Conduct Problems and Peer Rejection in Childhood: A Randomized Trial of the Making Choices and Strong Families Programs

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Overview

This presentation is drawn from the study of a multielement intervention designed to improve children’s social skills and reduce peer rejection.
Considerations for Children with Conduct Problems

- Early onset of stubborn, defiant, aggressive behavior a predictor of later fighting, violence, and drug use (Loeber & Farrington, 2001)
- Children who use force to solve social problems often come from homes where parent-child exchanges are physically and verbally coercive (Henry, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 2001)
- These children are likely to demonstrate poor school adjustment and be rejected by their peers (Hanish & Guerra, 2002)
“Early Start” Model of Delinquency

- A critical pathway emerging in the research (Nagin & Tremblay, 2001; Reid, Patterson, & Snyder, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001)

- Describes a sequence of risk factors beginning with a coercive home life and leading to peer rejection in school
Role of Home Life in Shaping Child’s Behavior

- Some parents unintentionally train children to respond to authority with hostility (Reid et al., 2002)

- Antisocial, aggressive behavior of children correlated with parenting styles that feature inconsistent supervision, harsh punishment, a failure to set limits, a failure to reward prosocial behavior, and a coercive style of interaction (Bird et al., 2001; Henry et al., 2001)
Role of Home Life in Shaping Child’s Behavior cont.

- Children mimic parent’s escalated behavior such as yelling, threatening, and hitting.
- Parents who withdraw when their child becomes aggressive passively give their consent to this behavior.
- Acquiescence rewards abusive behavior, exacerbates parental frustration, and disrupts attachment between parent and child (Patterson, Dishion, & Yoerger, 2000; Patterson, Forgatch, Yoerger, & Stoolmiller, 1998).
Explaining Coercive Parenting

Conditions that give rise to coercive parenting are unclear, but the following factors are known to complicate parenting:

- Social isolation
- Poverty
- Poor housing
- Inadequate health care
- Neighborhood violence

(Capaldi, DeGarmo, Patterson, & Forgatch, 2002)
Social Competence Among Children

- Social competence determined by cognitive processes, as well as emotional regulation

- Children demand social competence of friends by the time of elementary school (Patterson & Yoerger, 2002)

- Socially accepted children expect problem solving without resort to coercion
Rejection and Isolation

When rejected by peers, isolated children become more at risk of associating with delinquent peers and experiencing a variety of school and community problems (Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, & Horwood, 2002; Lonczak et al. 2001)
Research Supports Interventions Targeting Aggressive Children

Strengthening the social problem-solving skills of aggressive children improves social competence, self-esteem, and school comportment (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Solomon, 1989; Burns et al. 2003; Gottfredson, 1998; Grossman et al., 1997; Kazdin, Esveldt-Dawson, French, & Unis, 1987a, 1987b; Lochman, Coie, Underwood, & Terry, 1993; Rathvon, 1999)
Research Supports Interventions Targeting Parents

Parenting training and in-home family interventions result in reduced conduct problems for aggressive children (Bresten & Eyberg, 1998; Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Spoth, Redmond, & Shin, 2000)
Specific Interventions

The following studies incorporated skills training in both child and family interventions:

- Baltimore elementary school study (Kellam, Ling, Mersica, Brown, & Ialongo, 1998)
- Oregon Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT) (Reid, Eddy, Fetrow, & Stoolmiller, 1999)
- Fast Track program
Positive Results from Interventions

Areas in which these interventions brought improvement include:

- Cognitive concentration
- School commitment
- Alcohol consumption
- Incidence of pregnancy
- Social contact with peers
- Child physical aggression
- Aversive maternal behavior
Future Initiatives

These studies suggest the following directions for future initiatives:

- Creating and implementing multicomponent programs that address individual, family, and school risk factors
- Targeting early elementary school
- Mixing prosocial and disruptive peers
- Researching physical and relational aggression
Strong Families and Making Choices Programs

