ReachOut Parents: Informing a new digital service for parents of teenagers in Australia

About ReachOut Australia

ReachOut is Australia's leading online mental
health organisation for young people, providing
practical support to help them get through
everything from everyday issues to tough times.

Since 1998, ReachOut has worked alongside young people
to deliver online tools that address youth mental health
and reduce youth suicide. An extension to ReachOut's
service for young people was launched in 2016 to help
parents and carers improve the mental health and wellbeing
of the young people within their family environment.

Available anytime and pretty much anywhere, ReachOut.
com is accessed by 110,000 Australians each month.
That's more than 1.31 million people each year.

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Executive summary

ReachOut Australia has been helping young Australians to cope with everything from everyday issues to tough times since 1998. ReachOut works alongside young people to deliver online tools that address youth mental health and youth suicide directly into the hands of the people they have been developed for.

In May 2016, we launched a new digital service called ReachOut Parents. This service aims to improve young people's mental health and wellbeing through helping parents understand more about them and the tough times they face.

Parents have a crucial role in determining whether or not young people will get help, so it makes sense to support parents in helping their teens to get the assistance they need when they need it.

ReachOut Parents provides parents of teens aged 12 to 18 with evidence-based practical support and tips that encourage effective communication and relationships between parents and young people. It also makes available easy-to-read information on a range of mental health and wellbeing issues. A key feature of ReachOut Parents is a peer-to-peer forum where parents can connect with others to share their experiences in an anonymous, supportive space.

Anecdotally, we know that parenting is a lot more complex these days. This generation of parents of teenagers is the first to have to deal with issues such as their children's social media use, cyberbullying and when their child should get their first mobile phone. They are also very time-poor, and are increasingly turning to the internet for information and advice. And while there's a lot of online support for parents of babies and toddlers, we have found that there isn't much in the area of mental health and wellbeing for parents of teenagers – and that's when things tend to become more complicated.

In order to inform the content and design of this new service, ReachOut carried out a suite of research activities, including a literature review, focus groups and co-design workshops, and an online survey involving a diverse group of parents. We also held focus groups with young people to find out how they wanted their parents to help them. The findings and insights from this research helped to identify a range of useful information, including the issues parents wanted help with, how they use technology when seeking help, and how they wanted the support and advice presented to them.

TOP INSIGHTS

Parents' top concerns about their teenagers

- ► Communicating with their teenager
- ► Peer pressure
- ► Education and study stress
- ► Self-esteem
- ► Anxiety
- ► Drugs, alcohol and smoking
- ► Bullying
- ► Social media and technology use

What parents want from an online support service

Overwhelmingly, parents want a non-judgemental voice that empowers them through reassurance, empathy and practical help while recognising them as experts in the context of their own lives.

- ► Parents don't want to be patronised or made to feel like 'bad parents'.
- ► The service needs to accommodate different parenting styles and the impacts these may have on young people.
- ► The service needs to be culturally sensitive in a way that isn't tokenistic or exclusive.
- ► Privacy and anonymity are essential (particularly in rural and regional areas).
- ► Parents were concerned that the world had changed so much since they were growing up that it was difficult always to know exactly how to support their children and to understand what was happening in their lives.

User goals of ReachOut Parents

- ► Validate my experience.
- ► Help me to understand what my child is going through.
- ► Give me practical strategies so that I can choose what is right for me and my family.
- ► Show me that I'm not alone.
- ► Empower me to help my child.
- ► Help me to be connected to my child.

Parents' barriers to seeking help for their teenagers

▶ **Lack of resources:** A major barrier for participants across all groups was a lack of resources to access help, including finance, transport and internet access.
▶ **Not knowing where to get help**
▶ **Stigma**
▶ **Changing world:** In all focus groups, parents expressed a feeling that the world had changed significantly since they were teens and that they often felt ill equipped to deal with this fact. This was most obvious in relation to topics such as technology, bullying, and school and university pressures. They also felt that it is harder to control the influences their children are exposed to through technology and the media.
▶ **Past experiences with services**
▶ **Racism and discrimination**
▶ **Young person not wanting to be helped, or not believing that their parents are able to help them:** Parents spoke about their children resisting their help, or preferring to listen to others' advice. This could be frustrating and a barrier to helping them. They also spoke about finding it hard to get their children to open up to them during tough times.

