



Effectiveness of the Incredible Years parent training to modify disruptive and prosocial child behavior: A meta-analytic review[☆]



Ankie T.A. Menting^{a,*}, Bram Orobio de Castro^a, Walter Matthys^{b,c}

^a Developmental Psychology, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

^b Department of Child and Adolescent Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

^c Department of Psychiatry, University Medical Center Utrecht, Utrecht, The Netherlands

HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined effectiveness of the IYPT as treatment and preventive intervention.
- Results of 50 studies showed that the IYPT is effective regarding child behavior.
- Effects with regard to distinct outcomes and distinct informants were found.
- Initial severity of child behavior was the strongest predictor of effects.
- The IYPT meets criteria for a well-established intervention.

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ABSTRACT

The present meta-analytic review examined effectiveness of the Incredible Years parent training (IYPT) regarding disruptive and prosocial child behavior, and aimed to explain variability in intervention outcomes. Fifty studies, in which an intervention group receiving the IYPT was compared to a comparison group immediately after intervention, were included in the analyses. Results showed that the IYPT is an effective intervention. Positive effects for distinct outcomes and distinct informants were found, including a mean effect size of $d = .27$ concerning disruptive child behavior across informants. For parental report, treatment studies were associated with larger effects ($d = .50$) than indicated ($d = .20$) and selective ($d = .13$) prevention studies. Furthermore, initial severity of child behavior revealed to be the strongest predictor of intervention effects, with larger effects for studies including more severe cases. Findings indicate that the IYPT is successful in improving child behavior in a diverse range of families, and that the parent program may be considered well-established.

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Contents

1.	Introduction	0
1.1.	Intervention characteristics	0
1.2.	Child characteristics	0
1.3.	Family characteristics	0
1.4.	Methodological features	0
1.5.	The current study	0
2.	Method	0
2.1.	Inclusion criteria	0
2.2.	Literature search	0
2.3.	Coding of study characteristics	0
2.3.1.	Differential effectiveness: study context and standard IYPT	0
2.3.2.	Moderators	0

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* Corresponding author at: Developmental Psychology, Utrecht University, PO Box 80140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 30 2531971; fax: +31 30 2534718.

E-mail address: A.T.A.Menting@uu.nl (A.T.A. Menting).

2.4.	Coding of effect size statistics	0
2.5.	Procedure and statistical analysis	0
3.	Results	0
3.1.	Study characteristics	0
3.2.	Relations between study characteristics	0
3.3.	Analyses	0
3.3.1.	Overall effect sizes	0
3.3.2.	Differential effectiveness: study context and standard IYPT	0
3.3.3.	Moderators of effect size for parental report	0
4.	Discussion	0
4.1.	Overall effect sizes	0
4.2.	Differential effectiveness	0
4.3.	Moderators of effect size	0
4.4.	Limitations	0
4.5.	Future research	0
4.6.	Implications	0
	References	0

1. Introduction

Behavioral parent training (BPT) has been proven to be the most effective intervention method for pre-school and school-aged youth with antisocial behavior problems (McCart, Priester, Davies, & Azen, 2006). Although it is clear that training parents to use behavioral techniques can affect their children's behavior, it is less clear which factors influence the effectiveness of BPT programs (Hinshaw, 2002). Even with successful intervention programs, studies reveal substantial variability in outcomes. Identification of those who respond differently to intervention programs is necessary, because this points to interesting groups and possibilities to optimize interventions (Hinshaw, 2002). Also intervention effects may be associated with non-participant related factors, such as intervention formats and methodological features. Examination of these features may also yield possibilities for optimization of intervention programs in general, but also for specific programs. Examining to what extent a specific BPT program is effective in specific populations, with certain formats or within certain contexts, may guide better targeting of intervention programs and help to optimize the specific intervention program. Examination of a specific BPT program allows for more specific inspection of factors that might influence its effects. This improved understanding of a specific BPT program might guide agencies' or practitioners' choices to adopt a specific BPT program. Furthermore, knowledge considering factors that influence effectiveness of a specific BPT program might also be relevant in view of other BPT programs.

