

Review

Children facing a family member's acute illness: A review of intervention studies

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Abstract

Background: A review of psycho-educational intervention studies to benefit children adapting to a close (parent, sibling, or grandparent) family member's serious illness was conducted.

Objectives: To review the literature on studies addressing this topic, critique research methods, describe clinical outcomes, and make recommendations for future research efforts.

Data sources: Research citations from 1990 to 2005 from Medline, CINAHL, Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition, PsycARTICLES, and PsycINFO databases were identified.

Review methods: Citations were reviewed and evaluated for sample, design, theoretical framework, intervention, threats to validity, and outcomes. Reviewed studies were limited to those that included statistical analysis to evaluate interventions and outcomes.

Results: Six studies were reviewed. Positive outcomes were reported for all of the interventional strategies used in the studies. Reviewed studies generally lacked a theoretical framework and a control group, were generally composed of small convenience samples, and primarily used non-tested investigator instruments. They were diverse in terms of intervention length and intensity, and measured short-term outcomes related to participant program satisfaction, rather than participant cognitive and behavioral change.

Conclusions: The paucity of interventional studies and lack of systematic empirical precision to evaluate intervention effectiveness necessitates future studies that are methodologically rigorous.

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Keywords: Adaptation; Child psychosocial factors; Parents; Program evaluation; Psychosocial aspects of illness; Support groups in infancy and childhood; Children; Parental; Parental illness; Intervention

What is already known about the topic?

- Children experience psychosocial distress related to a family member's illness.
- Interventions to support children during this time are needed.

What this paper adds

- Increased awareness of the importance of supportive interventions to aid this population of children.
- Identification of and promotion of empirically tested interventions that produce positive behavioral and emotional outcomes for this population of children.

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- A review and analysis of the current state of evidence-based practice interventions in this context.

1. Introduction

Increasing awareness of the need for holistic care acknowledging the family as a healing and supportive network for patients and their recovery has made patient families a focus of care and concern (Molassiotis et al., 1997; Phipps and Mulhern, 1995). Research has demonstrated that family members experience stress, change, and anxiety related to the uncertainty and caregiving tasks imposed by a family member's illness (Keogh et al., 1998; Wochna, 1997). This is not restricted to adult family members. Over the 20 years, a broad range of studies has specifically evaluated children's response to a parent's physical illness (Armistead et al., 1995; Forehand et al., 1998; Morgan et al., 1992; Welch et al., 1996). Findings of these studies have repeatedly shown that parental illness is associated with psychosocial distress manifested in the behavior of children.

Stressors to children include separation from the family member during hospitalization, altered family roles, increased tasks and responsibilities, emotional uncertainty related to the present and future, experiences of viewing the family member's body image changes, and physical care of the ill family member (Compas et al., 1994, 1996). These have been noted to compromise family stability, alter parent-child and sibling-child relationships, and impair a sense of family well-being and security, all of which have traditionally been viewed as having an insulating and nurturing influence on children during times of stress.

Descriptive quantitative and qualitative research has shown that children and adolescents facing acute illness of a parent or sibling have increased emotional and behavioral dysfunction, difficulties with school work (Hoke, 2001), and increased physical complaints (Christ et al., 1994). Developmental age, gender, the amount of parent symptomatology, parent/sibling response to illness, and family characteristics were variables found to be significant (Howes et al., 1994; Lewis and Hammond, 1996; Welch et al., 1996).

Interventional strategies related to children facing a family member's acute illness have been underreported (Pitman and Matthey, 2004; Hinden et al., 2002) and often lack empirical methodology and/or statistical analysis of effectiveness. Visser et al. (2004), in a recent meta-analysis of 52 research studies related to the effect of parental cancer on children, found only seven studies which reported interventional efforts. The authors concluded that although all seven articles reported positive outcomes from interventions, none of the

interventions could be considered as legitimately efficacious due to the lack of valid evaluation methodologies.

Interventions to help children cope with parental and sibling acute illness are needed. The paucity of reported interventions to assist children in adjusting to a family member's illness should not cause one to use interventions that are presumed efficacious rather than scientifically tested for merit. Rather, attempts to supportively intervene should be highly encouraged, but systematically evaluated, so that evidence-based practice is ensured.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to review and analyze interventions that have been methodologically tested for children coping with parental and sibling illness. In doing so, empirically tested intervention strategies producing positive outcomes may be identified and clinically applied in supporting children during the shared illness experience.

2. Methods

2.1. Literature search

Two search strategies to identify intervention studies to improve the coping behaviors of children adjusting to a close family member's illness were used in this literature review. Medline (1966-present), Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health literature (Cinahl, 1984-present), Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition (1975-present), PsycARTICLES (1985-present) and PsycINFO databases were computer-searched. MESH headings were used when applicable; truncation of keywords was applied. Keywords used in the search were child adaptation, parental illness, child coping, social support, adjustment, intervention, therapy, and research. Keywords were combined in various combinations to limit the search to the content of the specific topic. The search was limited to English language studies. Publications from the search were analyzed for their relevance and inclusion in this review. Review of publications between 1990 and 2005 were selected because no interventional studies were found prior to 1990 in the literature review. Two earlier studies (Cain and Staver, 1976; Walker, 1970) emphasized the need for interventional strategies in children of both medically and mentally ill parents after examination of child stress and of child guidance center utilization; however, neither specifically introduced nor tested an intervention strategy. Second, reference lists from selected articles and a review article (Visser et al., 2004) were scanned for additional selections. Of the seven interventional studies cited by Visser et al. (2004) on the impact of parental cancer on children and the family, only one (Heiney and Lesesne, 1996) fit the criteria for inclusion in this review. The other selections lacked formal methods of

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