ORIGINAL ARTICLE

What can families really do? A scoping review of family directed services aimed at preventing violent extremism

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Abstract

The activities of extremist groups are perceived as a key threat to modern democracies. However, much remains unknown about the role families can play in prevention or disengagement from such groups. A scoping review identified seven studies that were eligible for inclusion. The findings suggest that there is limited, yet some, support for family-directed services to directly prevent engagement in extremist groups. Rather, family directed services may indirectly influence this by strengthening family members' resilience and thus their ability to engage with the family member. Additionally, professionals working with families where a member is on a path to developing extremist ideology should continuously reflect upon their professional conduct and develop a narrative approach to reduce resistance. An important limitation to these findings is the different contexts and countries they have been conducted in, spanning from East Africa to Northern Europe.

KEYWORDS
families, prevention, radicalisation, social support, violent extremism

> **Practitioner points**
>
> 1. Emotional support and professional advice on how to engage with a family member on the path to developing extremist ideology may create opportunities for influence.
> 2. Professionals working with families should reflect upon how they engage with service users′ ideologies and develop a sensitive and narrative approach to reduce resistance.
> 3. Future research endeavours should engage more deeply with the perspectives of family members and how family-directed services are experienced by those receiving them.

1 | BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Radicalisation and violent extremism have been on the agenda of Western societies for many years, and the threat of terrorism is considered a key issue for democracies (EUROPOL, 2019). A large, and growing, amount of research has been conducted to better understand the mechanisms involved in the ideological and behavioural development (typically known as radicalisation) towards violent extremism and terrorism. Some factors identified in this large body of research are the role of families, peers, belonging and social inclusion (Hales & Williams, 2018; Kruglanski & Bertelsen, 2020) in shaping attitudes towards extremism (Cragin et al., 2015; Sikkens et al., 2017b). In this research, an extended family understanding is utilised, incorporating more than just parents and siblings into the family structure, as these are found to have a potential positive impact on (distant) family members as well (Jæger, 2012). Families have been of scholarly interest from a prevention perspective, and also in understanding the radicalisation process (Sieckelinck et al., 2019). As family members are considered important in engagement in and disengagement from violent extremist groups (Berger, 2016; Harris-Hogan, 2014), family interventions are recommended in prevention work (McDonald et al., 2011), even though they are not always likely to succeed. As an example, family interventions may also make the situation worse if there is a contentious relationship between those trying to intervene and the one at the receiving end of such interventions (Berger, 2016). The notion of strengthening families in dealing with a family member's radicalisation is substantiated by findings of parents who feel powerless and uncertain and shift to less demanding responses towards their child (Sikkens et al., 2017a). Similarly, (radicalised) friends are also found to positively influence the use of extremist-motivated violence (Jasko et al., 2017). However, friends and family can be important in identifying, and thus possibly stopping, someone who is considering acts of violent extremism (Cragin et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2016b). As there is reluctance to report a friend to authorities, when friends and family members do so, authorities should take this assessment seriously (Williams et al., 2016a). Comparative research from the United Kingdom and Australia have revealed a strong reluctance to formally report family members to authorities, with almost all study participants having that option only as the last resort (Grossman, 2019). Further, and not surprisingly, concern and uncertainty about the reporting process has been found, with a clear preference for face-to-face reporting to authorities (Thomas et al., 2020). Contemporary research has also tried to understand how to better deal with these issues by asking what works to prevent and counter violent extremism (Madriaza & Ponsot, 2015; Stephens et al., 2019; Taylor & Soni, 2017). Also, a critical lens has been aimed at the United Kingdom's PREVENT agenda (Stanley et al., 2017), as UK scholars have been concerned with PREVENT's possible role in stigmatising Muslim families and communities as potential terrorists (Guru, 2012; Stanley

et al., 2017). However, PREVENT also contains confidential support services directed at families or other concerned close ones (HM Government, n.d.).