In examining specific BPT programs, it seems particularly useful to focus on the Incredible Years parent training (IYPT; Webster-Stratton, 2001), which is considered a "blueprint" for violence prevention (e.g., Mihalic & Irwin, 2003). The IYPT has a group based format, distinguishing the IYPT from most other BPT programs. During the IYPT, parents of young children view videotapes depicting parent models interacting with their children in various situations. In collaboration with two group leaders, who use an empowering approach, parents discuss these video vignettes and put learned techniques into practice through role-plays. In addition, home assignments are used to encourage parents to practice parenting skills at home. In the BASIC IYPT the subjects play skills, praise and rewards, limit setting and handling misbehavior are discussed, while the supplementary ADVANCE component goes further into interpersonal issues such as communication and problem solving (Webster-Stratton, 2002). Together with the Baby and Toddler Series, School Readiness Program, Incredible Years Child Programs and Incredible Years Teacher Programs these programs form the comprehensive set of Incredible Years curricula.

The IYPT has seen widespread growth and is used and studied internationally as a treatment for children with severe conduct problems, as well as a preventive intervention. The IYPT has proven to be an effective

intervention for disruptive child behavior according to numerous effect studies (e.g., Scott, Spender, Doolan, Jacobs, & Aspland, 2001; Webster-Stratton, 1984; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997) and reviews (e.g., Bauer & Webster-Stratton, 2006; Brestan & Eyberg, 1998). However, other studies revealed less convincing evidence of effectiveness (e.g., Helfenbaum-Kun & Ortiz, 2007; Webster-Stratton, 1998). In addition, the initial classification of the IYPT as a well-established treatment in a review-article by Brestan and Eyberg (1998) was later recanted by the authors: it was believed to be based on erroneous recording of the direction of group differences. According to a later review, the IYPT should be considered rather as probably efficacious, because of a lack of supportive replications by independent researchers, in addition to a lack of studies comparing the IYPT to other treatments (Eyberg, Nelson, & Boggs, 2008). However, it is unclear why independent studies by, for example, Drugli and Larsson (2006), Gardner, Burton, and Klimes (2006), and Scott et al. (2001) were not included in the review by Eyberg et al. (2008).

Furthermore, because of the inclusion criterion in the aforementioned reviews – only studies regarding youth with significant levels of disruptive behavior were included – a number of IYPT studies regarding youth with lower levels of disruptive behavior, particularly preventive studies, have not been included. Also new studies appeared since previous reviews were published and conclusions about the effectiveness of the IYPT differ among studies and reviews. Therefore, more clarity is desirable about the extent to which this specific parent training program works, both as a treatment program and a preventive program, and both "standard IYPT" and variants of the IYPT program. The large variation in outcomes of IYPT effect studies also raises the question 'what determines the effectiveness of the IYPT?'

The aims of the present study are to provide a meta-analytic test of the effectiveness of the IYPT in improving child behavior and to examine potential moderators of effectiveness. In this study, we use *effectiveness* as a generic term encompassing both efficacy and effectiveness studies. As discussed by others (e.g., La Greca, Silverman, & Lochman, 2009), efficacy and effectiveness may be considered along a continuum rather than as sharply distinct categories, and this continuum will likely be most informative for both practice and research. By examining moderators across this continuum, we hope to gain insight into factors critical when designing and studying effective parenting interventions.

Dissimilarities among studies of parenting interventions might partly explain differential conclusions about effectiveness between studies. Reviews of parent training literature and empirical studies of the IYPT and comparable interventions suggest a number of factors that may influence child outcomes of the IYPT. In the next paragraphs, we discuss suggested factors related to intervention characteristics, child characteristics, family characteristics, and methodological features within studies. Additionally, characteristics that describe the general study context may be relevant,

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