User research

In all our services at ReachOut, end users – in this case, parents – are involved as active participants and co-designers throughout the design research process. They participate in ideas generation, as well as providing opinions and feedback on existing design concepts. Our services are continually evaluated from the perspective of whether they are relevant, meaningful and engaging to the young people and parents who stand to benefit from them. The benefits of involving end users in the design, development and evaluation of our services include:

▶ Developing a better and deeper understanding of how young people and parents see and act in the world, and the context in which any service will be placed
▶ Ensuring that our service is relevant and engaging to users and therefore more likely to be used, increasing overall reach and impact
▶ Building credibility and rapport for the project, and ensuring that their values and attitudes are accounted for

ReachOut has used a number of different research methodologies involving parents to inform the ReachOut Parents service, including focus groups and follow-up interviews, co-design workshops, one-on-one prototype testing, and face-to-face and online focus groups with young people.

The sample across all of the research methodologies involved a diverse group of parents, including both male and female parents, parents with children between the ages of 12 and 18, culturally and linguistically diverse parents, parents who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, parents with a mix of a number of children, mix of sole and step-parents and two-parent families, LGBTI parents, and a mix of metropolitan and rural parents.

Key insights from the literature

Family demographics

According to 2015 data, there are 6.59 million families in Australia. Of these, approximately 82 per cent are couple families and 16 per cent are one-parent families.[1] Over the past two decades, social changes have seen people more likely to postpone partnering and childbearing and more likely to be divorced, separated or re-partnered. This means that young people are more likely to experience a number of family transitions in their childhood or adolescence.[2]

Help seeking

There is generally a lack of literature on parental help seeking. Parents play a vital role in help seeking for their young people. Despite the range of formal supports available, parents remain the closest and most important change agent in assisting young people to access the help they need.[3] While general practitioners are the most common formal support that parents go to first,[4] other useful informal pathways to care also exist. Unfortunately, information about these alternative pathways is less readily available. There are no clear and tested models of how parents seek help for their young people in this age group and what are the most effective components of change.

Technology use

In 2012–13, 96 per cent of households with children under 15 had internet access, while 89 per cent accessed the internet every day.[5] Internet access correlates with income: higher-income households are more likely to have internet access.[6] Adults under the age of 50 are using a combination of devices (desktop, mobile and tablet) and are just as likely as teens to be mobile internet users.[7] While the home is still the preferred place to connect to the internet, increasingly Australians are going online from alternative locations such as the workplace, wireless hotspots or a friend's place.

Environmental scan

Forty-six services with online support and information relevant for parents were identified by ReachOut. However, no services were identified that were dedicated to providing information and support in an online format for parents of young people aged 12–18 years with emerging mental health problems. The most common forms of online information and support were written formats, online peer support groups, video, interactive online tools and professional online support. Service gaps included personalised assistance to navigate the service system and tailored information for specific groups of parents (e.g. fathers, non-English speakers, parents with low literacy, and parents living in specific cultures and contexts).

Focus groups

Five focus groups were carried out in various locations around Australia in June and July 2015 in order to gauge the acceptability of ReachOut Parents and to understand its desired features and functionality. A total of 50 parents participated in the research: 32 females and 18 males. All the participants had at least one child aged 12–18.

Overall, the focus groups included seven step-parents, 15 sole parents, three parents who were separated but both involved in the care of their children, and 25 parents who were married with both parents involved with the care of their child. The majority of participants had two or three children. Eight parents were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; at least ten were culturally or linguistically diverse; and two identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

The focus groups explored parents' technology use; how parents seek help (what has been their help-seeking process/experience); what are the main issues parents see their adolescents as facing and what are the main barriers/challenges and enablers to seeking help for their young person; and what support is already available for parents that they are aware of. The focus groups also sought to understand the key mental health and wellbeing issues that parents see as relevant to their teenagers; how parents would like information presented to them; and how parents look after their own wellbeing. Furthermore, the focus groups sought to explore differences and commonalities across the different participant groups with regards to the above issues.

Various members of focus groups were selected to participate in further phone interviews, which explored these themes in more depth and started to explore service offerings.