Following the notion of socialisation, where close family members are key agents in influencing other members (Freeman & Showel, 1953; Grusec, 2011), this review examines whether families are an untapped resource for preventing violent extremism. A recent finding indicated that family members have a rather limited influence on the radicalisation process of other family members (Weggemans et al., 2021). This finding suggests that a review of experiences from such services is worth conducting, as it could identify factors that increase or decrease family members' potential as brakes on a radicalisation trajectory. To develop a picture of family-directed services and their impact, a scoping review of scholarly literature was conducted to identify and explore relevant literature. This leads to the following research question: *How do family members and professionals in family directed services experience prevention of (other) family members' radicalisation process?* Before answering the research question, this article first presents the theoretical framework guiding the analytical process.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cutrona and Russell's (1990) theories of social support were chosen as the framework through which to engage with the findings of the review, as family-directed services involve offering social support to parents and families. By reviewing findings in earlier studies, Cutrona and Russell (1990) found that social support is evident in two dimensions; instrumental support and nurturant support. These two dimensions are interlinked and contain sub-groups; instrumental support comprises information support and tangible support, and nurturant support contains emotional support and esteem support (Cutrona, 2000; Cutrona & Russell, 1990).

Attention has been given to identifying what type of support best matches various problems (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). Cutrona (2000) identified that emotional support tends to be sought in most cases, and that instrumental support is more likely to be received positively if the support provider has control over or competency in the problem area. The cultural context is also relevant when it comes to providing and receiving support, and gender might also have an influence (Kim et al., 2008; Thoits, 2011). This has implications for this scoping review, as those who provide family services should have knowledge of radicalisation and its processes, and thus be able to influence both the concerned and the potentially radicalised family members. The work of Cutrona and Russell (1987, 1990) has been applied to research on social support among police officers (Jackman et al., 2020) and on social workers' experience of preventing radicalisation and violent extremism in Norway (Haugstvedt, 2020). As such, this theoretical perspective is well suited as a framework for analysing the findings from family services in relation to radicalisation and violent extremism.

3 | METHODOLOGY

Scoping reviews apply a broad search that grasps a larger body of literature compared with systematic reviews, and may be chosen before conducting a more targeted systematic review (Munn et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2014). This scoping review followed the relevant proposed steps in PRISMA (Moher et al., 2009). However, it is not registered in PROSPERO, as PROSPERO does not accept scoping reviews (National Institute for Health Research, 2020).

3.1 | Population, intervention, comparison, outcome and study type – PICO(S)

PICO(S) is used in scholarly work at all levels to identify the components of clinical evidence for systematic reviews. According to Eriksen and Frandsen (2018), PICO(S) force the researcher to focus on the most important question or outcome, facilitates the next step (systematic search) and directs the researcher to identify the key components. When applied to synthesis of qualitative research, the comparison dimension of PICO(S), and to some degree the intervention, may be found inapplicable (Methley et al., 2014). See Table 1 for more on PICO.

4 | INCLUSION CRITERIA

This scoping review sought to identify scholarly literature on family-directed services, strategies, programmes or interventions relating to issues of radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism. Hence, the search process began by applying these terms as search words. The following criteria were applied when screening articles for eligibility; the research must be aimed at targeted family-oriented services, where some level of concern has been raised or where someone has been harmed or affected by terrorism. Scholarly papers describing interventions and services or focusing on the perspectives of service recipients, such as parents or couples, or those of counsellors and therapists, were included if they were thematically relevant. Review articles of family interventions that provided insights into the above were deemed valuable and worth including in this scoping review. No limits were set to the age of participants, as both youth and adults have been found to be at risk of being radicalised (Aiello et al., 2018; Oppetit et al., 2019) or can be harmed from terrorism. While aiming to identify experiences from these interventions or services, the search term 'experience' or similar is not included in the actual search, as it may narrow, not widen, the findings. Additionally, to avoid losing valuable insights from past work, this scoping review did not set any limitations on the date of publication.

5 | EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Articles or research that merely discussed conceptual or theoretical aspects of family interventions in the field of radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism were excluded from the review as they do not contribute empirically.

TABLE 1 PICO(S)

Population	Radicalised individuals and families or partners of radicalised individuals Professionals working within family-oriented services
Intervention	Family intervention/therapy/support
Comparison	N/A
Outcome	Experience, perception, improvement
Study type	Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods

6 | DATA EXTRACTION AND MANAGEMENT

Papers that met the criteria were imported into qualitative analysis software NVivo 12 Pro. This software was utilised to structure and organise the papers during the process of analysis, and to code and develop the themes in the thematic analysis.

