the effectiveness of parenting programs, questions regarding how and why these programs may be helpful remain largely unexplored.

Method: This qualitative study explored mothers' experiences with the ACT Raising Safe Kids program through 16 semistructured interviews.

Results: Through reflexive thematic analysis, three central themes were identified: (1) *shifts in mothers' beliefs and behaviors* illustrates how mothers' cognitive and behavioral shifts contributed to more balanced family dynamics, (2) *developing strategies to manage parenting challenges* highlights how mothers developed various strategies to manage everyday challenges, while also navigating parental pressures, and (3) *experiencing parenting support* explores mothers' perceptions of social support and the lack thereof, and how the group contributed to the building of social capital.

Conclusion: These findings highlight the valuable role of a group-based parenting program in supporting mothers in a sociocultural context marked by high expectations and increased individualization.

Implications: Clinicians should remain attentive to socio-cultural factors because these, as these shape parents' experiences of support and parenting challenges.

KEY WORDS

parenting program, pressure to be a perfect parent, reflexive thematic analysis, self-compassion, social capital, social support

“Parenting is the hardest thing you’ll ever love” is a saying that resonates with many people. While many parents consider having children to be one of the most joyful undertakings in their life, it is also one of the most stressful and challenging (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). In this respect, parents today are faced with multiple challenges that may shape their parenting journey. These may include everyday parenting difficulties, such as sleep disruptions or behavioral difficulties (Crnic & Low, 2002), but also broader, sociocultural factors, such as lack of social support, economic hardship, and high societal expectations (Henderson et al., 2016; Masarik & Conger, 2017).

Despite the increasing demands and expectations placed on parents today, particularly on mothers, there is also a growing awareness and recognition of the difficulties that parents may experience throughout parenthood. In this respect, parenting programs have been proposed as effective strategies to support parents with childrearing difficulties (e.g., Leijten et al., 2022). While numerous randomized controlled trials (RCTs) support the effectiveness of parenting programs in terms of parenting behaviors and parental mental health, less is known about how and why these programs produce these benefits. Given the limited exploration of this topic, we aimed to explore mothers’ perceptions and experiences that may operate during participation in the Adults and Children Together (ACT)—Raising Safe Kids (ACT Program; Silva, 2011). To gain a rich and in-depth understanding of these experiences, a qualitative study was conducted based on interviews with 16 mothers who completed the ACT Program.

WHAT SHAPES PARENTING TODAY? FACTORS INFLUENCING PARENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTHOOD

Parenting is often described as a “mixed bag,” filled with experiences that are meaningful or rewarding and others that may be frustrating, demanding, or emotionally exhausting (Musick et al., 2016). Because of the challenges often associated with parenthood, a significant proportion of parents of young children are at risk for the onset or recurrence of mental health problems, including stress and depression (Naerde & Hukkelberg, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). When parents chronically lack the resources needed to handle such stressors, they are at risk for more serious mental health problems, such as parental burnout (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018).

In the past few decades, substantial research has established well-known factors that may affect parenthood (e.g., Crnic & Low, 2002). These factors may operate at different, interconnected levels, such as parent-related factors (e.g., personality traits; Desjardins et al., 2008), child-related factors (e.g., child temperament; McQuillan & Bates, 2017), and sociocultural factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, social support; Armstrong et al., 2005; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016). Sociocultural factors can be understood as “environmental conditions that play a part in healthy and adaptive behavior and well-being or in a maladaptive behavior” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023). Thus, parenthood experiences are also shaped by the broader context (McMahon, 1995). In that respect, it is important to note that several authors have suggested parenting cultures have shifted, with expectations toward parents becoming higher than in the past (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2006). For instance, it is expected that parents, and particularly mothers, should be well informed about expert advice and should devote a large amount of time, energy, financial resources, and emotional involvement to their children’s intellectual and emotional development (Hays, 1996; Lee et al., 2023). These demanding societal expectations about motherhood, which sociologists refer to as the culture of “intensive

parenting,” suggest that a mother’s life should be built around the needs of their children and that they should place their children’s well-being ahead of their own (Faircloth, 2014). Although this ideology assumes that both children and mothers would benefit from these practices, research suggests that it may have unintended negative consequences. For instance, past research found that both mothers and fathers adhering to such intensive parenting beliefs engage more often in suboptimal parenting practices, ironically putting children’s development at risk as well (Lamprianidou et al., 2025).

Another broader sociocultural factor that may shape parenthood is the growing individualization of society, characterized by the fast pace of modern life, rapid changes in technology, and a decline in informal social support networks, including support from friends, family, and the immediate social environment (Plantin & Daneback, 2009; Santos et al., 2017). Similarly, declines in social capital observed in many Western societies (e.g., Putnam, 2000) would put people at risk for experiencing loneliness and other mental health difficulties (e.g., Nyqvist et al., 2016). Indeed, loneliness is common during pregnancy and early parenthood among present-day (expectant) mothers and fathers, with studies reporting that between 32% and 42% of parents experience feelings of loneliness (Kent-Marvick et al., 2022). Thus, the shifting socio-cultural context—marked by high societal expectations toward parents on one hand, and growing individualization on the other—constitute important contextual risk factors that may contribute to difficulties experienced by some mothers during parenthood. Although these challenges affect parents more broadly, mothers continue to assume a greater share of childcare and emotional labor in many societies (Craig & Churchill, 2021), which may make them particularly vulnerable to the pressures associated with contemporary parenting norms. In this regard, it is essential to explore how these challenges can be mitigated and to identify effective ways to support mothers, with particular attention to the role of social support.

SOCIAL SUPPORT AS AN ANTIDOTE: THE POTENTIAL OF A GROUP-BASED PARENTING PROGRAM

Social support has been shown to play a protective role in helping mothers cope with the difficulties that may arise from the many challenges that parenthood may bring (Milgrom et al., 2019). Social support refers to the experience of feeling loved, valued, and part of a network that provides mutual assistance and is usually measured through the structure of social networks (e.g., number of relationships) or their functions (e.g., informational, appraisal, instrumental, and emotional support; Acoba, 2024; Wills, 1991). Social support may be derived from various sources, such as family or friends (Ford et al., 2007) and has long been identified as a key factor in mental health and overall well-being (e.g., Santini et al., 2015). In this respect, past research has shown that connecting with other mothers who have similar experiences helped to normalize the challenges of parenthood and fostered a sense of worth in their mother role (Lee et al., 2019). In addition, previous research has highlighted that mothers expressed a desire for group-setting interventions to have the opportunity to share their experiences with other mothers (Kent-Marvick et al., 2022). As such, group-based parenting programs have been proposed as effective strategies to provide parents with social support, while addressing childrearing difficulties and promoting parental mental health (Barlow & Coren, 2018).