- These programs were developed to interrupt risk processes
- Designed for mixed group settings (with a greater proportion of prosocial children)
- Address physically and relationally aggressive behavior
- Manuals for each program include:
  - Summary of theory and research
  - Strategies for enhancing cultural competence
  - Practice tips
Strong Families Program

- Designed to improve parenting skills e.g. limit-setting, problem-solving, rewarding prosocial behavior
- Includes 15 lessons on child development, parent-child communication, family problem-solving, and discipline
- 15-30 hour duration
- Delivered in the home to target highest risk families who cannot participate in school or office training due to poverty, transportation limitations, etc.
Making Choices Program

- 30 lessons on children’s cognition and skills
- Teaches problem-solving skills to children and reduces peer rejection (Fraser, Nash, Galinsky, & Darwin, 2001) by helping children:
  - Build enduring friendships
  - Work productively in groups
  - Respond positively in new social situations
Basis for Making Choices

Program based on:

- Social information processing (SIP) (Crick & Dodge, 1994)
- Social preference (Warman & Cohen, 2000)
- Emotional regulation (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2002)
- Social skills research (Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Epstein, & Doyle, 2002)
Design for Study of Making Choices and Strong Families Programs

- 115 children between 6-12 years of age
- Drawn from 9 sites in North Carolina (6 urban, 3 rural)
- 62 children and their parents underwent the two programs, 53 children and their parents randomized to a waitlist control group position
- Making Choices administered in after-school settings (e.g. school, YMCA)
- Strong Families administered in the home
Classroom teachers referred children to the study for meeting at least one of the following criteria:

- Displaying aggressive behavior- “frequent hitting, arguing, defiance, or anger”
- Experiencing rejection by prosocial peers- “being not liked by or isolated from classmates”
- Displaying prosocial behaviors
Notable Demographics of Participating Children

- 63% male
- 85% African American
Carolina Child Checklist-Teacher Form (CCC-TF)

- CCC-TF developed to assess outcomes (Macgowan, Nash, & Fraser, 2002)
- An elaboration of the 37-item Social Health Profile
- Scales measure the following:
  - Prosocial behavior
  - Emotional regulation
  - Social Contact
  - Cognitive concentration
  - Relational aggression
  - Authority acceptance
General Result

Significant posttest differences observed on all measures except authority acceptance
Changes in Social Interaction

Teachers rated children in intervention group as:

- Having more social contact with peers
- Engaging in more prosocial behavior
- Being less likely to avoid social contact
- Being more skillful in expressing feelings appropriately
- Being more successful in controlling temper
- Being better able to calm down when excited
Changes in Relational Aggressiveness

Children in intervention group became less relationally aggressive, as evidenced by a reduction in tendency to:

- Exclude other children
- Tease other children
- Yell at other children
- Tell lies
- Say mean things
Changes in Cognitive Characteristics

Children in intervention group demonstrated an increase in cognitive concentration by:

- Working harder
- Paying more attention to instructions and assignments
- Staying on task
- Completing assignments
Changes in Control Group

- During the period of the study, children in the control group experienced slight declines in classroom behavior and social performance.
- Declines suggest the program sampled children who were at a marked risk and on a potentially eroding behavior trajectory.
- Reinforces the need for effective early intervention for high-risk children.
Practice Strategies

Three effective practice strategies can be gleaned from the study:

- Teaching specific skills
- Restructuring opportunities and environmental contingencies (e.g. using mixed groups as with Making Choices)
- Strengthening parenting while reducing family stress through such measures as providing public assistance and health care to address food, health, and environmental problems
Cultural Considerations

- SIP framework chosen because it is developed from culturally sensitive research on African American children.
- Core parenting content may apply across cultures.
- Means for delivering parenting content (e.g., drawings, puppets) must vary according to cultural norms.
Limitations and Considerations for Future Research

- Study did not separate Making Choices from Strong Families, findings apply only to the two programs in conjunction.
- Outcome data limited to perceptions of teachers; excludes perceptions of peers, parents, etc.
- At two school sites, teachers were not fully blind to which children were in intervention group.
- Inclusion of a larger sample and extensive follow-up data would be preferable.
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