



Research Snapshot

Effective Treatment of Mental Health Disorders among Children in Child Welfare Care

What is this research about?

Mental health problems are common among children and youth in the child welfare system (CWS). These children and youth have often been neglected or abused and/or exposed to domestic violence, poverty, and substances and toxins before and after birth. Further, many of these children and youth have lived in traumatic family environments. Unfortunately for children and youth in the CWS with clinically significant mental health problems, intervention strategies are often not appropriately tailored to meet their unique needs. Some interventions have demonstrated promising outcomes in reducing behavioural problems, out-of-home placements, and parental stress. In the present study, the efficacy of mental health treatments available specifically for children and youth in the CWS were evaluated.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers evaluated 27 studies examining mental health treatment for children and youth in the CWS. Therapeutic interventions included multiple component, single component, and unspecified methods where the specific service received was either unknown or unspecified.

Multiple Component Therapeutic Interventions (11 studies):

- Early Intervention Foster Care Program
- Multi-systemic Therapy
- Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care

What you need to know:

Many children and youth in the child welfare system are receiving inadequate mental health treatment. Evidence suggests that comprehensive intervention efforts involving the child or youth, family, school, and community are required for improving behavioural functioning and placement stability.

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- Individual & Group Cognitive Behaviour Therapy + Parent Counselling Program
 - Individual Play Therapy + Group Therapy + Counselling
 - Individual Therapy for Parents + Attachment Based Family Therapy

Single Component Therapeutic Interventions (10 studies):

- Incredible Years Parenting Program
- Parent & Foster Parent Training and Support
- Parent-Child Interaction Therapy
- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Parent Training
- Group Play Therapy

Unspecified Therapeutic Interventions (6 studies):

- Case Management
- Outpatient Mental Health Services

Studies were rated on two aspects: 1) the quality of evidence as supported by the methodology, and 2) the strength of the recommendations as determined by weighing



the advantages and disadvantages of the intervention. The highest scores were assigned to randomized control trials where the benefits outweighed the risks (e.g., cost effectiveness; time-limited, manualized treatment; clear intervention guidelines; and practicality for participants and clinicians).

What did the researchers find?

For multiple component therapeutic interventions, positive overall outcomes were found for improving behavioural functioning (e.g., internalizing and externalizing behaviours) and placement stability. Eighty percent of studies found positive effects for behavioural functioning and 75% of studies found positive effects for placement stability. Inconsistent outcomes were found for improving psychosocial functioning (e.g., prosocial behaviours, social competence) as only 50% of studies found positive effects for psychosocial functioning.

For single component therapeutic interventions, improvements in parenting outcomes were revealed; 80% of studies found positive effects for parenting ability. Limited positive outcomes were found for improving behavioural functioning. Specifically, 40% of studies found positive effects for behavioural functioning.

For unspecified therapeutic interventions, ineffective outcomes (e.g., limited or no change in mental health difficulties; costly) were found for improving behavioural functioning, psychosocial functioning, and placement related outcomes (e.g., placement stability, type of placement, placement disruption, number of placements, time in out-of-home placement). Fifty percent of studies found positive effects for psychosocial functioning, 25% of studies found positive effects for behavioural functioning, and 25% of studies found positive effects for placement stability.

How can you use this research?

This research can guide care planning for children and youth involved in the CWS with identified mental health problems. Comprehensive intervention efforts involving youth, families, school, and the community should be provided to improve behavioural functioning and placement stability. Specifically, the Early Intervention Foster Care Program, Multi-systemic Therapy, and Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care programs are suggested for children and youth involved with the CWS.

Original Research Article:

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article:

Stewart, S. L., Leschied, A., den Dunnen, W., Zalmanowitz, S., & Baiden, P. (2013). Treating mental health disorders for children in child welfare care: Evaluating the outcome literature. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 42*, 131-154.

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