FINDINGS

> *You're not always looking for a solution; you're looking for support and an alternative, and for someone to say: 'You're a good parent. You may not feel like it, but you are.'*

The main issues of concern to parents of teenagers

- ► How to communicate with my teenager
- ► Peer pressure
- ► Education and study stress/not going to school
- ► Career and future
- ► Self-esteem
- ► Anxiety
- ► Drugs, alcohol and smoking
- ► Bullying
- ► Social media and technology use
- ► Racism and discrimination (for Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse, or CALD, parents)

Where parents go to for support and help

> *Well, generally, if there's an issue that I don't have any first-hand personal knowledge of, I'll go to family or close friends. I'll discuss with them how they might have dealt with a similar situation. Then I'll look online. I'll go and research something online and then go and talk to an organisation or a body that specialises in it.*

- ► Family, friends and other parents
- ► Online
- ► Their child's school
- ► Service providers
- ► Peer support

Parents' technology use

- The majority of parents felt quite comfortable with technology.
- In all of the focus groups, the majority of parents used Facebook regularly.
- The majority of parents used Google to search for information.
- A number of parents used YouTube tutorials to find out information about how to do things.
- The mental health website that parents were aware of was Beyondblue.
- Parents used smartphones, iPads, laptops, tablets and PCs.

Barriers to seeking help

Participants who described previous experiences of seeking formal help for their children also spoke about the many barriers and challenges they faced along the way. Many of them said they would persevere to overcome any obstacles, but commented that this could be an exhausting process. Barriers included:

Lack of resources

A major barrier for participants across all groups was a lack of resources to access help, including finance, transport and internet access.

But because of today's economic budgetary constraints, a lot of the non-profit organisations have to reduce their assistance. People have either got to fork out themselves or go without.

Participants who reported financial barriers also spoke about not being able to afford an internet connection. One mother said that she and her children accessed the internet at the local library.

Not knowing where to get help

Stigma

Changing world

In all focus groups, parents said they felt that the world had changed significantly since they were teens, and that they often felt ill equipped to deal with it. This was most apparent in discussions of technology, bullying, and school and university pressures. They also felt that it is harder today to control the influences their children are exposed to through technology and the media.

We've got no experience with so many of the problems teenagers have because it's a different world. They have problems that didn't exist when we were teenagers. We haven't lived through some of the shit they face, so we don't know how to deal with it.

Past experiences with services

Racism and discrimination

Young person not wanting to be helped or believing that their parents are unable to help them

Parents spoke about their children resisting their help or preferring to listen to others' advice. This could be frustrating and a barrier to helping them. They also spoke about the difficulty in getting their children to open up to them during tough times.

She'll listen to her friends who are saying the same things that I'm saying. But if I say it, she's like: 'Oh, you don't know that!'

How parents look after their own wellbeing

- Catching up with friends and family
- Creating space and time for their children
- Volunteering
- Exercise

Feedback on the service: content, features and user experience

- ▶ All parents wanted the site to be simple and easy to use.
- ▶ They wanted the information to be categorised.

> *Having it set up so that I could just put in a question and it will take me to that part, rather than me having to go: 'Okay, so this part is about adolescents; this part is about young children; this part is about eating disorders; this part's...'*

- ▶ The language needs to be simple and relatable.
- ▶ The site needs to be culturally appropriate and inclusive.
- ▶ The site needs to use humour and not be judgemental.
- ▶ The content needs to be relevant, kept up to date and be evidenced based.
- ▶ The service needs to offer a Q&A session, tips on how to talk to teenagers, and access to immediate help if needed.
- ▶ Parents appreciated being able to discuss issues with other parents.

> *If we've got support networks that have children of a similar age, that's okay. But a lot of my friends have children who are much younger, so they haven't been through it yet. It's very hard. If you don't have people in that age group or who have just gone through it, it can be very isolating.*

- ▶ The use of personal stories was very popular across all the focus groups.
- ▶ Parents liked the idea of fact sheets, but didn't want them to be too text heavy.
- ▶ Participants suggested that the service needs to provide links to other local services, community-based activities and face-to-face parent groups.

Parents from hard-to-reach or vulnerable groups

Social, economic and cultural factors influenced the access particular parents had to appropriate services and the issues they viewed their teenagers as having to deal with. Being a step-parent also influenced how participants in this research were able to respond to the issues the young people they lived with were going through.

- ▶ Single parents had less support, and some found it difficult to deal with issues that their children of the opposite sex were experiencing, particularly single dads.
- ▶ Step-parents were often more careful about being critical of their stepchildren than their biological children.