Parenting programs generally rely on the assumption that parents are active agents who can adjust their behaviors to optimize children’s emotional and behavioral well-being. Most parenting programs following the theoretical principles of social learning theory address similar strategies, such as positive discipline, problem-solving skills, and emotion regulation (Bandura, 1977; Reyno & McGrath, 2006). Both quantitative and qualitative research demonstrated that parenting programs have the potential to help mothers and fathers improve parenting behaviors and parental mental health (Butler et al., 2019; Leijten et al., 2019). Further, while the main

aim of most group-based programs is to improve parenting skills and knowledge, they may have secondary benefits that can contribute to positive outcomes. These may include improvements in parental mental health and opportunities to exchange and form social networks with other parents (Mathijs et al., 2024). Indeed, compared with individual parenting programs, group-based programs offer a distinct approach, as the group setting can provide support and relief to parents who may feel helpless and discouraged by their children's behaviors (Gross et al., 2018). For instance, a qualitative study on parents' experiences with the Incredible Years program (Furlong & McGilloway, 2012) found that a positive, non-judgmental group environment enhanced parents' confidence and well-being by normalizing guilt and isolation and reinforcing their sense of being "good enough parents." Given the benefits that group settings may offer, the present study aimed to explore mothers' experiences following their participation in the group-based ACT Program.

THE ACT—RAISING SAFE KIDS PARENTING PROGRAM

The ACT Program is a parenting program developed by the APA that aims to support parents and caregivers to develop positive parenting practices and prevent child maltreatment (Silva, 2011). The program is based on social learning theory of Bandura (1977) and can be delivered universally (i.e., to all parents in an entire population group). The program is designed to strengthen families and to optimize or change parenting behaviors through the dissemination of information about nonviolent discipline, child development, anger management, problem-solving skills, effects of media on children, and methods to protect children from exposure to violence (Silva, 2007). The program targets parents of young children (i.e., 0–10 years old) and consists of eight structured sessions delivered weekly in 2-hour sessions (see Table S1 in the Supplemental Material for a description of the program).

A recent integrative review of the ACT Program employing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies highlighted the positive impact of the program on both parenting practices and child behavior outcomes. For instance, the program has been shown to be effective in reducing physical discipline, as well as psychological and verbal violence, while enhancing parents' emotional and behavioral regulation, understanding of child development, and the use of positive discipline strategies (Altafim et al., 2023). Furthermore, in line with other parenting programs, the ACT Program tends to improve parents' mental well-being, as parents reported lower stress and depression levels after program completion (Lawrenz et al., 2021).

THE PRESENT STUDY

Although extensive RCTs have demonstrated the effectiveness of parenting programs, how and why these outcomes occur remain largely unexplored and poorly understood. Indeed, questions regarding how and why parenting programs yield benefits have often been overshadowed by the predominant focus on demonstrating their effectiveness (Kazdin, 2007). With this in mind, the present study aimed to gain a better understanding of mothers' perceptions and experiences throughout their participation with the ACT Program. We therefore adopted a qualitative approach to generate more contextualized and nuanced insights into mothers' perspectives and experiences with the program (Busetto et al., 2020). Furthermore, by adopting a socioconstructivist approach, we aimed to explore the ways in which mothers' individual experiences and perspectives are socially and culturally constructed and how their experiences and perceptions are shaped by interactions with others and the broader sociocultural environment in which they live (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Thomas et al., 2014). In this sense, this study also considered how sociocultural factors, including greater societal expectations toward mothers

and navigating an increasingly individualized society, may influence mothers' experiences with a group-based program.

METHOD

Participants and recruitment

Data were gathered among mothers having participated in one of six parenting groups carried out in Brussels, Belgium, from March 2023 to December 2024: three groups took place in public institutions located in a middle to high socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhood (at a university and in a community center), whereas three groups were organized in a mental health service offering psycho-medico-social support to children and adolescents from 0 to 18 years old in a low-SES neighborhood. The participants were recruited to participate in the ACT Program through the mental health service, social media, flyers, and word of mouth.

Among the 29 participants who initially started, 17 parents completed the program, and 16 mothers were ultimately included in the present study ($N = 16$). One father was excluded from this study because the inclusion of a single male participant would not allow for meaningful representation or comparison. The experiences of the father with the ACT Program are described in a separate manuscript (From Distress to Growth: A Pragmatic Case Study Exploring a Father's Change Mechanisms in a Parenting Program). The participants were aged between 25 and 45 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.25$, $SD = 6.88$). Although several parents had more than one child, they were invited to report demographic information regarding only one of their children. The targeted children were aged between 9 months and 10 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 5.55$, $SD = 3.37$). More sociodemographic information is presented in Table S2 in the Supplemental Material. The sample included participants from diverse ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds, including participants from a wide range of income levels, educational backgrounds, and employment statuses. Although the recruitment for program participation was aimed at both mothers and fathers, all included participants were mothers. This is consistent with other research, as past research found that fathers enroll 5 times less often and have higher dropout rates compared to mothers (Fletcher et al., 2011).

Procedure and program description

The sessions conducted in public institutions were led by the first author, a clinical psychologist and certified ACT facilitator, who was assisted by research interns (graduate clinical psychology students). The sessions at the mental health service were guided by the first author and two additional mental health professionals, both of whom were also certified ACT facilitators. Participation in the program was free of charge. Prior to data collection, participants were invited to sign an informed consent form, which described the study's goals, procedures, and the voluntary nature of participation. The program is composed of an introductory meeting, followed by eight weekly sessions. Each session lasted 2 hours and had predefined themes. The sessions are highly interactive and use role-play, activities, group discussions, and didactic instruction to share information and skills about parenting (Silva, 2011). This study and all related materials were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Identifying information was modified to protect participants' confidentiality and ensure anonymity.

