

Access Early Intervention: an eHealth solution to childhood behavioural disorders

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In Australia, less than 24% of children with behavioural and emotional problems access evidence-based interventions (Sawyer et al., 2000). In rural areas, access rates are even lower, and mental health services are simply not available. Run within the University of New South Wales, participants in the current study resided within Sydney and outside the Sydney catchment area in regional and rural New South Wales. Parents of 47 children with conduct problems received either in-person parent training (TAU) or parent training via an e-health platform. The Access Early Intervention program required families to watch video modules, before connecting with a psychologist through videoconference each week.

In terms of parent engagement, results indicated there was no difference between the conditions on parent's engagement level in therapy sessions, and parents in the e-health condition were engaged with the treatment modules, rating the quality of them as good. Parents in both groups were satisfied with their treatment, and rated the quality of therapy sessions as good. Parents in the e-health group rated the website as useable and acceptable. While parents ratings of therapeutic alliance between clinicians and clients was equal in both groups, clinicians in the e-health group rated their alliance with their clients significantly higher than clinicians in the TAU group. Clinician's rating of satisfaction with the content covered in sessions, their feelings of empowerment to help the client, and belief in their ability to have an impact delivery therapy and create change, were significantly higher in the TAU than e-health group.

There was no difference in mothers or fathers confidence in dealing with current and future behaviour problems between the groups, with approximately 90% of parents agreeing or strongly agreeing they could manage current and future behaviour problems. Mothers and fathers agency significantly increased from pre to post treatment in both groups. Mother's inconsistent discipline and corporal punishment decreased significantly from pre to post treatment, while fathers positive parenting increased, and inconsistent discipline and corporal punishment decreased significantly from pre to post treatment. Parents knowledge of effective strategies also increased significantly from pre to post treatment for both groups.

Analyses exploring improvements in child behaviour problems revealed mother's ratings of total difficulties, oppositional behaviours and ADHD symptoms decreased significantly from pre to post treatment and remained stable from post to follow-up. Father's ratings of oppositional behaviour and ADHD decreased significantly from pre to post treatment. Father's ratings of ADHD symptoms remained stable at follow up, while oppositional behaviours increased from post to follow-up, back to pre treatment levels.

This project took the first steps in making a well-established and evidence-based treatment available to thousands of rural families who currently have no access to help. Preliminary evidence suggests the e-health program is comparable to in-person services.

Presenter

Jessica Kirkman is a PhD candidate at the University of New South Wales. In 2012 she received First Class Honours in Psychology from Macquarie University for her innovative research into teacher perceptions of cyber bullying. Her experience includes four years as an Applied Behavioural Analysis therapist, specifically working with 4 to 8 year old children with autism. Her research career has focused on the development of online treatments to increase accessibility for high-risk families with access-to-care barriers. Jessica has an interest in international research and collaboration, and has participated in the Macquarie University Global Leadership Program. In 2010 she received an International University Program scholarship that enabled her to complete a summer semester at Copenhagen Business School. For the past two years Jessica has been working in the Child Behaviour Research Clinic, with families with a child diagnosed with a severe behavioural disorder, after receiving a prestigious Australian Postgraduate Award. She is also Project Manager on the Macquarie University Chilled Plus Project, an online treatment for adolescents suffering from Anxiety and Depression.