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Empowering Teachers Working with Children and Families at Risk through the Early Impact Program

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Abstract: The prevalence of challenging behaviours in children impacts upon families, educational settings, and within the broader society of Australia. Challenging behaviours develop early in an individual's life and can lead to more serious problems including substance abuse and delinquency in adolescence and adulthood. Given the high incidence of challenging behaviours in children, the need for prevention and early intervention strategies to target the onset and development of this phenomenon is paramount. Further, research in prevention needs to focus on how approaches to early intervention and prevention operate within a cross-cultural context. The Early Impact (EI) program is an early intervention and prevention program designed to reduce the incidence of conduct problems in children. It provides a framework for regular classroom teachers to equip them in working with children presenting challenging behaviours in the school setting. Further, the EI program serves to promote stronger partnerships between schools and families to best address the diverse needs of this population of children and ameliorate the stresses for school personnel and families associated with working with children at-risk of challenging behaviour. This paper explores the psychosocial variables that influence the child's trajectory towards dysfunction. It also provides a description of the EI program design including its philosophical framework that has been informed by current advances in the psychology literature which underpins the various EI program components. Finally, the paper emphasises the significance of comprehensive interventions programs for children and families at-risk that focus on both school and home settings and that are easily implemented in, and cost-effective to, community populations.

Keywords: Challenging Behaviour-Children-Teachers-Families, Early Intervention, Prevention

Introduction

This paper provides a description of an early intervention and prevention program that has undergone recent evaluation to determine its efficacy for children with challenging behaviour. The paper delineates a number of psychosocial variables drawn from the psychology literature known to influence the development of problem behaviour and identifies how the components of the program under description serve to ameliorate the risks associated with such variables. A brief summary is also provided that describes specific categories of early intervention and prevention and their application to the program design. Finally, the paper highlights the need for the development of early intervention programs that can be easily implemented in regular classroom settings to assist teachers in better managing a diverse population of students with varying behavioural and psychosocial needs.

Challenging Behaviour in the Classroom

Teachers working in regular classroom settings are faced with the challenge of accommodating a diverse population of children (Frick, 2004). In recent years there has been an increasing trend in Australian

education systems for children with learning and behavioural difficulties to be integrated into mainstream classrooms. In light of this trend, teachers are experiencing increasing pressures associated with the organisation of the classroom setting and associated curriculum to best address the diverse educational needs of children (Ruef, Higgins, Glaeser, & Patnode, 1998). Individuals exhibiting challenging behaviours are of particular concern given the associated demands that impact upon teachers and other school personnel in adequately targeting their needs (Ruef et al., 1998).

In the last decade significant attention has been given to the development of early intervention and prevention treatments to reduce the incidence of challenging behaviour in young children (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001). Specific programs have been developed that serve to assist school personnel and families in working with children with challenging behaviour (The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2002; Walker, Severson, Feil, Stiller, & Golly, 1998; Webster-Stratton, 1998). Most program frameworks are designed to target specific risk factors that have been known to influence the development of problem behaviours in children. The following section delineates key

psychosocial variables drawn from the literature that place children at greater risk of developing challenging behaviour.

Risk Factors Associated with the Development of Challenging Behaviour

Research examining the development of challenging behaviour in young children has identified a number of risk factors that may increase a child's susceptibility to future maladjustment. While specific factors may impact upon the level of the individual, family or school, research in early intervention and prevention has recognised the interactivity of such factors in the child's broader ecology. Contemporary models that delineate pathways to dysfunction recognise the mutual interplay of characteristics of the child and his/her surrounding social systems in the development of challenging behaviour (Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, & Cunningham, 1998).

Risk factors identified at the individual level include the child's temperament (Dodge & Pettit, 2003; Frick & Morris, 2004) and genetic disposition (Rutter, 1989). At the level of the family, variables such as interpersonal dynamics including harsh parenting practices (Bor & Sanders, 2004), negative interactions between parent and child (Shaw, Winslow, Owens, & Vondra, 1998), marital discord (Frick & Loney, 2002), and poverty and its associated effects (Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1998) are known to increase the likelihood of challenging behaviour developing in the child. Risk factors at the school level include school organization influenced by socio-demographic characteristics such as class size and additional support structures within the school environment (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979), lack of peer acceptance, and association with at-risk peer groups (Dishion, Nelson, Winter, & Bullock, 2004).