Data collection

Sociodemographic information was collected from parents via a questionnaire administered during the first session. Approximately 3 months after program completion, participants were

invited for a semistructured interview either at their home or at the mental health center. The interviews lasted for 45 minutes on average and were carried out by the first author of this study. This method was chosen because the mothers were familiar with the first author, which was expected to facilitate openness during the interviews. However, because the interviews were conducted by the first author, social desirability bias cannot be fully excluded. To enhance trustworthiness and reduce this risk, several steps were taken. First, at the beginning of each interview, the interviewer emphasized that the study aimed to explore participants' personal experiences and encouraged them to share both positive and negative perspectives, noting that critical reflections were equally valuable. Second, participants were informed that all their responses would remain confidential and anonymized and that their answers would not affect their participation in the study. In addition, the interviewer adopted a neutral and nonjudgmental stance and used open-ended questions to allow participants to describe their experiences freely.

An interview guide was created by the first author and reviewed by two experts in qualitative methods. As such, the interview guide consisted of several open-ended questions exploring different aspects of the participants' experiences with the program, such as their views on the program's structure, how parents felt in relation to the group, whether and how they had changed over the course of the program, and what they attributed these changes to. Examples of interview questions include the following: "What did you think of the program?" "How did you feel about the group-setting?" "Do you feel differently after following the program? How, why?" and "Since participating in the program, have you noticed any changes in your relationship with your child? How, why?"

Positionality statement

Reflexivity is an essential component of qualitative research. In this context, it is important to note that the first author is a White Belgian female with a background in clinical and family psychology. Her professional training has shaped her understanding of parenting and psychological support, and thus inevitably informed the way the research was designed, conducted, and analyzed. The first author's role in the project was threefold: She acted as facilitator of the parenting groups, the interviewer of the parents, and the researcher. Although this positioning allowed her to gain valuable contextual insights, it also carried the risk of influencing parents' responses, as well as how their narratives were interpreted. Furthermore, being part of a research team studying how society shapes parenting—including topics such as the pressure to be a perfect parent, intensive parenting, and social capital—further informed the interpretive lens through which the analysis was approached. To address this, the first author engaged in ongoing reflexivity through supervision and peer discussions. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2021a) framework, this reflexive practice sought to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings while acknowledging the influence of positionality on the research process.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2019), a specific approach of the widely used thematic analysis technique in psychology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was chosen over other qualitative methods because it emphasizes the subjectivity of the researcher as an "analytic resource" and promotes a reflexive engagement with theory, data, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, p. 330). Furthermore, it includes a rigorous and systematic qualitative approach to coding, where researchers

are enabled to identify patterns within the dataset without relying on a preestablished coding scheme and where themes should be the final product of coding and iterative theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

The interviews were coded by the first author. Before starting the analysis, the first author familiarized herself with the datasets. Afterward, a first interview was coded to test the coding procedure and to clarify analytic insights. The results of this preliminary analysis were then discussed with the second author and refined to ensure comparability of the coding strategy. Coding was conducted inductively, without using a preexisting framework, to understand the meaning of participants' reports based on the research aims of this study. In the next step, initial themes—patterns of shared meaning—were developed by grouping similar codes. The themes and subthemes were then further developed and were discussed among the three coauthors on several occasions to enable understanding, interpretation, and reflexivity using mind maps and visual diagrams (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Differences in interpretations were discussed openly and resolved by revisiting the data. Because of the different perspectives, this resulted in a rigorous reevaluation and reorganization of certain codes and themes to enhance coherence, distinctiveness, and conceptual clarity. This enabled the first author to refine and align them better with the research question and the new insights that emerged throughout the discussions. At the end of the theme elaboration, all authors agreed on the final themes and subthemes. The data were organized and analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitates the management, coding, and visualization of qualitative data.

RESULTS

A total of three themes were developed through the analysis, each containing several subthemes (see Figure S1 in the Supplemental Material for an overview). The first theme (1) "Shifts in mothers' beliefs and behaviors" describes changes in mothers' way of thinking and acting after following the program in relation to their child, their family, and themselves. This theme comprises three subthemes: (1.1) "Adjustments in mothers' own behaviors and family dynamics," (1.2) "Reframing and accepting children's behaviors," and (1.3) "From isolated daily struggles to a shared reality." The latter subtheme is interconnected with the second theme (2) "Developing strategies to manage parenting challenges," which captures how mothers learned to manage parenting challenges. This theme is composed of four subthemes: (2.1) "Shifting from self-blame to self-acceptance," (2.2) "Learning to manage difficult emotions," (2.3) "Learning to take time for oneself," and (2.4) "Taking a step back from parental prescriptions." Lastly, the third theme (3) "Experiencing parenting support" explores how mothers felt supported in the group and how this played a role in their experience with the program. This last theme comprises three subthemes: (3.1) "Awareness of persistent needs and gaps in parenting support," (3.2) "Informational support through the program," and (3.3) "Emotional support through the group."

Theme 1: Shifts in mothers' beliefs and behaviors

Participants reported how the program positively impacted their own parenting behaviors and their family life and emphasized how the program reshaped their beliefs about parenting. This first theme encompasses three subthemes that explore how these shifts manifested in mothers' behaviors and family dynamics, and their beliefs regarding their children's behaviors and parenting struggles. Each subtheme is further developed next.

Adjustments in mothers' own behaviors and family dynamics

Mothers often described how the program led to noticeable shifts in their own parenting strategies and the overall family life.

What I do is, for example, in the morning if she doesn't want to get dressed, I tell her, "Listen, if you don't get dressed, you won't have time to eat." Or like, "Either you read, or you eat, but you can't do both at the same time, because if you take the time to read, you won't have time to eat anymore." So yeah, it's more about explaining things. She understands better, and it goes more smoothly. Less shouting, less crying, you know.

(Ella, mother of a 3-year-old)

This is how Ella described how her shift in discipline techniques influenced her daughter's emotional responses. Like this mother, other participants reported how changes in their own parenting behaviors had downstream effects on their children. As Ava reported:

From the moment I communicate my emotions, my feelings, I communicate my limits. I know how to say no without feeling a lot of guilt every time I have to explain things. Now, I can see that he respects the limits more. He can express things more too. And overall, things are going better. It is a bit more stable.