> *I talk to a few guys I know back home who are in the same situation as me. But for me, I can't find anything like, you know, girls' problems or whatever.*

- ▶ Barriers for Aboriginal parents include a lack of culturally appropriate mechanisms through which to have a voice, and a lack of Aboriginal workers.
- ▶ Aboriginal parents had a much greater focus on extended family than did other parents.
- ▶ CALD parents raised the issue of generational and cultural differences between parents raised overseas and children raised in Australia.

Parents' mental health and wellbeing

- ▶ A number of parents talked about their own mental health issues and how these impacted on their parenting, including feeling exhausted.
- ▶ Because of their own experiences, some parents had knowledge of the mental health system.
- ▶ Some parents had had negative experiences, and this made them wary of clinicians.
- ▶ Other parents spoke about how their own mental health issues made it easier for them to empathise with their children.

Young people consultation

A crucial element in the design of a service for parents was that the information, support and advice matched up with the support young people wanted from their parents. For this reason, we undertook to gauge the views of young people through online and face-to-face focus groups with 36 young people ranging from year 7 to year 12 from both rural and metropolitan areas.

The aim was to test how young people feel about a service for parents; what advice they have about such a service; what issues they would like their parents to give them support with; and how they would like their parents to approach them about issues.

FINDINGS

► Each year of high school brings new experiences, challenges and issues. Relationships between parents and young people are tested the most between years 9 and 11, when young people are working out who they are and dealing with peer pressure. During this time, parents are also anxious and frustrated.

► Young people feel that their parents are often too controlling and likely to overreact, and are poor listeners during this difficult time, so they often retreat during these years.

► Young people would love their parents to take the time to spend time with and listen to them, take their side and validate their feelings.

► Connections between parents and young people break down when parents push for information, ask the same thing over and over, yell and overreact, or make critical comments and offer unwanted advice.

► Young people are more likely to open up when doing an activity. It's a chance to connect, understand and laugh together.

► Parents need more effective ways to respond when young people open up, such as being more positive and encouraging rather than critical.

► When young people are feeling stressed, pressured, uncertain and anxious, they want their parents to show them that they care, that they love them and that they want to do something to help.

► Young people want parents to facilitate the help-seeking process, rather than taking over and directing things. It's important for young people to feel part of the decision-making process, and to be informed and on board with the next steps.

► During these vulnerable times, parents need to do everything they can to show their children support, respect and love.

Co-design workshops

Two co-design workshops involving 24 parents from metropolitan and regional locations were held in order to understand user needs, user experiences and service design for ReachOut Parents.

FINDINGS

The findings from the co-design groups confirmed the findings from the focus groups; however, some additional findings were as follows:

Pathways into ReachOut Parents

- ▶ Google and online search
- ▶ Mental health websites
- ▶ Friends
- ▶ GPs
- ▶ Family
- ▶ School chaplains
- ▶ Counsellors
- ▶ Raising Children's Network website
- ▶ Media
- ▶ Community services
- ▶ NGOs

What parents don't want on an online service

- ▶ Online courses (too general and take too long – would prefer to access tailored advice quickly)
- ▶ Testimonials (don't trust them)
- ▶ Some parents said that they would consume content on social media but would not participate in a discussion because of privacy concerns for both themselves and their children.

Community forum focus group

A key component of the ReachOut Parents service is the parents' community forum, where participants can read about other parents' experiences, and gain support and advice from them in an anonymous, non-judgemental and safe space, at any time of day or night.

In holding a focus group to inform this part of the service, we were looking to gain insights from parents into how the forums can fit into the everyday lives of parents and carers; how we can create and maintain a great community that meets their needs; and what content they wanted. The sample included 12 parents – six male and six female – and was a mix of small-group and individual activities.

FINDINGS

Why would parents go to an online forum?

► To share their own and listen to other parents' experiences
► To engage with experts
► For reassurance that they are not alone
► For advice, information and practical solutions
► To discuss topical issues
► For self-empowerment

Why would parents come to the community?

► To share their experiences
► To obtain advice and information
► To look for information
► To look for connection

Who would they want to talk to?

► Ordinary parents with experience
► Specialists in the field (including young people)

What would an online community need to be like to be most useful?

