



“There’s no acknowledgement of how mentally taxing this is”: Parent priorities for support in managing constipation

Leanne Morrison^{1,4}, Charlotte Cairns², Riya Tiwari², Sonia Newman³, Kate Henaghan-Sykes¹

¹Primary Care Research Centre, University of Southampton, ²School of Health Sciences, University of Southampton, ³NIHR Research Support Service, ⁴School of Psychology, University of Southampton

What is the problem?



1 in 3 UK children experience constipation. Research with families reports that parents do not have enough support to manage childhood constipation (1-3).

In 2023-24 we ran a national online survey and spoke to 30 parents (4). Parents told us they spend a lot of time in ‘trial and error’. Some felt unsupported by health professionals.



How can support from health professionals be improved?

What is missing from existing online support (e.g. NHS, ERIC) available to parents?

What did we do?



Two community listening cafes.

- Six parents attending a Family Hub serving a deprived area of Southampton.



1

- Viewed animation providing overview of our national survey.
- Discussed lived experience of seeking help for their child’s constipation.



2

- Prioritised suggestions on how existing support for parents could be improved.



Think-aloud discussion with three parents.

- Explored real-time reactions while using online support resources for the first time.



1

- ERIC.



2

- NHS Healthier Together.

What did we learn?

Practitioners won’t do anything until in you’re in crisis mode

Have to fight to get people to listen - it shouldn’t be this hard to get help

There’s nothing I can do

I never knew what I was doing

GPs and health visitors are as clueless as we are

It’s not helpful to be told you’re already doing all the right things – we need help

Emotional and mental demands of managing child’s constipation are not always recognised in primary care:

- Child’s problems dismissed as ‘just constipation’ with advice to ‘wait it out’.
- Experiences of young parents, younger children, or children with additional needs not taken as seriously.

Practical support for actioning recommended management is not available:

- No help available in-the-moment when parents feel distressed.
- Positive experiences with practitioners involved creation of an action plan.

I have been crying my eyes out - laxatives do not address the emotional impact constipation can have on parents

The ERIC website takes the issue seriously – I didn’t get that from the GP

There’s no acknowledgement of how mentally taxing this is for parents

What if you’re trying everything and it’s still not working?

The ERIC website is great for learning - I need something to help translate learning into action

It’s important to be able to find what you need quickly in the moment when I’m tired, angry, and frustrated, maybe in the middle of the night”

1

Support that **acknowledges emotional impact** and **strengthens resilience** to follow constipation management plans

Parent-identified priorities

2

Support that enables parents to **create an action plan** and **troubleshoot challenges** in-the-moment.

What next?

Resources are needed to support the **emotional and practical needs** of parents managing their child’s constipation.



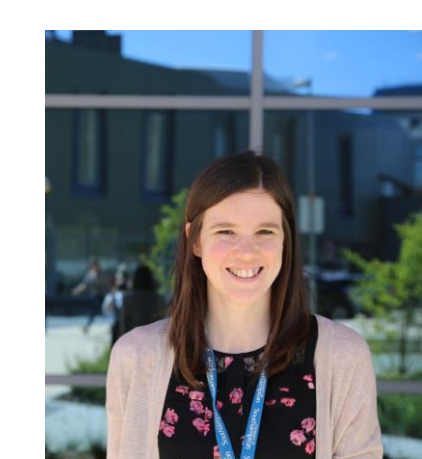
We will use these findings to seek funding for further research.

We aim to develop an accessible, scalable tool that can be used by parents to confidently manage their child’s constipation.

Please contact us if you are interested in our research.

Contact

L.Morrison@soton.ac.uk



References

¹Flanckgård, G. (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.14539>; ²Thomson, A. P. et al. (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0009922820964457>; ³Thompson, A. P. et al. (2021). <https://pediatrics.jmir.org/2021/1/e24851/>; ⁴ Tiwari, R. (submitted, under review)