(Ava, a mother of a 5-year-old son)

Some mothers also described how the program influenced their way of interacting with their partner and their overall coparenting relationship. Lucy, a mother of a 1-year-old son, explained:

We got a lot of advice that we needed to support each other. Yes, I am the mother, but he's also the father, so it was important that when I had something to say, he would listen to me, and when he said something, I would listen to him. So yeah, at the beginning, it wasn't really. ... Yes, we listened to each other, but still. And now, we really listen to each other, he says when something's not right, he speaks up. So, it's better than before.

Although most participants reported changes in their own parenting behaviors and their family life, parents' individual needs, the age of the children, or prior knowledge influenced several parents' experience. For instance, Hannah, a mother of a 9-month-old son, highlighted how she could not attribute changes in her son's behaviors to the program because he was "at an age where he's evolving so fast." Thus, for most mothers, the group helped to adapt and reflect on their own behaviors, which for some, appeared to play a role in their coparenting relationship or the parent-child relationship.

Reframing and accepting children's behaviors

Participants expressed that learning and understanding child developmental norms helped them to reshape their perceptions about children's difficult behaviors. Specifically, some mothers stated that it helped them to move from frustration or blaming their children for misbehaviors, to more acceptance and empathy toward the child. Ella explained, "Sometimes, I would get annoyed but, I would tell myself, 'Well, she's still a child, and what she's doing makes sense, I mean, it's normal, and it's part of her development too.'" Like Ella, Ava explained that the

program helped to reframe her own expectations toward her son's behaviors; she shared, "My son accepts more things, and even when he doesn't, I accept that he doesn't, because he's a child, after all. And when my expectations are more realistic, it also leads to less situations of distress."

The mothers reported that the program helped to give meaning and reinterpret their children's behavior by realizing that some behaviors are part of their development, while also being more comprehensive of the context that may contribute to children's frustrations. For Linda, a mother of a 5-year-old, understanding that children's tiredness may contribute to their frustrations, helped her to put her children's reactivity in perspective. She stated: "And for me too, it's easier to say, 'Come on, move on.' It's not that she's [her daughter] questioning the 'no,' it's just that it's not the right moment, she's just tired and thus more reactive." Overall, mothers described a shift in how they perceived and interpreted their children's behaviors.

From isolated daily struggles to a shared reality

Mothers expressed comfort in realizing that other parents face similar daily parenting struggles, and that they were not the only ones experiencing difficulties. As Nathalie specified,

I think the benefit of the group is realizing that we're not alone, that we're facing the same problems and that there might be a kind of normality in what feels difficult or abnormal or not what we initially wanted.

It provided relief to hear that everyone is in "the same boat" and that parents share a somewhat "common foundation," where everyone is "confronted with short nights and children's anger," as expressed by Hannah and Olivia. Olivia, a mother of a 4-year-old daughter, further specified: "I wasn't aware of the universal aspect of parenthood, that being a parent is not that simple. And that it's normal to feel upset." Realizing that other parents face similar challenges helped parents to reframe and normalize their own struggles by accepting that these difficulties are part of being a parent.

It helps to put our suffering and difficulties into perspective and to normalize them. As parents, no matter where we are on the scale of our challenges and struggles, it's always OK that there are other parents who. ... Because we're going through the same things, asking ourselves the same questions, and facing the same difficulties. Once you know that, you feel so much less alone, and that changes a lot of things. Yes, that you're not the only one. Yes, that it's not me, it's not anyone. It's just that it's hard, in fact, to be a parent.

(Ava, mother of a 5-year-old)

To sum up, where participants previously assumed that they were the only ones who were struggling, they realized throughout the group sessions that this is a common reality for many parents, as noted by Olivia: "I felt like it wasn't something that was only happening under our roof. It's happening under the roof of many parents."

Theme 2: Developing strategies to manage parenting challenges

As participants described in Subtheme 1.3, they were able to reframe daily parenting struggles as a shared rather than an individual experience. In line with this, several mothers expressed

developing other strategies during the program that helped them manage common parenting challenges. This second theme encompasses four sub-themes that explore these strategies.

Shifting from self-blame to self-acceptance

The mothers expressed trying to be gentler and more accepting toward their own behaviors. As Amira, a mother of a 9-year-old son, explained:

I tolerate myself. Sometimes I would tell myself, “Ah, look, I don’t always have to feel guilty and say, ugh, what’s wrong with me, I was too harsh there, maybe he [her son] had a bad day today because of me.”

Rather than criticizing themselves for responding inadequately to their children’s behavior, several mothers tried to be kinder and more supportive toward themselves. This also helped them to feel less guilty about their own behaviors, as Ella reported:

Just the fact of telling myself that I’m human and that sometimes when I snap, when I get angry, it’s natural, it’s normal—and that I just need to release the pressure and stop feeling guilty—that’s really the biggest thing that stands out.

When mothers were kinder to themselves, they were often able to see their errors as part of a bigger picture. For instance, realizing that making mistakes is part of the parenting journey allowed Olivia to recognize that, overall, she is doing a good job as a parent:

It’s telling yourself, “Hey, you’re actually doing things well, it’s okay.” And, I think I came out of it telling myself, “I think you’re doing the best you can, you’re a good mom.” And there are moments where, sure, you reacted in ways you wish you hadn’t, but it’s temporary—and really, it’s okay, it’s part of the story.

(Olivia, mother of 4-year-old)

Overall, participants described becoming more understanding and gentler toward themselves, rather than blaming themselves when difficulties arose.

Learning to manage difficult emotions

Although all mothers were confronted with stressful or challenging situations, some expressed struggling to manage their own emotions in such moments. Some participants shared that the sessions helped them to develop greater awareness of their own angry emotions and to recognize that having angry feelings is normal. As Olivia shared, “It helped to realize that there are mechanisms beyond my control. That when I am tired, it is normal to be more sensitive and to become angry.”

For others, it helped to calm down and distract themselves to control their anger before engaging with their child. For instance, Nour, a mother of a 5-year-old son shared the following:

When I got angry, I would stay by myself. I’d go to my room to calm down. I’d think about things—positive things—and then I’d calm down. So, for example, if my son had done something and I got angry because of it, I would calm myself first, so that I could explain and talk to him about why he did this or that.

When parents allowed themselves to calm down first, it helped them to avoid reactive and potentially harmful responses. As Linda shared, it helped “being able to let go in order to avoid getting angry. Taking time, breathing, to avoid exploding.”