- ► Good volume of content
- ► Unbiased and constructive
- ► Clear language and tone
- ► Would prefer personal experience/genuine people who are experiencing a genuine problem
- ► Professional opinions
- ► Relevant to own circumstances
- ► Responses are fast and accurate, and provide knowledgeable information
- ► Practical

How do forums fit into parents' everyday lives?

- ► **Access time:** To and from work when I have some downtime, commuting, just before bed, mostly evenings, in car in traffic, when I need to find out something about a product/service, any time of the day or night
- ► **Access device:** phone/iPad
- ► **Frequency of forum use:** dependent on forum, daily, once or twice a week, monthly
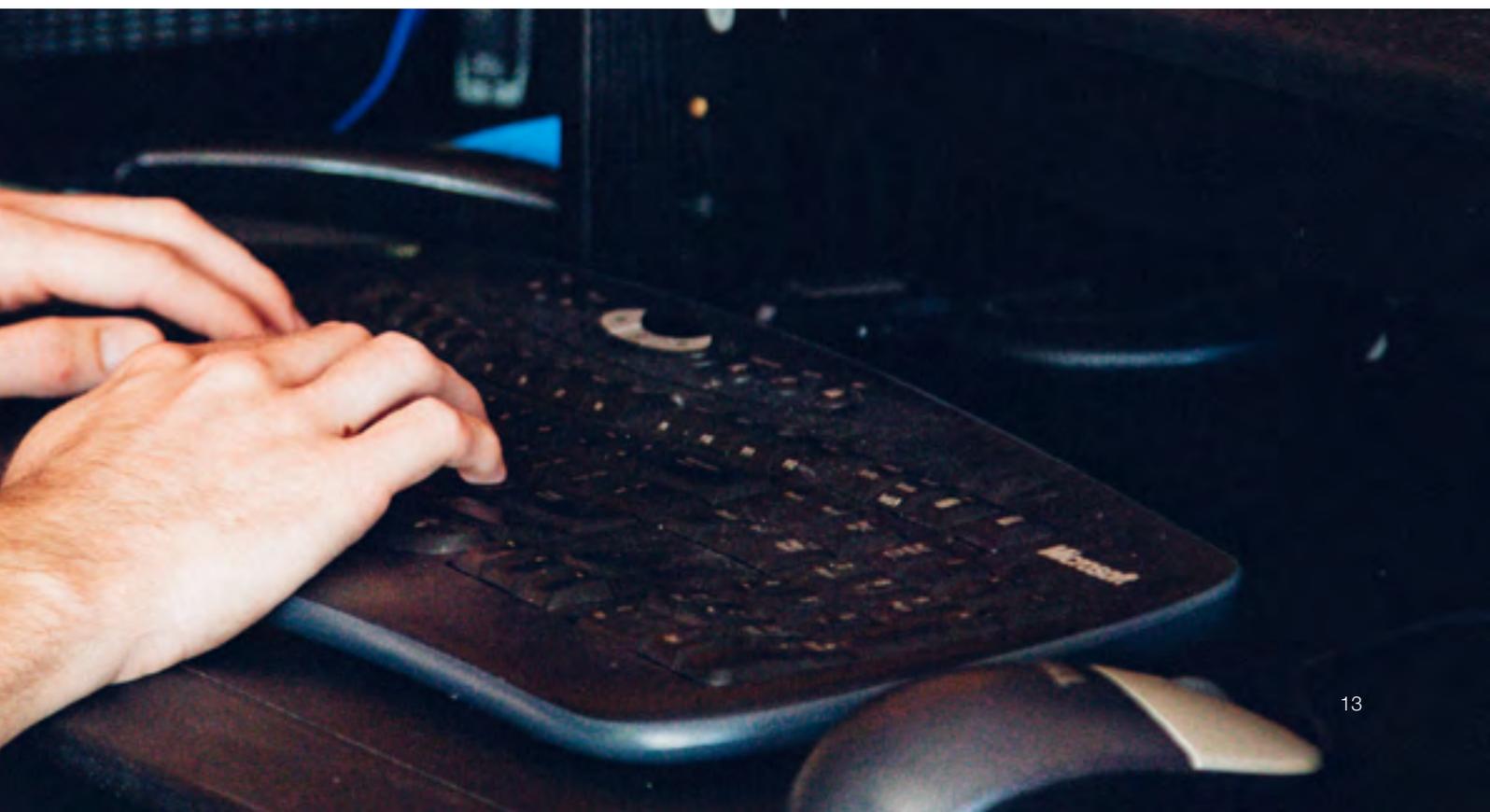
One-on-one prototype testing

This methodology involves capturing feedback to an early prototype of the ReachOut Parents service to test overall flow and concept, observe and understand navigation usage and behaviours, validate categories and labels, evaluate how well the prototype and designs are meeting user experience goals, and identify any issues in order to move forward with building the final product.