Models of Early Intervention and Prevention

The literature in early intervention and prevention provides a guiding framework for the design and implementation of intervention programs that serve to reduce the impact of risk factors known to influence challenging behaviours in children. Three forms of preventative intervention have been identified: universal, selective, and indicated (Greenberg et al., 2001). Universal programs target a whole group or population providing a proactive form of intervention for all individuals regardless of participant's levels of perceived risk. Examples of universal programs include child immunisation initiatives, community parent programs and school-based programs targeting an entire class group. Selective interventions target

individuals who are perceived to be at greater risk of the development of maladjustment based on particular risk factors that may be identified in this population. Programs such as social skills training for infant aged children in poor communities, parent training for sole parents, and self-esteem programs for adolescents struggling to integrate with their peers are examples of selective interventions. Indicated interventions are those that target individuals who are showing signs of more serious dysfunction, but who do not yet meet diagnostic criteria for mental or behavioural disturbances. Programs aimed at reducing depression or antisocial behaviours in more at-risk individuals are examples of indicated programs.

The Early Impact Program

The Early Impact (EI) program is an early intervention and prevention program, developed by the first author that has been formulated to reduce the risk of the development of challenging behaviours in preschool-aged children. The program framework consists of universal and indicated components that serve to target risk factors evident at the levels of the child, family and school. The following section provides a description of the various components of the EI program and gives explanation to the means by which the various components serve to ameliorate the risks associated with the development of challenging behaviours in at-risk children.

The EI School Component: The EI Curriculum

The school component of the EI program consists of universal instruction in the EI curriculum. The curriculum is titled 'The Early Impact Curriculum: A Program for Encouraging Positive Behaviours in Young Children' (Lamar, 2002). The curriculum is taught to the class group by the regular classroom teacher and includes instruction in areas including: positive communication; friendship formation; social problem-solving; developing self control; and engaging in prosocial behaviours. The teaching of the EI curriculum is intended to reduce risk factors at the level of the child by providing instruction in the acquisition of behaviours that promote positive engagement with individuals in the child's world. Further, at the level of the child, the curriculum serves to encourage social successes that instil confidence in the child in terms of their interactions with others. Extending beyond the level of the child, the program curriculum targets risk factors at the school level by teaching the child the benefits of associating with positive peer networks. Further, the teacher is encouraged to monitor the relational dynamics in the

classroom and assist the more at-risk children in applying strategies that serve to integrate them successfully in to the regular peer group.

The Teacher's Management of the Class Group

The school component also consists of the teacher being trained in positive child management practices that assist them in working with a diverse group of students with varying emotional and psychosocial needs. All teachers involved in the facilitation of the EI program receive the equivalent of one full day of training in the implementation of the EI program curriculum and the related strategies of management. A manualised version of this component titled 'Encouraging Positive Behaviours in the Classroom' (Lamar, 2002) is provided to the classroom teacher and serves as a reference to assist them in successfully managing the class group. Strategies incorporated in the program design include: settings of classroom limits; facilitation of an inclusive classroom environment; positive teacher communication and engagement; techniques to redirect inappropriate behaviour; use of logical consequences; facilitation of class meetings; and strategies to encourage partnerships between home and school. A focus on the teacher's management of the class group serves to reduce those potential teacher stresses associated with working with children with challenging behaviour. Further, the strategies of management influence more at-risk individuals at the level of the child by supporting temperamental characteristics such as the development of self-control.

Remedial Assistance for Children Identified as More At-Risk

In concert with the EI curriculum and the teacher's employment of strategies of management, the EI program includes an indicated school component that serves to provide remedial assistance to those children more at-risk of the development of challenging behaviours. An educational support specialist such as a school counsellor or special education teacher facilitates weekly sessions that are based on an extension of the regular EI curriculum. These sessions also provide a means of targeting temperamental and psychosocial factors that increase the risk of later dysfunction. The following section provides description of the home component of the EI program.