Learning to take time for oneself

While some mothers initially believed that they should always be available for their children, they described learning throughout the sessions that it is also necessary to prioritize their own needs at times.

I'm realizing it's actually the other way around. I won't be able to be a good mother in the long run if I don't make myself a priority. It was unthinkable before, and little by little, it's starting to sink in. I've started putting it into practice, and I'm glad I did.

(Nayla, mother of a 10-year-old)

In line with this, Ava realized that looking after herself is essential to feel good in her role as a parent and should not be something to feel guilty about:

I allow myself much more to take time for myself, because I know it's necessary. It's not a luxury, it's simply necessary. And it's part of my role as a parent to be able to do that. And it also means that I'm a good mom by doing that. And before, I really struggled to take time for myself. I felt so guilty. Now, it still happens, but much less.

(Ava, mother of a 5-year-old)

For Nour, hearing others share their experiences of learning to take more care for themselves was inspiring. She said, “I realized I had forgotten about myself. I was just focused on my son, my son, my son. Now, no. It's still mostly about my son, but a little bit about me too. I do something for myself.” For some parents, attending the group in itself was a form of self-care, as it provided a dedicated moment to reflect on themselves and their role as a parent. For Olivia, participating in the group also meant “giving yourself a moment just for you. Even if you're talking about your children,” whereas for Farah, the group was “something I did for myself. And it was a time for myself.” Taken together, participants reported that the sessions helped them become aware of the importance of taking care of themselves to feel better overall and to be more emotionally present for their children.

Taking a step back from unrealistic parenting prescriptions

Mothers described finding it challenging to cope with the pressure to live up to the ideals of being a perfect, flawless parent. This message about perfect parenthood was conveyed through several ways for mothers. For instance, some mothers expressed concerns about the overload of information and opinions about parenting, as Hannah expressed: “I feel that there are really a lot of injunctions around parenthood nowadays, and that it's too much for me.” Because of this, the mothers in this sample often described feeling guilty and doubting their own parenting. As Hannah further specified: “There is a kind of heaviness and guilt, a fear of doing things wrong. Now, that's also clearly linked to my personality, to some of my character traits and all that. But still, I think there's a broader climate that encourages this.” Laura, a mother of a

6-year-old son, also expressed that parents today, especially mothers, have to be extremely involved in the lives of their children to be considered a “good parent”:

In today's reality, in the world we live in, you're expected to be the perfect mom, you know? To always do everything, like baking birthday cakes, being present at all the school events, at all the parent meetings, to really be present for everything.

In general, these societal prescriptions of how to be a “good parent” led some mothers to excessively question or doubt their role as a parent.

I'd say my parenting is still quite weighed down by all the doubts I have about what I'm doing right, what I'm not doing right, and probably mistaken beliefs about what I imagine others expect from my child or how they perceive the way I do things. (Hannah, mother of a 9-month-old).

This pressure was perceived through interactions with fellow parents, which often led to feeling inadequate or guilty when things were not going well with their own children. Furthermore, this pressure was often felt through social media platforms, which portrayed “a lot of perfection, but we don't see the negative side of it [parenting],” like Ella described. In turn, for her, this led to “too much guilt, too much pressure, too much of ‘you have to do better’.” Mothers described that the sessions allowed them to put these societal, and often internalized pressures into perspective, either by reflecting on their behaviors or by normalizing parenting struggles. As such, they also expressed more joy as a parent since the group allowed them to alleviate some pressure to raise the best possible child. For instance, Ava shared the following in relation to her son:

There's also less pressure that I put on myself in the relationship I have with him [her son]. And also, something fundamental: more pleasure in being a parent, in fact, in being a mom. Because with all the pressure, worry, and stress, there comes a point where there's no longer any pleasure, there are just duties and responsibilities, anxiety and concerns because we feel so much pressure from society to raise the perfect, the most wonderful child in the world, without having enough resources, consideration, or support. But now, this has helped me to say to myself: actually, I'm doing my best.

They also described that the sessions allowed them to find out which parenting style aligned with their own needs and what feels right to them, instead of doing what society expects from them. Furthermore, the mothers shared that living up to certain parenting ideals felt impossible because they are often contradictory. Overall, mothers expressed that they perceive numerous societal expectations surrounding parenting today, which may add pressure. However, they reported that the sessions helped them critically reflect on these expectations and put them into perspective.

Theme 3: Experiencing parenting support

This third theme captures the ways in which mothers experienced the group as a meaningful source of support. They described how the group served as a space where they found emotional and informational support, while also becoming aware of the lack of support they previously experienced in their parenting journey. This theme encompasses three subthemes.

Awareness of persistent needs and gaps in parenting support

Mothers expressed the importance of parenting groups, noting that they felt unprepared for the realities of parenthood and lacked adequate guidance and clarity about what to expect. For instance, Laura shared that “there’s no one who really explains to us how to raise a child. So, we just learn as we go,” highlighting the absence of support in parenting. She continued, stating that “you don’t know what to expect as a parent.” Building on this, Farah expressed the need for and importance of more guidance in parenting when she said, “To be a good cook you have to take cooking classes. I don’t know, for construction, you have to do architecture and all that. Do you take courses to become a parent? Never in life!” This perspective was reflected by other mothers as well, who believe that parenting skills are not something automatically acquired but rather something that is learned. As Ava shared,

It [parenting] is an incredible turmoil, and one for which we had very few tools, really. But now, thanks to what we did together, it allowed us to be better equipped. We have more knowledge, and yes, we actually feel more empowered to react, to react better, and to know, that there is always a way of doing things that could work for me.

Contrary to society’s beliefs regarding mothers’ inherent capacities to raise children, Sarah, a mother of a 2-year-old son, disagreed with the commonly conveyed idea that parenting is “instinctive” and that “there are not a hundred ways to be a parent” and emphasized that parenting is more something you learn, that parenting is “not just a given,” as Amira expressed. Therefore, parents underlined the need and benefits of such parenting groups, as Nadine, a mother of a 6-year-old son, shared: “I think that these parenting groups, first and foremost, help to support parents, to exchange ideas with other parents, to build connections, learn from one another, and regain self-confidence.” Although mothers described lacking parenting support, they mentioned finding such support in the group sessions.