7 | SEARCH AND SCREENING PROCESS

To identify relevant scholarly work on family interventions, programmes or services related to radicalisation, violent extremism or terrorism, the search words in Table 2 were used on all platforms with advanced search capabilities. The following scholarly databases were chosen for this search: Web of science, Scopus, Academic Search Premier, Academic Search Complete, CINAHL with Full Text, ERIC, International Security & Counter Terrorism Reference Center; MEDLINE, SocINDEX with Full Text. Figure 1 shows the literature search presented as a PRISMA flowchart (Moher et al., 2009). The systematic search was first conducted in July 2020, and again in May 2021. In addition to the specific findings from systemic searches of databases, additional sources were included from references in other work and through search in Google scholar. Only the author conducted the screening of the potential research papers to be included in this scoping review.

7.1 | Thematic analysis

This review undertook a thematic analysis of findings from the identified papers. As proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is traditionally a six-step process to identify patterns or themes within qualitative data, such as transcriptions of interviews. Normally, this is done either through an inductive or abductive approach to data from interviews or documents, but is also used in scoping reviews of past research (Goldstein et al., 2017; Mendelsohn et al., 2015). In the current research, thematic analysis was adapted to capture the main findings in already disseminated research, to highlight patterns across different articles and contexts. After searching for content and codes, steps 3–5 create initial themes, naming and refining them (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

8 | FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The articles identified in this scoping review are presented one by one, and the chapter ends with a synthesis of these findings inspired by the thematic analysis conducted in Mendelsohn et al. (2015). The following presentation focuses on the potential effects of family-directed

TABLE 2 Search words and combinations

Topic 1	Combination	Topic 2
family therapy OR family counselling OR family intervention OR family systems therapy OR systemic therapy	AND	terrorism OR terrorist OR terror OR extremism OR violent extremism OR radicalisation OR radicalization

Identification	Records identified in scholarly databases (n = 863)	Additional records identified through other sources, Google Scholar and cited in other academic work (n = 96)
Records after duplicates were removed (n = 959)		

Screening	Records screened (n = 959)	Records excluded (n = 908)

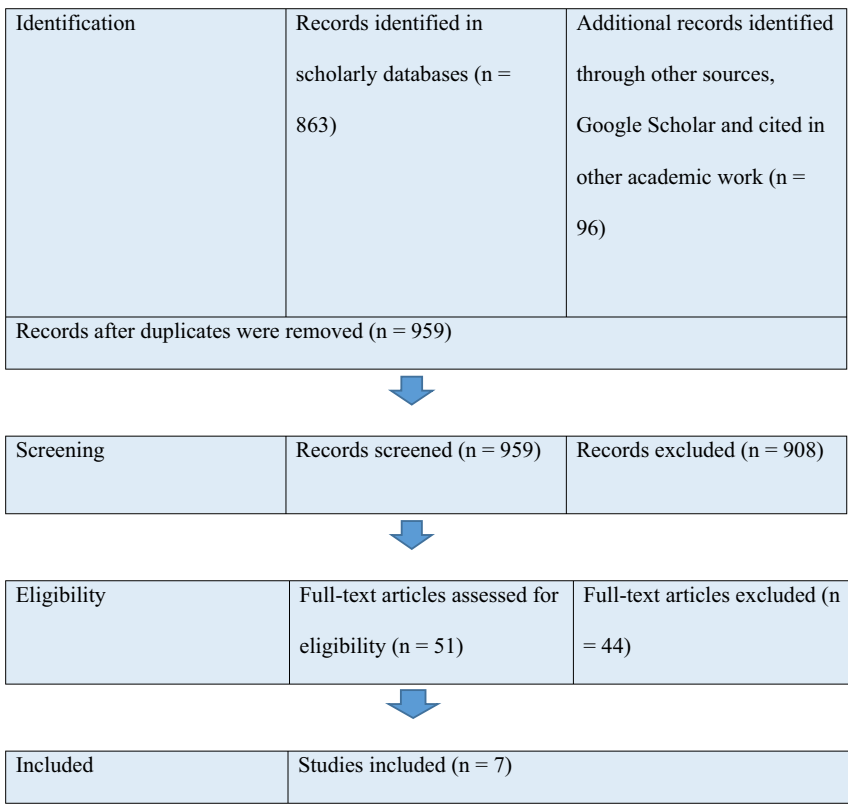| Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 51)	Full-text articles excluded (n = 44)

Included	Studies included (n = 7)

FIGURE 1 Flow diagram

services and presents the experiences of participants or service providers involved in them. In Table 3, the included articles are presented.