The EI Home Component

The home component of the EI program can be universally applied, however, it is intended primarily

to target indicated children who are showing signs of greater risk of dysfunction. The home component is based on a parent training program developed by the first author and includes a manual titled 'Encouraging Positive Behaviour in Young Children' (Lamar, 2002). The parenting program is designed to increase parent competencies in managing children's behaviours and targets familial risk factors known to influence the development of challenging behaviour in children. The parenting program is organised into six two-hour sessions and involves a trained facilitator working through the training curriculum with parent groups. Concepts explored in the home component of the EI program include: an examination of a parent's values, beliefs, and assumption; parental authority; child development; positive communication; rule and limit setting; parent consistency; strategies to reinforce appropriate behaviour; consequences including time out; problem solving and problem ownership; exercising assertiveness; managing anger; quality time; and parent preservation. The underlying intention of the parenting program is to encourage a proactive approach to parenting that enhances the parent/child relationship and facilitates a safe and supportive home environment. In this way, risk factors impacting upon the relationship between the parent and child such as aversive parenting practices and inadequate care are potentially reduced.

The Effectiveness of the EI Program

A recent evaluation was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the EI program including its social validity in a regular community population. Ten schools in the metropolitan district of Brisbane, Australia participated in a randomised controlled enquiry involving 455 children and their families. Five schools engaged in the EI intervention and the remaining five were designated to control conditions. Results of the evaluation at post-intervention identified a reduction in the behaviour of children at the school level. An intervention effect was found that marked a reduction in the symptoms of challenging behaviour and an increase in prosocial behaviours for the full sample of participating children in the intervention group that was sustained at post-intervention.

The evaluation also served to determine the social validity of the EI program as evidenced by high participation and satisfaction rates. In terms of participation in the evaluation, the attrition rate from pre-to post-intervention was 99% to 96% demonstrating the program's capacity to retain participant engagement. In terms of participant satisfaction the findings were also strong. Of the nine teachers involved in the evaluation, all reported high levels of satisfaction

with the EI program design. 87% of teachers reported that the EI program contributed to the promotion of positive behaviours in young children. 75% of teachers indicated that their ability to manage the class group was excellent. Further, 62% of teachers indicated that, as a result of the EI program, the behaviour of more at-risk children had improved.

Parents who completed self-reports at post-intervention, reported high levels of satisfaction in terms of the benefits derived from engaging in the parent training component. 84% indicated that they felt confident employing the recommended strategies. 76% reported increased confidence in managing their child's behaviour. 62% believed that their capacity to manage their child had improved and 62% indicated that strategies learnt were helpful in assisting them in disciplining their child. The levels of satisfaction reported by both teachers and parents engaged in the EI program lend support to the social validity of the EI intervention.

Implications for Future Directions in Early Intervention and Prevention

The prevalence of challenging behaviours in children impacts upon families, schools, and the broader community within Australia. Challenging behaviour in the classroom context effects student learning and impacts upon the teacher's capacity to provide adequate instruction to the diverse range of students within their charge (Harvey, Lewis-Palmer, Homer, & Sugai, 2003). Beyond the school gate, the effects of challenging behaviour on families and the broader community are also of concern.

Recent advances in the science of prevention acknowledge the significance of tailoring interventions that provide a comprehensive approach to the prevention and treatment of children with emotional and

behavioural challenges. Despite the steps that have been taken to determine the key variables that lead to the prevention of dysfunctional behaviour, little attention is being given to the development of intervention treatments that are cost effective and that can be easily disseminated within regular community populations. The Early Impact program is an alternative early intervention and prevention program that has shown to address some of the limitations of existing models of treatment. Its universal and indicated components are designed to provide regular classroom teachers with a framework that accounts for a diverse population of students. Strategies incorporated in the program design assist in the promotion of positive behaviours at the home and school level. Further, the comprehensive framework of EI facilitates closer partnerships between home school that encourage reciprocal support between teachers, parents, and the broader community.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the EI program, an early intervention and prevention treatment designed to arrest the development of challenging behaviours in children. The paper has provided a description of the various program components and delineated ways in which the program design serves to ameliorate risk factors known to influence dysfunctional behaviours in children. Finally, the paper has emphasised the need for future research in prevention to investigate cogent intervention treatments that equip school personnel, families and the broader community with strategies to address the needs of children with a diverse range of emotional and psychosocial needs.

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Stephen has worked for the past twelve years in education and psychology. He has a particular interest in counselling psychology and early intervention and prevention strategies for children and families at-risk of conduct problems. He has recently submitted his doctoral thesis in psychology where his research focussed on the evaluation of an early intervention and prevention program for children with conduct problems. He is currently working as a full-time lecturer in the School of Human Services at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia, where he teaches counselling and psychology to both undergraduate and post graduate students.

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