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Characteristics of Evidence-Based Parent-Training Programs

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Introduction

Purpose: To identify key characteristics in evidence-based parent-training programs that ensure effectiveness and efficiency for agencies serving families with children aged 5–9 with emotional and behavioral disorders. My research strategy will be to do a literature review of evidence-based parent-training programs that strengthen parent competencies, foster parent’s involvement in school, decrease children’s behavioral problems and strengthen children’s social and academic competencies.

Problem to be addressed: When children receive inconsistent or ineffective discipline from parents, they are at risk of developing childhood behavioral disorders. By adolescence, these problems can develop into Conduct Disorders as demonstrated by violence, substance abuse and criminal behavior. Teaching parents to consistently and effectively discipline their children is paramount to avoiding the development of long-term behavioral disorders. Agencies serving this population often implement parent-training programs for families struggling with childhood behavior problems. Agencies would benefit from knowing what the literature indicates are evidence-based strategies in parent-training programs so the agency can utilize programs that are proven to be effective and efficient.

Research question: What are the key characteristics in evidence-based parent-training programs that demonstrate effectiveness and cost efficiency?

Findings: Evidence-based parent-training programs are strength-based and tailored to meet the needs of individual families being served. Effective training is didactic and experiential and offers information in multiple settings and modes. Evidence-based parent-training programs work within the families culture, socio-economic status and cognitive functioning. Parent educators are trained specifically to help guide parents in learning new parenting skills. Goals established are a collaborative effort by the child, parent and staff. Group-based programs are effective for many parents and are the most cost-efficient.

Literature Review

Research indicates that seven to twenty percent of children meet the diagnostic criteria for Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Conduct Disorder as outlined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental disorders IV-TR(10). An estimated thirty-five percent of children in low-income families demonstrate behavioral problems (7). Studies show that parents have a tremendous impact on their children and can influence a child’s behavioral and emotional development in a negative or positive way. For example, parents that lack parenting skills can exacerbate behavioral problems in children. Agencies serving families involving children with behavioral disorders should first assess caregivers for parenting problems and then train parents to respond in a positive manner to help correct behavioral difficulties (16). Because parents are the most influential change agents for a child’s behavioral difficulties, parent-training has proven to be the most effective method of intervention.

This study looks at evidence-based programs that are well-supported by clinical trials and found to be effective. For programs to be effective, parent-training programs must meet the following criteria: (a) appropriate assessment, (b) cultural considerations (7, 11), (c) parents must be able to learn the skills being taught, (d) skills must be used to elicit behavioral change (e) and skills must be maintained and generalized across multiple settings and environments (1, 15).

There are three general formats used to educate parents how to manage their children’s behavior; self-administered programs, individual programs and group formats. Each of these formats has strengths and weaknesses.

•*Self-administered* are accessible and can be delivered to all in need at a low cost. This format has been shown by some to be as effective as therapist-directed programs, but less effective than group based discussions. This type of format has a low dropout rate and is especially effective for single mothers experiencing maternal depression and mothers with a low mental age (15).

•*Individual programs* are highly effective with parents. They offer parents greater flexibility in scheduling and environmental setting so parents are more likely to participate. This format is more intensive and it provides direct feedback to the parents. It uses rehearsal and modeling and is found to elicit change in parent attitudes and behaviors (8). Additionally, the content is individualized making it easier to focus on specific areas of difficulty, as well as, address parental questions and concerns. Although parents are highly satisfied with this model, these sessions are the most expensive, the most time consuming, offer low social support and are often incapable of meeting increased demand. This type of program is best for financially disadvantaged groups. (8, 15).

•*Group formats* have high satisfaction among parents and offer skills through discussion, modeling, role play and written materials. The individual cost is lower. This format offers member support and kinship, encourages greater parental engagement and maintains a low dropout rate especially when parents are grouped together based on common need (1, 8). This format is especially effective for parents that are socially isolated and have less social support. Group formats, although not a benefit to all, are able to meet the increasing demands for parent-training (8, 15).

Methods

This study involved a systematic review of the literature on evidence-based parent-training programs. The parent-training programs researched are ones used by agencies serving families with children, age 5–9, that are diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders. Computer searches of journal articles listed between 1984 and 2007 in the following databases were conducted: ERIC, PsychInfo, Sage, and Social Work Abstracts. The following broad search terms were used: child emotional and behavioral disorders, parent education, parent-training, evidence-based, and diverse populations. This strategy identified 15 articles that allowed me to analyze the key characteristics of evidence-based programs.

Data/ Results

There were three parent-training programs that received regular mention in the literature as effective for families with children with severe emotional and behavioral disorders, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, Parent Management Training and The Incredible Years program. The key characteristics of each program are listed below.