9 | FINDINGS

An earlier study found that multi-systemic therapy (MST) was adapted to target youth in neo-Nazi groups in the southern part of Norway in the early 2000s. In a report describing the measures taken to handle that particular situation, combined with local individually oriented services, MST was found to produce short-term disengagement from crime. Of the eight individuals who received MST over six months, four were post-MST (about three years later) involved in crime and five were back in the neo-Nazi group (Carlsson & Haaland, 2004). Therefore, MST appears to establish a temporary control structure that, when dismantled, had a minimal effect. Compared with other problem areas, such as crime in general and substance abuse (Blankestein et al., 2019; Porter & Nuntavisit, 2016), MST shows less promise in tackling youth engagement in far-right groups.

Since 2011, the German Hayat programme has delivered counselling and support services to peers, family and significant others who are concerned for an individual in all stages of a radicalisation process (Koehler, 2013). In addition to individual counselling, Hayat facilitates family group meetings with families in similar situations. Inspired by experiences from drug and mental health services, the family group meetings provide a forum for sharing concerns,

TABLE 3   Included articles

	Authors	Date	Title	Publication
1	Carlsson & Haaland	2004	Violent youth groups – intervention at the municipal level. Experience report from Kristians and 2001–2004	*NIBR Rapport*
2	Koehler	2013	Family counselling as prevention and intervention tool against "foreign fighters". The German Hayat Programme.	*Journal EXIT –Deutschland*
3	Bertelsen	2016	Danish preventive measures and de-radicalization strategies: The Aarhus model	*Panorama. Insight into Asian and European Affairs*
4	Koehler & Ehrt	2018	Parents' associations, support group interventions and countering violent extremism: An important step forward in combating violent radicalization	*International Annals of Criminology*
5	Andersson Elffers Felix	2018	Evaluation of Forsa and the family support centre	*AEF Rapport*
6	Kolbe, A., R.	2019	Do home-based social work services increase the success of programming to prevent violent extremism: Evidence from a small-scale intervention in an urban East African population	*Clinical Research in Psychology*
7	Yayla	2020	Preventing terrorist recruitment through early intervention by involving families	*Journal for Deradicalization*

emotions and questions, where the emphasis is on the exchange of experiences and emotional strengthening (Koehler, 2013). The majority of cases at the time of study were related to international violent Salafi networks. The effect of this and other deradicalisation programmes are difficult to evaluate, as stated by the author of the paper himself. The outcomes reported vary, but at least twenty-three of the sixty-two included cases in the paper had promising results in regards to conflict pacification and reduced risk of the family member travelling to Syria or Iraq. The majority of cases were still pending at the time of publication. A later piece by the same author suggested performing a wider evaluation of German family support services, as these services appear not to have slowed the flow of German fighters into Iraq and Syria (Koehler, 2015b).

The Danish Aarhus model aims to help youths move away from radical environments, crime and violence by offering support services, such as housing, finance and work, to re-integrate individuals (Bertelsen, 2015). This model utilises the individual's network, such as family, to facilitate alternative ways of settling issues outside of violence and extremist group activities. While a causal relationship has not been demonstrated between family support received and a reduction in traffic to Syria from 31 individuals in 2013 to just a few individuals in 2014 and 2015 (European Forum for Urban Security, 2016), the model shows promise. This is possibly due to the long-standing working relationship between social services and police in the SSP-model (Koehler, 2015a).