Ten parents in total participated in the testing – three men and seven women – with an even split between those living in metropolitan and regional areas. The sample contained parents from different educational levels and employment statuses, and a diversity of family types (step-parents, sole parents and nuclear families) was represented. One participant identified as Aboriginal and had participated in initial focus groups and a co-design workshop. All had at least one child who was in the 12–18 age range.

FINDINGS

► Overwhelmingly positive response to the service.
► Participants generally found what they needed, but some navigational items were overlooked. For example, there was a challenge with getting parents to the right content because of the variety of ways they think about and frame the issues.
► Content needs to be as succinct as possible, and there is a need to use structure and layout in a way that doesn't appear to be overwhelming.
► Labels were generally very well received.
► Titles that were very clear and framed positively using non-judgemental, plain language worked best.
► Titles need to describe the aim of practical content – that is, is it to build a parent's skills, or to support them to build their child's skills?
► Participants understood how content was categorised, and the card sort reinforced the decision to connect the 'understand' and 'things to try' content.
► As with previous research, parents want a suite of content around particular life stages and events.
► A module designed for parents to work in partnership with their children would be very welcome.
► Images worked well, but need to be relatable and relevant.
► Liked the index page and the tiled approach.
► Loved the diversity of topics, but found the amount of content relating to each topic a bit overwhelming.

Online survey of parents

In addition to the qualitative research, ReachOut carried out an online survey of 1000 parents to inform the ReachOut Parents service.

The survey sought particularly to include insights from sub-groups, including parents on low incomes and single parents, and to examine differences between younger and older parents, and between parents living in rural/regional and metropolitan locations. Questions included how parents rated their child's mental health, and if and how they would use the internet to access information or support.

The insights broadly supported the findings of the qualitative research, but also included additional insights, as set out below.

FINDINGS

Child mental health

Around 21 per cent of all parents surveyed rated their child's mental health as fair or poor.

Low-income households – those on less than $32,000 per year – are more likely to rate their child's health as poor/fair, at 30 per cent, compared with the average figure of 21 per cent.

Single parents are also more likely to rate their child's health as poor or fair, at 27 per cent.

High-income households are far more likely to rate their child's health as excellent.

Around one-third (32 per cent) of parents would like their children to receive support for a personal or emotional problem.

Single parents are more likely to want help for their child, at 41 per cent compared to the average figure of 32 per cent.

Sources of help and information

Around one-third (31 per cent) of parents have used the internet to find information on childhood problems.

Single parents are more likely to use the internet to seek help, at 38 per cent compared to the average figure of 31 per cent.

Regional parents are less likely to use the internet for information or support (26 per cent compared to 31% average).

Seventy-eight per cent of parents indicated that they either have used or would use a website to find information about their child's mental health issues.

Conclusions from the research

Parents have been involved in the research process from the conceptualisation to the design and implementation of the service. The research illustrated the vital role parents play in young people's mental health, and indicated that many parents will continue to try and support their children no matter what, despite negative past experiences and often numerous barriers.

While the majority of parents were very invested in supporting their children, many were not sure of the best way to do this and were receptive to the idea of a service that could provide them with some practical tips. They appreciated the opportunity that the research process gave them to connect with other parents, and saw being able to interact with other parents as a vital part of a service for parents. Parents liked the idea of reading about other parents' experiences (both the positive stories and the struggles) and communicating with other parents in a moderated environment. Most were also happy to learn from professionals, as long as the professionals respected parents as experts in their own right and delivered information and support in a relevant and non-judgemental way. A number of parents perceived the world their children were growing up in as being very different from their own, largely because of advances in technology. The way in which their teenagers communicated with each other was thus different from their own experience and they wanted suggestions about the best ways to communicate with their children.

Essentially, parents want a service that is friendly, inclusive, relatable, evidenced based, practical, non-judgemental, uses humour, is easy to navigate and understand, and respects their privacy/anonymity.

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