

The effectiveness of parent training interventions in improving problem behaviours among disabled children

Bryony Beresford

Teaching parents behaviour management strategies has been shown to be effective in addressing children's problem behaviour. Such approaches are also used, though apparently less extensively, with parents of children with learning difficulties and autistic spectrum disorders. This study reports a rapid review of the best available evidence on the effectiveness of behavioural parent training interventions for parents of disabled children.

Key findings

- There are few studies which have explored the effectiveness of parent training interventions for parents of disabled children and none are of high quality. This limits the extent to which conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of such interventions.
- The best available evidence suggests that training parents in behavioural approaches to managing problem behaviour, either alone or alongside training in other parenting skills or information about their child's condition, is a promising approach which can have a positive effect on child behaviour for at least some children with learning difficulties and/or autistic spectrum disorders.
- There is some evidence that generic parenting interventions are effective in providing parents of disabled children with behaviour management skills. However, there is currently no evidence as to their relative effectiveness compared to interventions developed specifically for children with learning disabilities/autistic spectrum disorders or modified generic interventions.
- The evidence also suggests that parent training in behaviour management can have positive effects on parents in terms of their perceived self-competence and parenting skills.

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Background

Behaviour problems are more common among disabled children than among their non-disabled peers. Behaviour problems can threaten children's safety and well-being, and can interfere with, or prevent, their participation in school, community and social activities. Severe behaviour problems are also one of the main reasons why disabled children and young people are placed in residential schools, and can also act as a barrier to accessing services such as short breaks. For families, behaviour problems are associated with increased levels of stress among mothers, and parents report high levels of unmet need for skills to manage their child's behaviour.

Behavioural theory and principles of behaviour modification have been used to inform and determine interventions to address problem behaviour. The approach involves identifying what provokes or causes the behaviour and current parental (or other parties') responses to the behaviour. This information is then used to develop a behaviour management strategy which seeks to change or modify factors precipitating the behaviour and responses to that behaviour.

Since the 1970s, interventions to address problem behaviours in children have directly involved parents in the delivery of the intervention. Such interventions have been shown to be highly effective in ameliorating behaviour problems among non-disabled children. In light of this, parent-training programmes have been incorporated in governments' family support strategies across the world. Practitioners working with families with disabled children also use behavioural approaches to address problem behaviour.

The findings of a rapid review of the effectiveness of teaching parents to use behavioural approaches to managing behaviour problems among disabled children are reported here.

Findings

The quality and range of the evidence base

The studies included in the review consisted of five controlled trials and eight randomised controlled trials. None of the studies were rated strong in terms of research design and quality, four were rated as weak, and the remainder of moderate quality. Just two of the studies were conducted in the UK.

The current state of the evidence about the effectiveness of teaching parents with a disabled child behaviour management skills is not only limited by the quality of the evidence but also by the fact that the behaviour management interventions have usually been investigated within the context of wider interventions, namely, improving parents' teaching skills, parent-child interaction or parental understanding of the condition. These may, or may not, have an indirect impact on the effectiveness of the behaviour management aspect of the intervention. For this reason it is not possible to treat the included studies as a single group. The included studies in this review were therefore grouped according to the overall focus of the intervention (see Box 1).

Evidence on effects on child behaviour

The evidence is weakest and most equivocal with respect to interventions which only seek to teach parents behaviour management skills. Here the findings from four studies suggest such interventions look promising in terms of improving the behaviour management skills of at least some parents of children with learning difficulties.

Box 1 Types of Intervention

Interventions which only teach parents behaviour management skills

Interventions which seek to improve the parent-child relationship and teach parents behaviour management skills

Interventions which teach parents behaviour management and teaching skills

Interventions which teach parents behaviour management skills and seek to improve parents' understanding of their child's condition.

Two studies concerned interventions which seek to help parents to improve the parent-child relationship and the parents' behaviour management skills. Both studies report significant positive intervention effects on child behaviour and parent-child interaction, with the effects on child behaviour reaching clinical significance in both studies.

The set of interventions where there is most evidence concerns interventions on parents' behaviour management and teaching skills. Five studies were included in the review which evaluated this type of intervention. The evidence from these studies suggests that, at least among some parents of children with learning difficulties, interventions which are developed specifically for parents of children with learning difficulties and which incorporate training on behaviour management and teaching skills can be effective in improving child behaviour and various parent outcomes.