Through qualitative interviews with mothers who had lost their offspring as foreign fighters, and from a case study of the network "Mothers for Life", Koehler and Ehrt (2018) revealed that families suffer shock, loneliness and trauma after being notified of their child's death. Acquiring adequate professional care, such as trauma therapy, in the aftermath of a child's death is important. The authors suggest that networks, such as "Mothers for Life", may be strengthened by having a strong connection to authorities, which may provide easier access to resources and support parents of potentially radicalising individuals (Koehler & Ehrt, 2018).

The Family Support Centre in the Netherlands has, since its initiation in 2015, given support to 65 families (as of August 2018). The cases they have managed are varied and include having family members as foreign fighters still in active conflict zones, while others have returned to the Netherlands or are currently in prison. The overall findings from these families are positive, and highlight that case managers should be accessible, stable, have great knowledge of the problems at hand and provide support in terms of housing, finance and work (Andersson Elffers Felix, 2018). The services provided by the Family Support Centre therefore ease the burden of having a family member participate in an extremist group and possibly strengthen the families' capacity to take care of its members.

Follow-up data were available to Kolbe (2019), who researched the effect of home-based social services, including family therapy, in a prevention program targeting adolescents in an East African city. This research found that there was a positive association between receiving home-based social work, completing the prevention program and deciding not to join extremist groups nine months after a three-month prevention and leadership program. Of the 60 youths that had received home-based social work, 96.7% had not joined an extremist group nine months after the intervention, compared with 84% of the youth who had not received home-based social work. However, as home-based social work includes more than family therapy, it cannot be concluded what element of the services provided accounted for this effect.

A Turkish family support programme was carried out from 2010 to 2014 to prevent people from being recruited to terror organisations by involving the families and parents of potential recruits (Yayla, 2020). A total of 371 families of university or high school students were visited by

the programme officers during the first year of operation to inform them of their youth's association with known terrorist groups and to counsel parents on how to help their youth disengage from such groups. The programme's developer, and author of the study, reported that by the end of the first year, 86% had disengaged from the terror organisation or its recruiters. However, because of political turmoil in Turkey, follow-up data in later years are unavailable, according to the author (Yayla, 2020).

Much analytical work has been done to address the difficulties associated with various preventive measures within the social and health care service and to develop a means of "soft control" of citizens and service users (Guru, 2012; McKendrick & Finch, 2017; Ragazzi, 2017). However, this scoping review explored the potential effects of family directed services and examined the experiences provided in past scholarly work. The next step was to conduct a thematic analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), inspired by the work of Mendelsohn et al. (2015). This analysis revealed two main themes: *family support as a stress-reliever* and *family support as a competency provider*. In addition, some indications of *effect* were provided, as can be seen in the above presentation of research findings. The following section introduces the themes identified in the thematic analysis and discusses these in relation to the theoretical framework developed by Cutrona and Russell (1990).

10 | DISCUSSION

The two main themes – family support as a stress-reliever and family support as a competency provider – align somewhat with the two main dimensions of Cutrona and Russell's (1990) theoretical development of social support: nurturant and instrumental support.

Regarding *family support as a stress-reliever*, three studies reported family services that provided a forum or setting for sharing concerns and relieving stress (Andersson Elffers Felix, 2018; Koehler, 2013; Koehler & Ehrt, 2018). Such support eases the emotional burden of having a family member engage in groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), as they can provide emotional support and professional guidance (instrumental support).

Further, *family support as a competency provider* through instrumental support can come in the form of advice on how to address extreme ideology (Yayla, 2020), trauma therapy, access to other government resources (Koehler & Ehrt, 2018) and housing, finance or work (Andersson Elffers Felix, 2018). These services may indirectly strengthen families to be more resilient in the face of a family member's process towards adopting extremist ideology and thus contribute to preventing such a development. However, four studies explicitly stated the effect such services had on family members' radicalisation or engagement with extremist groups (Carlsson & Haaland, 2004; Koehler, 2013; Kolbe, 2019; Yayla, 2020), at least for a short period of time.

In terms of a *preventive effect* of family support services, the most solid finding is by Kolbe (2019), who found a positive association between receiving home-based social work (including family therapy) and not joining an extremist group at follow-up point, nine months after the intervention. Also, Yayla (2020) found that family counselling in the Turkish Sanliurfa region showed promise in disengaging youth from extremist groups, but could not show data on the long-term effects. Similarly, Carlson and Haaland (2004) found indications of the effect of MST on participating in right-wing groups in Norway, but follow-up data indicated that five out of eight youth had re-entered the group. Further, without stating a direct relationship, the Danish Aarhus model is considered promising in regards to disengagement from violent groups (European Forum for Urban Security, 2016; Koehler, 2015a).