Informational support through the program

Mothers expressed appreciating the themes and the structure of the program and particularly liked the themes related to the child development, screen time, and emotion regulation. They enjoyed the combination of theory with practical tools, exercises, and their own personal experiences. For instance, Laura described her experience as following: “There was a little bit of theory, but each time we started from our own experience, and there were always practical examples too, so it really spoke to us,” which allowed her “to come back better equipped in relation to our child.”

Although some mothers were already familiar with information elaborated throughout the sessions, they enjoyed the practical aspect and the exercises of the program. As Nathalie explained: “Even if there were things I already knew, seeing how they played out in practice—how others put them into practice—was valuable.” They also appreciated exchanging ideas, learning new approaches and gaining insight from both the facilitators and the fellow parents.

I think we all helped each other by sharing our experiences and our examples. Everyone’s examples made you reflect on how you might have reacted, or what you might have suggested to the other person. So, I think just by enriching the discussion, we helped each other.

(Olivia, mother of a 4-year-old)

One mother, however, expressed that although she enjoyed the sessions, she felt the program did not offer many new insights:

I wouldn't say it was really enriching. I didn't always come out thinking, "Oh, I learned a lot." It was more like, "Oh, I had a good time, the discussion was pleasant," but not necessarily thinking, "I've learned a lot."

(Nathalie, mother of a 4-year-old)

Overall, mothers in this sample described the group as a space where they can learn and exchange about parenting strategies, tools, and knowledge related to parenting.

Emotional support through the group

While the group offered the mothers new informational and practical insights related to parenting, they also expressed appreciating the connections with the other parents and facilitators. They described feeling at ease in the group as they felt heard, reassured, and understood by the group:

without making anyone feel guilty or showing how things should be done, but rather offering general advice, and above all, empowering parents, especially mothers, to feel reassured in their own way of parenting with the resources they have, while also providing ideas and suggestions to improve situations and address the difficulties we face. For me, it was very positive and very interesting—and at the same time, very open. We really felt at ease, so it was very, very good.

(Ava, mother of a 5-year-old)

The mothers described that the nonjudgmental setting allowed for respect and honesty among the parents. As Laura described, "At no point did I actually feel judged. ... It was always really respectful." This was helpful to talk openly about parenting without minimizing difficulties. For instance, for Ava, it was important to speak about her difficulties, especially because is often considered "taboo" in society, which in turn helped her to feel "much more comfortable in sharing my difficulties and asking for help, in all sincerity about how much I'm struggling, and without always minimizing it like, 'Oh, I'm having a bit of a hard time, but it's okay ... I'm fine.'" The appreciation for the authentic exchanges was shared by Hannah, for whom the group was a space where you could "really talk about it [parenting] with authenticity and from the heart."

The mothers also noted that the group allowed them to feel less alone. For instance, for Linda, the group helped her

to feel less alone too, because it's true that sometimes we get a bit too caught up in our daily life, and so it's good to get out of that and find out that there are other parents who sometimes also have difficulties or need to talk to each other.

Others highlighted their limited social network and indicated how the group helped compensate for this lack. For instance, Amira shared, "Above all, it was the exchanges—because I'm someone who doesn't have any friends, I don't have any family, so even the fact of exchanging, of talking a little, it changes things a bit." Overall, participants expressed appreciation for the peer support and the overall group dynamics, as Nesrine shared, "It's a really good moment of sharing: we talk, we have fun, we laugh, and sometimes we cry."

DISCUSSION

This study highlights mothers' experiences and perceptions after completing the ACT Program, shedding light on the potential benefits for mothers to participate in a group-based program. In addition to changes in psychological processes that are specifically targeted in the program (e.g., emotion regulation), several themes also emerged in mothers' narratives that were not directly targeted in the intervention and that go beyond addressing well-established parenting difficulties, such as fostering self-compassion and alleviating pressure to be perfect. Potentially, these shifts may have occurred due to the specific nature of the group-based setting of the program (Mathijs et al., 2024). In the following section, these results are discussed in greater detail.

Navigating motherhood: Strategies for managing parenting challenges

Building on previous research, our results indicated that the program helped mothers to manage several well-known parenting difficulties (e.g., Leijten et al., 2019). Indeed, mothers reported that the program produced positive changes by adjusting parenting behaviors and shifting beliefs. This directly helped them to better manage childrearing difficulties, improved their overall parenting experience, and enabled them to put children's difficult behaviors into perspective (Subthemes 1.1 and 1.2). This is in line with previous research regarding the ACT Program highlighting parents' improved parenting behaviors as important changes after program participation such as learning and implementing better parenting and discipline strategies and recognizing when their child's behavior is developmentally appropriate (Altafim et al., 2023). Furthermore, participants reported that these shifts in beliefs and behaviors created positive changes in the child's behaviors, the parent-child relationship, and overall family dynamics, which reflects findings found in earlier studies (Errázuriz et al., 2016).

Although some studies indicated that one parent's participation in a parenting program may lead to misalignment in childrearing practices and heightened tension within the coparenting relationship (e.g., Furlong & McGilloway, 2012), our results further revealed that the program may have promoted more supportive and cooperative dynamics, thereby reinforcing the sense of being a "parenting team" (Piotrowska et al., 2017). This is important because coparenting support—defined as the collaborative relationship between parents that goes beyond the romantic relationship—is associated with lower levels of parenting stress, which in turn can promote optimal parenting (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016). These findings can be understood within the context of family systems theory, which suggests that family members are interdependent and mutually influence one another (Minuchin, 1974). Accordingly, shifts in mothers' behaviors and beliefs throughout the program may affect the entire family system, as their partner and children adapt and respond in turn.

Furthermore, our results suggest that the mothers in our sample engaged in self-compassion, given that several subthemes aligned with the key components of this construct. For instance, several mothers reported increasingly realizing that experiencing parenting difficulties is shared by other parents (Subtheme 1.3), while also becoming more understanding and forgiving toward themselves (Subtheme 2.1). In essence, self-compassion involves directing the same kind of care, kindness, and compassion toward oneself that one would convey toward loved ones who are suffering. According to Neff (2003), self-compassion is conceptualized in terms of three core components: self-kindness (being kind and understanding toward oneself in moments of failure, rather than being harsh and self-critical), common humanity (recognizing that all humans make mistakes and seeing painful experiences as something universal rather than something personal), and mindfulness (accepting stressful and painful emotions without suppressing or exaggerating them). Supporting earlier evidence (Lee et al., 2019), our findings suggest that the use of self-compassion enabled mothers to recognize that their struggles were shared by

others, which in turn provided a sense of relief, reducing feelings of isolation and guilt. Self-compassion can play an important role in parenthood, as past research found self-compassion to promote well-being and positive psychological functioning (Neff et al., 2007a, 2007b).