A different and very specific intervention was the focus of the final set of included studies. Here an intervention developed for parents of primary school aged children recently diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome was tested for its effectiveness in two separate pieces of research. One of these studies reported significant improvements in child behaviour.

Taken together, these findings suggest that interventions to improve parents' skills in managing problem behaviours using principles of behaviour modification appear to be a promising intervention approach. The evidence reviewed shows they can have a positive impact on child behaviour outcomes among children with learning difficulties.

The effectiveness of generic parenting programmes

Two studies investigated the effectiveness of generic parent training interventions (Parent Plus, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy) which had originally been developed for use with parents of non-disabled children. These studies provide evidence which suggests that the content and structure of generic parent training interventions may be appropriate for using with some parents of some children with learning difficulties. Three different studies investigated the effectiveness of modified (for use with parents of children with learning disabilities) versions of generic parent training interventions (the Incredible Years Training Programme, Triple P). All found positive impacts on child behaviour. However, none of the studies investigated the *relative* effectiveness of generic interventions compared to modified versions of generic interventions.

Other outcomes

Twelve of the studies assessed additional outcomes. Three studies used parental knowledge of behaviour modification principles as an outcome measure and all showed improvements in parental knowledge. Two studies explored parents' implementation of behavioural strategies learnt during the intervention, and both found significant improvements with respect to this outcome. Two studies measured changes in parenting skills and both report positive effects. Finally, two studies looked for changes in parent-child interaction. Both showed improvements in one or more aspects of parent-child interaction. Two out of the six studies which used parental stress or mental health as outcome measures found significant improvements. This was the outcome area where findings across the studies are most equivocal.

Practice implications

The evidence base for the effectiveness of interventions which include an element of training parents in behavioural approaches to managing problem behaviour is limited. However, the evidence suggests that such interventions appear to be a promising way to address behaviour problems in disabled children. Given the increased incidence of behaviour problems among disabled children compared to non-disabled children, it would seem that such interventions should form part of the support provided by services to parents with disabled children.

The evidence with regard to the effectiveness of different modes of delivery of parent training is more equivocal and conclusions cannot be drawn regarding the relative effectiveness of delivering training individually or in groups.

A range of programmes or manuals were investigated by the studies included in the review. Evidence from studies of generic parenting programmes suggests that for some families, these may be an effective approach.

A lot of the included studies concerned interventions which were delivering more than just training in behaviour management skills. They also sought to improve parents' teaching skills, their understanding of the parent-child relationship, or their understanding of their child's condition. The evidence reviewed suggests this is a promising approach to improving problem behaviour. However, there have been no studies which have explored the relative effectiveness of delivering just a behaviour management skills training compared to delivering a multi-faceted intervention.

Implications for future research

More high quality UK research on the effectiveness of training parents in behavioural approaches to managing behaviour problems among disabled children is needed. Studies are needed which investigate the impact of mode of delivery of parent training on effectiveness. In addition, interventions typically include a number of different ways both to train parents in behaviour modification principles and techniques, and to support them as they implement these skills. There is extremely limited evidence, however, on which elements of the interventions are necessary to achieving positive changes.

From the evidence reviewed, it would seem that generic parenting interventions can be effective in addressing behaviour problems for some families with a child with learning difficulties. It is not clear whether they are more or less effective than interventions which are modified or developed specifically for children with learning difficulties. Research exploring this, and identifying ways in which generic parenting programmes need to be adapted to make them effective for families with a child with learning difficulties, is therefore required. Finally, future research needs to explore the costs of delivering such services and cost effectiveness.

Methods

A range of electronic databases was searched for relevant publications since 1985. 7912 were screened for relevance. Full copies of 397 records were obtained for more detailed evaluation. Thirteen studies met the inclusion criteria for the review. Study designs were assessed on the Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods, and the quality of the research and research reporting was assessed using the Effective Public Health Practice Project Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies.

Further information

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Social Policy Research Unit,
The University of York, Heslington,
York YO10 5DD, United Kingdom.
Telephone +44 (0)1904 321950
Fax +44 (0)1904 321953
E-mail spru@york.ac.uk