

Community-based Internet forums are great for new mothers, but could marginalize fathers

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Researchers believe that local online forums could play a key role in helping new mothers to share experiences and concerns, according to a study published in the January issue of the UK-based *Journal of Advanced Nursing*.

Professor Wendy Hall from the University of British Columbia and Assistant Professor Valerie Irvine from the University of Victoria, Canada, studied online communication threads between a group of 40 women, who had all given birth in the same year and joined a local forum based in a moderate-sized Canadian city.

They concluded that these forums could provide a viable alternative to face-to-face groups, especially in rural communities where travel and professional support are limited.

As a result of the study, the researchers are encouraging healthcare professionals to help mothers with young children to set up, or access, similar community-based networks as they believe they offer more tailored support than existing corporate web-based forums with unlimited international access.

But they have warned that there is a danger that women-only forums can marginalise fathers and that if fathers are not actively involved in discussions about childcare this could pose particular problems for

working mothers.

"The 12 women who initially set up the forum met while they were attending parent education classes" explains Professor Hall. "They invited a community health nurse to monitor their communications and correct any information that was wrong."

New members were then invited by word of mouth.

The 40 women who took part in the study gave the researchers permission to monitor their archived posts, which covered a one-year period. They were highly educated, with an average age of 36. The group included pregnant women as well as the mothers of babies up to 11 months of age. Eight out of ten were married and 88 per cent had above average incomes. Sixty-one per cent were employed outside the home, nine per cent worked at home for pay and 14 per cent were on maternity leave.

The researchers found that the women used the online support group to:

Develop community connections in the small geographical area that the membership covered. It was used to share information about accessing community programmes and classes, suggest and share the names of service providers, organise dates for events, sell or trade children's items, share videos and plan get-togethers.

- Request and provide emotional support. The women shared their stories, experiences and feelings, expressed sympathy, thanked others for their help and talked about their beliefs and expectations. For example they discussed practical issues, like breastfeeding, finding child care, teething and healthcare experiences, and emotional issues, like how they felt about going back to work.

- Share information that they had gleaned from websites, reading or care providers, and learn. For example, they talked about the best ways to get their babies to sleep, useful websites and books they had discovered or advice they had been given by their healthcare provider on issues such as milk allergies. They also helped other members whose computer skills were less developed.
- Normalise the experiences they were having with their babies and as mothers. The women found it helpful to discuss problems and compare notes about problems as it made them realise that other mothers had similar issues. They also talked about how they had solved problems, the advice they had received and how their experiences would change as their children developed.

The authors have pointed out that the experiences of mothers on a tightly-knit geographical forum could be more similar than women on a website that draws membership from diverse communities across the world.

"The mothers who became part of this online community obviously drew great benefits from the advice, support and friendship they received from other local women" says Professor Hall.

"However some of the women did report that their partners were commenting on how much time they spent on the computer and they acknowledged that social activities were organised that excluded fathers.

"There were some indications that our study group felt that parenting was primarily their responsibility and that fathers didn't need to be included in the discussions.

Supporting mothers is very important but it is also vital that

fathers are not sidelined in a way that discourages them from being active parents."

The authors conclude that local online support groups can play an important role in helping to support women in what can be an isolating experience, by bringing them together with other mothers with similar expectations, beliefs and knowledge.

"This self-sufficient grass-roots group required limited monitoring by the community health nurse and this format could offer an alternative to face-to-face support groups" says Professor Hall. "Nurses and other healthcare providers could also help women to identify online local or regional resources.

"The forum we studied clearly shows that the opportunity to share experiences with like-minded, local women can stop pregnant women and mothers from feeling isolated and worrying about giving birth and parenting."

Source: Wiley

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