A National Evaluation and Comparison of Parenting Programs: The One Year Effects

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Introduction

Over the past decades various group-based parenting programs have been developed to prevent children’s conduct problems. Some programs are based on behavioral theories. Others are categorized as non-behavioral programs and they are based on different theoretical approaches such as parent-child attachment, family communication, or family-systems models. However, we have a limited understanding of whether these different theoretical approaches affect program effectiveness. This is a knowledge gap that might prevent full implementation of the programs in regular care.

In their meta-analysis, Lundahl and colleagues (2006) tried to compare the short- and long-term effects of behavioral and non-behavioral parenting programs. Short term they found no significant differences. However, they were not able to compare long-term effects of the programs since there were too few non-behavioral long-term evaluations. Today, there are more studies on non-behavioral programs overall. Yet, no study has compared behavioral and non-behavioral programs. Nonetheless, recent research suggests that the long-term effects are seemingly similar across behavioral and non-behavioral programs. However, the studies differ on measurements, time lags, and samples. Therefore it is difficult to draw firm conclusions. In order to compare behavioral and non-behavioral programs the programs need to be evaluated within the same research design, using the same measures.

Method

This study uses pre-, post-, and one-year data from a randomized control trial with a three group design. 547 parents with a child between 3 and 12 years were randomized to the programs. Of those, 460 parents started. In 84.1 % of the cases the primary reporter was the mother.

Analysis

We used latent-change models to estimate changes over time. We examined whether:
1. the changes in child and parent outcomes from pre-test to post-test differ across programs?
2. the changes in child and parent outcomes from pre-test to one-year follow up differ across programs?
3. the reductions in child problems and improvements in parent behaviors were retained from post-test to one-year follow up?

Results

Immediate short-term results:
- For both parents and children Comet came out as the most effective program, overall (figures 1, 2 and 4).
- For children the Incredible Years showed equal or greater reductions compared to Connect (figures 1 and 2).

Results between posttest and the one-year follow-up:
- The parents and children in Connect continued to improve, see figures 1, 2 and 3.
- The parents and children in Comet either maintained their immediate levels or worsened (figures 1-4).

The development between pretest and the one-year follow-up:
- No significant differences between the programs were found, see figures 1-4.

Conclusion

Our results indicate that the specific programs affect parents and children differently. From pre-test to the one-year follow-up (approximately 16 months), changes took place. However, they were slightly different for the three programs. Ultimately though, at the one-year follow-up, there were no significant differences between them. This is important knowledge for those policy and decision makers responsible for program implementation.