Further, echoing the findings of previous studies investigating the ACT Program (e.g., Lawrenz et al., 2021), participants described the development of optimal strategies to regulate their emotions as meaningful changes they experienced through the program (Subtheme 2.2). As such, mothers reported using strategies that can be considered more adaptive forms of emotion regulation, such as greater emotion awareness and understanding (Lane & Schwartz, 1987), reducing emotional reactivity (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014), and cognitive reappraisal (Gross & John, 2003). Overall, the program content regarding emotion regulation helped them to gain a better understanding of their own emotions and enabled more appropriate responses to challenging situations, which in turn appeared to reduce conflict with the child. Indeed, past research found that improvements in parents' emotion regulation strategies may trickle down to their own behaviors and ultimately contribute to enhanced emotion regulation in their children (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2022).

Participants also described engaging in self-care over the course of the program as a strategy to better manage difficult situations (Subtheme 2.3). The concept of self-care has generally been understood as the engagement in behaviors that support health and well-being (Lee & Miller, 2013). Parental self-care behaviors can take many forms, including exercising, getting rest, engaging in pleasurable activities, lowering expectations, and making time for oneself (Raynor & Pope, 2016). Although self-care may enhance parental well-being and may play an important role in fostering effective parenting (Raynor & Pope, 2016), mothers, in particular, view or describe their parenting role as involving a great amount of self-sacrifice that can serve as a barrier to self-care (Barkin & Wisner, 2013). However, as reflected in our findings, participants described that throughout the program, they learned about the importance of prioritizing their own needs at times to be available for their children, without experiencing the same sense of guilt they had previously felt. Interestingly, some mothers described the act of attending the group as a form of self-care because it provided a moment for personal reflection on themselves in their role as a parent. Although self-care was not an explicit focus of the program, mothers noted recognizing its importance through the group exchanges and support.

“It’s okay to make mistakes”: Mothers’ reflections on redefining societal expectations

Mothers in our sample further shared that there is also a broader “climate” that encourages parents to live up to ideals of perfect parenthood, leading them to feel guilty or having doubts about their parenting (Subtheme 2.4). This is consistent with previous research, showing that an overabundance of parenting advice and opinions on how to be a “good” parent may lead parents to feel overwhelmed, confused, and stressed (Hardyment, 2007) and may create pressures leading to self-blame, guilt and lower self-efficacy beliefs (Guendouzi, 2006; Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018). As such, participants described putting these parenting ideals into perspective due to their participation in the program. Potentially, mothers’ increased self-compassion may have helped them in accepting their imperfections without harsh self-judgement, while also allowing them to recognize that they are doing well in their parenting role (Liao et al., 2021). Furthermore, some of these changes can be linked to the peer support dimension of the group-based setting because such a setting may particularly enable the normalization of struggles and reduce feelings of guilt, while creating a safe space to question unrealistic parenting ideals (e.g., Lee et al., 2019).

It is important to note that the present study was conducted in Belgium, a country with comparatively extensive family policies and social protection systems. Although structural

support (e.g., subsidized childcare and parental leave) may buffer certain practical stressors, cultural norms regarding maternal responsibility and involvement may remain present. Accordingly, mothers in our sample described feeling pressure due to the high societal expectations. This trend has been reported in other studies as well, where mothers experienced high levels of pressure, regardless of their ethnicity or social class (e.g., Elliott et al., 2015). Within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, these pressures can be understood as a multilevel phenomenon shaped by proximal relationships, societal demands, and broader sociocultural norms that define and reinforce ideals of parenting. Thus, mothers' program participation provided an opportunity to reflect on and question prevailing sociocultural norms and expectations that may shape their parenting experience. In this regard, our findings suggest that a group-based program may help to address well-known parenting difficulties. For instance, they help to encourage the use of positive discipline techniques, while also supporting parents in navigating broader sociocultural challenges, such as taking a step back from parenting ideals.

Interestingly, our findings also indicated that mothers perceived a lack of informational support because they reported feeling unprepared for parenthood and lacking adequate guidance in their parenting journey (Subtheme 3.1). At first sight, this may seem at odds with the aforementioned results where mothers expressed feeling overwhelmed by an overload of information and advice on parenting. When delving deeper into our results, our findings may suggest that the way in which the information and messages on parenting are conveyed and communicated may be of importance. For example, on social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Reddit, YouTube, TikTok), parents may share content about their childrearing practices and parenting experience, a practice referred to as "sharenting" (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). Although parents' social media use is not necessarily related to negative parental outcomes (e.g., Glatz et al., 2023), some parents may depict their parenting in an overly idealized way, refraining from sharing potential difficulties or admitting to challenges they may face (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2017). Such portrayals may elicit feelings of uncertainty or even failure among other parents as they may believe that these depictions of perfect parenthood are the norm (Archer, 2019) and therefore may feel less competent when comparing oneself with other parents (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2017). Online platforms, pamphlets with parenting information, or self-guidebooks about parenting often lack real-time, two-way communication, and thus parents may be unable to clarify doubts, explore nuances, or ask follow-up questions, which may potentially lead to misunderstandings or misapplication of advice. However, as our results suggest, when information on parenting is given in a safe, nonjudgmental setting where parents can have authentic exchanges about their parenting experiences with a professional and/or other parents, it may promote both parenting skills and parental well-being (Barlow & Stewart-Brown, 2001) without necessarily adding more feelings of pressure. In this respect, facilitators can also play a crucial role in this process by encouraging parents to trust their own knowledge and expertise; offering reassurance; and avoiding overwhelming parents with advice but instead presenting flexible, adaptable options (Lee et al., 2023).

