

Case Study: Boosting Health Literacy & Care: Digital Parental Support via ChatHealth messaging

Authors:

Laura Burrowes

Clinical Development Lead, Digital Health Transformation Service, Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust

Julie Crook

SPA Duty Clinician – Health Visitor, Derbyshire Community Health Services NHS Foundation Trust

Description

ChatHealth is a safe and secure messaging platform allowing service users to receive confidential health information and advice from healthcare professionals. Initially developed by Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust in 2012, ChatHealth has been adopted by more than 80 NHS Trusts and healthcare organisations and is widely used by health visiting services in England to offer a safe and secure messaging helpline to parents and carers of babies and children under five¹. Feedback shows that service users value the convenience of the service, alongside more traditional ways to get help. In some cases, swift support and advice via text from a health visitor can avoid needing a GP appointment or parents going to the Emergency Department.

Context

ChatHealth was first piloted in health visiting in 2016 by Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust. The pilot ran from November 2016 to December 2017, during which ChatHealth was promoted to the parents and carers of around 140,000 babies and children to access support from health visitors via messaging. During this period, the service received 1,448 enquiries and handled 5,124 messages. These results highlighted the need and value of supporting parents and carers using digital platforms².

Since then, more than 40 health visiting services in England have implemented ChatHealth to offer safe and secure messaging to parents. Across all these health visiting services, between April 2022 and March 2023, 67,200 conversations took place with parents and carers of 0–5-year-olds. Of these, more than one in four (18,900;26%) related to enquiries about minor illnesses.

Feedback on the service from parents has been extremely positive. In 2022-2023, 85% of parents who used ChatHealth said that the service had helped them. Positive feedback related to support for minor illnesses included:



I would have called 111 if I didn't access this service for support.



The quick response and advice was really helpful. Would have gone to A&E because the GP would not see us today.



I'm a new mum winging it and having this service, really helps. Really quick response as well. Thank you.



As a first-time mum always second guessing what to do in different situations, this service provided a fast easy way to communicate with a professional about non-emergency type queries we may have.

Method

Derbyshire Children's Services Single Point of Access (SPA) implemented ChatHealth in June 2020. During the COVID-19 pandemic, home visiting was limited. As a result, more families were being supported by SPA and this led to the rapid development of this new service. Introducing ChatHealth to the service during a pandemic provided parents with an additional way of rapidly accessing advice and support from a health visitor within the SPA team.

Evaluation methods were embedded within the project to establish whether ChatHealth improved the health visiting offer. This included enhanced feedback questions using the Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) cycle and model for improvement. Service users were asked to state their level of satisfaction out of 10. They were also asked where they would have gone for support had ChatHealth not been available.

Outcomes

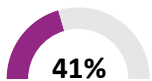
Derbyshire Children's Services were able to demonstrate a high level of service user satisfaction, as well as the significant impact that ChatHealth had on the locality health visitor's workload and the reduction of avoidable appointments for primary and secondary care.

Following a successful 12-week pilot with enhanced feedback in summer 2022, the evaluation was extended to further evidence the benefits of ChatHealth. From October 2022 to July 2023, Derbyshire SPA health visitors had 2,154 conversations with service users using ChatHealth. The main reasons for contacting ChatHealth were for support/advice with:

- infant feeding
- general health of the child
- constipation/stool queries
- reflux
- colic

769 feedback responses were given by service users with 268 of these providing enhanced feedback. The average satisfaction score of those providing this information was 9.8/10 demonstrating how ChatHealth is valued and responds effectively to parent and carer enquiries about their child's health.

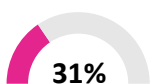
Of those who commented where they would have gone if ChatHealth hadn't been available:



said they would have gone to the GP



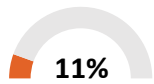
Would have made appt with GP but this service much quicker and has saved GP appt for someone else.



would have tried to call the HV



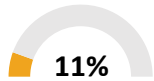
I would have rung if ChatHealth wasn't available, but it wouldn't have been convenient to wait on the phone or I perhaps would have missed a call back whereas chatting is perfect because can do it on the go!



said they weren't sure or wouldn't have known where to go



I honestly have no idea where I would have gone instead.



said they would have used the internet/Google



ChatHealth is really helpful as sometimes searching the Internet can lead to really misleading information, it's useful to be able to chat on and off about a non-urgent health query.

Other responses included:

- "111"
- "Midwife"
- "Waited for next HV appointment"
- "I just would have worried"
- "Nurse at GP surgery"
- "Asked other mums"
- "Wouldn't have gone anywhere"
- "Pharmacist"
- "Would have e-mailed"

Many parents highly rate the service and support they have received via ChatHealth and say they appreciate the speed, ease and helpfulness of the service. Feedback has also demonstrated that the ChatHealth service supports both busy and working parents to access health advice when unable to answer the phone.

Only 2 respondents suggested areas of improvement, both stating that they would have liked to have had the service available at the weekend.

During the same period this data was being collected, 4,091 telephone calls were added to the SPA waiting list for a health visitor call back indicating that around 34% of queries for advice/support into the SPA service were through ChatHealth.

Key learning points

In summary, the data collected suggest that ChatHealth has:

- **Provided parents with easier access to support:** ChatHealth service has enhanced the health visiting service offer to parents of babies and young children in Derbyshire. ChatHealth, in conjunction with the Family Health Advice Line (previously the SPA telephone line), has provided parents with easier access to the Health Visiting service.
- **Reduced pressure on other services:** ChatHealth has supported parents to get the right help at the right time. The feedback has shown that 41% of service users would have contacted the GP if they did not have ChatHealth. ChatHealth has saved GP's time and enabled health visitors to work more effectively and enhance their support to families.
- **High level of user satisfaction:** The data collected have shown that service users really value the ChatHealth service, the advice given and the ease of access to it. The enhanced feedback questions added to the service user feedback template have proved valuable and provided the information required.

As a result, Derbyshire will continue to collect data to obtain more information on a long-term basis and add to a greater, more robust data bank to further evidence the benefits of ChatHealth to the Derbyshire Family Health Service and give the opportunity to highlight different trends which may instigate further research.

The enhanced feedback questions are also now being used to provide data for the telephone advice line so this can also be audited in the same way as ChatHealth.

References

1. Digital Health Transformation Service (2023) Impact in Numbers. <https://impacts.dhtsnhs.uk/>
2. Palmer C (2022) Use of a text messaging service for communication with parents and carers. <https://bit.ly/4al2y3Y>