Leading Evidence-based Parent Training Programs (age 5–9)

	Parent-Child Interaction Therapy	Parent Management Training	The Incredible Years
Target Population	Age 3–9 Children with behavior problems	Age 3–18 Children with conduct problems	Age 2–12 Young children at risk of behavior problems
Treatment Format	Individual sessions with parent and child	Individual sessions typically with parent only	Video-based series Therapist lead individual or group intervention with parent/teacher and child involved
Setting	Clinic	In-home services	Clinic/Community
Goals of Intervention	Builds parent skills for reducing behavior problems and addressing family relationships and interactions	Reviews with parents behavior modification techniques that are being implemented in the home with a goal to change a child’s behavior	Builds parent and teacher skills for reducing problem behavior in home and classroom
Cultural and Other Considerations	No differences across ethnic groups	Effective with co-morbid conditions	Effective with multiethnic families
Cost	\$3, 638 per family	\$318 cost per family plus supervision and assessment costs	\$840 per child for parent training and videos
Training Resources	Master’s level therapist trained in Parent-Child Interaction therapy	Written material	Trained therapist videos

Cultural Implications

Literature shows that not all parents respond equally to parent-training (1, 2, 7). Parents in a minority status drop off at higher rates due to financial hardships and social strain that disrupts parenting (2). Parents with low socioeconomic status are often under environmental stressors that may disrupt their parenting focus and attention due to safety and survival needs (9). Interventions that use a strengths-based approach (11) and educate trainers on cultural competence are most effective for maintaining attendance and follow through for participants with diverse backgrounds (11). Parent-training programs are most effective when they incorporate methods that consider a family’s culture and meet each individual family’s needs. For example, programs that value differing beliefs, traditions, perspectives, unique resources, and differing approaches to child-rearing are most effective with diverse families. Approaches that are effective offer flexible hours to meet diverse work, school and child care needs. They also consider transportation issues that may impact attendance in sessions away from home. Culturally sensitive programs attempt to engage both parents when possible to emphasize consistency in parenting. Programs that utilize a variety of teaching methods for multiple learning styles and a variety of resources to reach a varied audience are most successful (5). Racial socialization and differing styles of communication must also be recognized to meet participant needs.

Conclusion

Highly effective parent-training programs have common characteristics. For example, they meet a family where they are at to encourage change. Effective parent-training programs take into consideration parent variables, such as social adversity, maternal depression, available social support, marital status and problems, socio-economic status and life stressors(14). When programs are sensitive to environmental factors that are out of a parent’s control and consider additional interventions to promote parents’ emotional well-being, parents are more willing and able to focus on learning and applying new parenting skills. Programs that are successful also consider co-morbid conditions, such as mental health and substance abuse, as well as the participant’s cognitive level (5). Parents with substance abuse or mental health issues need additional support to take steps to remain physically and emotionally healthy (1).

Individualized programs are the most effective with children with severe emotional and behavioral disorders; therefore, an individualized component should be a portion of the parent-training program for this population(6). Programs that offer interventions through a mixture of home visitation and clinical settings are more effective than those that offer programming in one setting only(6). Home visitation helps to support parents emotionally and provides information within a natural setting. The home setting also offers an opportunity to provide parents with direct feedback for individual challenges (5). Effective programs have flexible scheduling to accommodate varying work, child care and school schedules. Evidence-based parent-training programs focus on enhancing interactions between the parent and child (2). Parenting programs that engage parents in the change process will be most effective in reducing child behavior problems(6). Children make greater progress when parents are actively involved and help plan and implement academic and behavior interventions(1). When change goals are relationship-centered they encourage warm parental responses which is effective in changing a child’s behavior (2).

Evidence-based parenting programs work with a family’s strengths. The program curriculum and staff implementing the program are culturally competent and consider racial and ethnic factors (11). Programs that are effective are satisfying to the parent involved thereby increasing the likelihood that parents will attend and complete the program(5). The best program approaches have clear goals and skilled trainers facilitating parental learning (1) Evidence based parent-training programs are didactic, as well as experiential, and include a written manual and homework assignments (1). Elements of both behavioral and nonbehavioral programming should be included in parent-training programs. Programs that include a behavioral principle have better outcomes on changing a child’s behavior than those that did not; however, nonbehavioral programs have better outcomes on parental attitudes (6). Effective programs work with parents to help them generalize the information across all settings(7).

A three-tier model, as shown with the triangle below, can be used to help guide practitioners in deciding what parent-training format to use with families. This model progresses from the least intensive program to most intensive. Programs that are self administered are accessible and serve the greatest number of families with the lowest cost. They are likely to be effective with families that need minimal support. Programs that offer a group format can serve multiple families at one time, are effective with most families and are cost-efficient. Programs that use an individual format are effective for helping families that need the most support to navigate change, but they are also the most expensive to implement. Programs that have a combined individual and a group format are the most effective and efficient (14).