The group as a source of support

Our findings suggest that the group dimension was essential for participants' experiences with the program. Indeed, the reciprocal exchange of informational (Subtheme 3.2) and emotional (Subtheme 3.3) support emerged as essential experiences in mothers' narratives. The group format is an optimal setting to learn vicariously from one another by observing, interacting, or reflecting on other parents' experiences (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Furthermore, participants reported learning new information while also feeling emotionally supported by the other parents in the group, and hence, experiencing social support. According to the literature, social support is composed of four types of support: informational (e.g., guidance, knowledge about

emotion regulation), emotional (e.g., expressions of empathy, trust), instrumental (e.g., offering daycare, financial support), and appraisal (e.g., feedback, encouragement; Wills, 1991). In line with previous research, mothers expressed experiencing these types of support through the group discussions and program content, as they reported gaining new insights and knowledge about parenting (e.g., Ramos et al., 2019). Furthermore, by sharing their challenges and difficulties, they were able to support and reassure one another in a nonjudgmental setting (McLeish & Redshaw, 2017).

The group also compensated for a lack of social network and may have helped to alleviate feelings of loneliness. As previous research has shown, parents are more at risk of loneliness when they lack peers in similar situations to share experiences with (Nowland et al., 2021). These findings may reflect a broader trend in which parents need more social support but may receive less from their immediate friends and family due to the increasing individualization of Western societies (Nunes et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2017). From an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), loneliness in parenthood may reflect a perceived mismatch between desired and available social support across interconnected environmental systems, ranging from close relationships to broader sociocultural structures. In addition, intertwined with the growing individualization, the neoliberal rationality—where the ideal parent is being depicted as self-managing and personally responsible for their children's successes (Grolnick & Seal, 2008; Wall, 2004)—prioritizes parents' individual responsibility over the collective social support traditionally provided by families or friends (Wall, 2004). In this respect, group-based parenting programs have the potential for parents to develop positive supportive relationships with members of their local and wider community, also known as “building social capital” (Fielden & Gallagher, 2008; Putnam, 2000). Such building of social capital is characterized by mutual trust, reciprocity, and collectively resolving problems that parents may have in common (Stone & Hughes, 2002), which are aspects that are typically facilitated in group-based parenting programs. This is beneficial for individual parents because higher levels of social capital are associated with better mental health outcomes and enable parents to create a more positive context where their children's social, emotional, and educational needs are more easily met (Wandersman & Nation, 1998). In addition, communities and societies may also benefit from building more social capital because it fosters resilience, social and economic development, and flourishing of societies more generally (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004).

Overall, this type of parenting support may be particularly relevant in the context of prevention aimed at promoting parental well-being and positive family outcomes (Branco et al., 2022). It is therefore important to strengthen the visibility and accessibility of such programs. This can be addressed both by raising awareness among parents, many of whom are unaware that these resources exist (in part due to their limited availability), and by advocating at the policy level, where preventive approaches continue to be underprioritized.

Clinical implications

Although findings from qualitative research should not be generalized beyond the specific context in which they were generated (Polit & Beck, 2010), the present study illustrates the potential usefulness of parenting programs. In particular, the results highlight the importance of considering the broader sociocultural context in which families are embedded when designing and implementing parenting programs. Thus, the findings suggest that it is important for clinicians and facilitators to be attentive for prevailing societal expectations as well as for parent's social network because these may shape their perceptions of parenting challenges and their experiences with parenting programs.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that parents may benefit from parenting programs through processes that are not always directly targeted by the program, such as the

development of self-compassion and perceived social support. Parenting programs that combine behavioral parenting strategies with components aimed at fostering self-compassion remain relatively scarce because most interventions tend to focus on either behavioral strategies or on parental psychological processes (e.g., Jefferson et al., 2020). Accordingly, future research should examine whether integrating self-compassion components into parenting programs grounded in social learning theory enhances their effectiveness. Such findings could inform mental health professionals and clinicians as to whether incorporating core components of self-compassion should become a standard component of parenting interventions. Finally, clinicians facilitating group-based parenting support should remain attentive to the group processes that may emerge because these interactions may play an important role in shaping parents' experiences of support and their perceptions of parenting challenges.

Limitations and future research

The qualitative approach allowed us to delve deeper into mothers' perceptions and overall experiences with the ACT Program, as well as how these experiences were shaped by the broader sociocultural context, providing insights that extend beyond traditional outcome-focused research. However, this study also has several limitations. First, although our study provided the opportunity to situate mothers' perceptions and experiences within the larger, contemporary sociocultural context, our findings are also tied to a specific time and context. Given that this limits the extent to which the findings of this research can be applied to other contexts, future research should explore mothers' experiences with group-based parenting support in different sociocultural contexts to assess the transferability of our sample's experiences.

Second, the interviews were conducted by the program facilitator and first author, with whom mothers were already familiar. Although this familiarity may have created a safe environment that encouraged open exchanges and gave access to insider perspectives from within the sessions, social desirability may have led some participants to adapt their responses to align with perceived expectations. As such, future studies may benefit from having interviews conducted by a researcher not involved in program delivery. Third, our sample included only mothers, which limits the generalizability of the findings to fathers. However, despite the need for more research on fathers in parenting programs, engaging and maintaining their participation remains challenging (Fletcher et al., 2011). Future research should thus focus on including and examining fathers' in-depth experiences and perspectives with group-based parenting programs. Fourth, although the sample was diverse in terms of SES and ethnic background, these dimensions were not explicitly addressed in the analysis. As a result, the potential influence of mothers' SES or ethnic background on their experiences could not be examined, and shared themes may have masked meaningful contextual differences between participants. As such, although this approach allowed for the identification of common experiences across a heterogeneous group, it limits the depth of interpretation and the assessment of transferability to specific socioeconomic or cultural contexts. Given that disadvantaged families may benefit the most from parenting programs yet are often the hardest to engage (LoBraico et al., 2021), it is essential for future research to gather more evidence from diverse populations to better understand how these interventions may support them in their parenting.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored mothers' perceptions and experiences in the ACT parenting program. Our results suggest that the group format played a meaningful role in shaping mothers' experiences with the program. Specifically, the findings highlight that group-based parenting

programs can foster greater self-compassion among mothers and alleviate pressure to be a perfect parent. Thus, they may offer support to navigate broader, sociocultural challenges shaping the parenting experience. Together, these findings point to the multifaceted value of a group-based parenting program that may serve as a valuable space for parenting support.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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How to cite this article: Mathijs, L., Soncini, A., Magalhães, C., Catry, C., Maroquin, L., & Van Petegem, S. (2026). Exploring mothers' experiences and perceptions in a group-based parenting program: A qualitative study. *Family Relations*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.70235>