11 | IMPLICATIONS

There is some, yet limited, evidence to claim that family-directed services have a lasting effect on family members' further radicalisation. However, it may also be that such services have a preventive effect through indirect processes. Families' resilience and capability to support, challenge and positively engage with their loved ones, where concern for radicalisation is raised, can create stronger bonds and make families more influential. However, this influence was not directly proven in this study and should thus be explored in future research. Future research endeavours should also shed light on the perspectives of family members on those receiving family support.

What about the practice field? In a contested area, such as the United Kingdom's PREVENT agenda, how can family-directed services steer clear of the blurred roles of support and control from cooperation with police and other government services? A continuous engagement with professional and ethical standards, professional strategies and critical reflection with peers or supervisors is strongly recommended, as found through the experience of Norwegian social workers (Haugstvedt, 2020). Sikkens et al. (2017b) have indicated that parents can play a role in preventing radicalisation and contribute to a de-radicalisation or disengagement process. According to the authors, they can do this by providing parental advice and care and by listening, talking to and educating their children about ways to find a meaningful life (Sikkens et al. (2017b)). Another publication from the same research project recommends that parents receive professional support and guidance to overcome parental uncertainty when addressing extreme ideology in their families (Sikkens et al., 2017a). Working with families of individuals found at risk of (further) radicalisation, professionals should strive to not "securitize" family members by giving them heavy responsibilities in nation-states' counter-terrorism strategies. This might lower the risk of creating potentially wider gaps between family members, as well as keeping a firm focus on these efforts as responsibilities of states, not of family members. Additionally, following the suggestions from Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013), dialogue regarding ideology should ideally utilise narratives rather than arguments and logic when resistance is expected, as well as staying close to the family member's potential doubt if it is pronounced. Building on the findings from both Australia and the UK (Grossman, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020), authorities should be aware of families' uncertainty on when and how to possibly report concern for a family member. Hence, authorities should take steps to create more transparency on how they interact with families or others who raise some kind of concern about radicalisation or violent extremism.

12 | LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be noted about the work of this research project. First of all, it has been conducted by a single researcher only. However, it has been conducted in several steps, giving the researcher time to clear his mind of early surfacing findings between searches, analysis and discussion. Second, the studies included in this review are from a variety of countries. Obviously, social and cultural aspects of family workings might differ between Denmark, Germany, Turkey and an un-specified East African country. Hence, as the findings in this review are based on research conducted in different contexts, the comparison of them is not necessarily a seamless one. These aspects should be kept in mind when reading this article.

13 | CONCLUSION

This scoping review explored research on family-directed services aimed at preventing radicalisation and violent extremism or supporting the families of family members engaged in extremist groups. Seven articles were eligible for inclusion, and two main themes surfaced from the analysis: family support as a stress-reliever and family support as competency provider. The findings show that while there is some, yet limited support to claim that family directed services can prevent engagement in extremist groups or the development of extremist ideology, such services may indirectly influence this through strengthening family members' resilience and ability to engage with the family member on a possible trajectory towards engaging in extremist groups or ideology. Being able to share their concerns with others and receive support and advice from both peers and professionals could strengthen families' dialogue with that family member. It is, however, important to firmly state that the responsibilities to prevent or counter a family member's radicalisation process towards more extreme ideology and/or behaviour is not something the state can nor should leave to families alone. Rather, for family members, this task is challenging, and may create strain and insecurity about how and when to react or report. If or when they do, authorities should take their concerns seriously, and provide instrumental and emotional support services to strengthen families' ability to help, not control, their loved ones – regardless of the ideological stance of that person.

ETHICS

This research did not use primary data collected from participants. Rather, as the nature of a review article reflects, data were collected through published research. As such, the research has not been submitted for ethical assessment or approval by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). However, the author has strived to respect the initial findings of the included articles and their respective participants.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest to reveal, and there is no specific funding for this research article.

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