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The Need for Effective Early Behavioral Family Interventions for Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

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1.1 Aim & Arguments

In this paper it will be argued that behavioral family interventions have not been effectively utilized or promulgated in the community for children with ADHD despite the demonstrate efficacy of these types of interventions. A model of multilevel system of intervention that can be tailored to the individual family's needs is presented.

It is argued that:

1. ADHD and CD behaviours represent different dimensions of child behaviour;
2. The high correlation between these disorders is due to co-occurring risk factors rather than one disorder being casual in the development of the other;
3. Many of the primary risk factors of CD behaviours are known;
4. Effective interventions are those that target potentially modifiable risk factors known to increase the risk of later developmental difficulties; and
5. Family based behavioural interventions need to be developed and rigorously evaluated for children with both ADHD and CD.

3.1 Relationship between ADHD and conduct problems

ADHD is currently conceptualised as involving developmental deficiencies in the regulation and maintenance of behaviour by rules and consequences (Barkley, 1990). In contrast, children with Conduct Disorders are characterised by a pattern of persistent behaviours that violate basic rights of others or age appropriate social norms and rules. ODD is characterised by behaviours that are negative, hostile and oppositional to authority figures but do not include the more serious violations of rules that characterise CD.

3.2 Developmental course

The symptoms of ADHD may be clearly present prior to the age of four. In middle childhood, difficulties for children with ADHD begin to accumulate. The persistence of difficulties has enormous impact in terms of stress to families, disruption to school and financial cost to society. Moreover, behaviour problems of this nature are predictive of many negative outcomes in early adulthood and adulthood.

3.3 The need for family intervention

These findings have highlighted the need for the development of early interventions that identify these children and that address both the primary ADHD disorder and the concomitant disorders of CD or ODD. A number of studies have demonstrated the utility of behavioural interventions with children with ADHD. Despite the evidence that early intervention with children showing difficult behaviour can be effective even when the child has ADHD and despite the evidence that it is the ODD-type behaviours that eventually place the child at risk for later CD problems, only a minority of children with ADHD are treated with behavioural interventions.

3.4 Towards an effective parent training technology for ADHD

An effective family intervention technology for ADHD should aim to empower families to manage their child's disorder by teaching parents active problem-solving skills and to be advocates for their child's needs. The key features of the proposed family intervention could include the following: a collaborative approach; psychoeducation about ADHD; positive parenting and child management; stress coping skills; anger management; advocacy skills; partner and social support; helping children with their school work.

4.1 Summary and Implications

Family risk factors such as poor parenting, marital conflict, and parental psychopathology have the potential to adversely affect the long-term outcome of children with ADHD. Family intervention strategies have an important role to play in preventing children with ADHD developing severe conduct problems. Adequate family support needs to be broadly based and not confined solely to behaviour management strategies, although these are clearly important. Models of family intervention and support need to target key developmental transition points. However, as ADHD is a chronic condition, it is important that parenting support be continuous available throughout a child's school years. After completion of a core training program, a brief self-directed program may be useful ways of consolidating key principles and strategies taught in training programs.

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