

Parenting Intervention and the Prevention of Serious Mental Health Problems in Children

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1.1 Aim

The author examines the role of a population strategy that incorporates the media and professionals in primary care services as part of a comprehensive parenting and family support system to improve the health status and wellbeing of children.

2.1 Why Behavioural Family Intervention?

Of the interventions that target parenting and family relationships, behavioural family interventions (BFI) based on social learning models have the strongest empirical support and warrant serious consideration for broader population-level application. The empirical basis of BFI is strengthened by evidence that the approach can be successfully applied to many other clinical problems and disorders. Meta-analysis treatment-outcome studies of BFI often report large effects sizes with good maintenance of treatment gains. The success of BFI highlights the importance of including parenting interventions in any comprehensive preventive intervention designed to reduce behavioural and emotional problems in children.

3.1 A Population Approach to Family Intervention: Triple P- Positive Parenting Program

The Triple P program is a multilevel parenting and family support strategy developed by the author and colleagues at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. The program aims to prevent severe behavioural, emotional and developmental problems in children by enhancing the knowledge, skills, and confidence of parents. It incorporates universal, selective and indicated interventions across five levels on a tiered continuum of increasing strength. The program is designed to maximise efficiency, contain costs, avoid waste and overservicing, and ensure that the program has wide reach in the community.

The distinguishing features of the program include: its universality; the use of multiple levels of intervention to facilitate matching the intensity of intervention to the needs of each individual family; its multidisciplinary nature; the use of flexible delivery modalities; and the program's aim of destigmatising access points.

4.1 Primary Care as a Setting for Prevention and Early Intervention

A large number of paediatric consultations deal with parental concerns about a child's behaviour, development, or school achievement. The past decade has seen an increasing emphasis on treating mental health problems at the primary care level. Primary care service providers can be supported to perform a triage function for the appropriate referral of children with moderate to severe behaviour problems to specialised services, and be better informed about available mental health services in the community.

5.1 Future Needs

That only a small proportion of children with significant mental health problems have contact with mental health services indicates there are significant barriers to service utilisation. Several steps can be undertaken to improve community awareness of parenting issues and enhance service provision. Primary care services are well placed to offer parenting support in the community through early detection of problems, provision of advice to parents about developmental issues, provision of empirically supported prevention and early intervention programs for mild to moderate child behavior problems. There is now sufficient evidence for governments to seriously consider funding the broad implementation of well-established, empirically supported parenting and behavioral family intervention programs to improve the mental health status of children.

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