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Review

Treatment of elopement in individuals with developmental disabilities: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

We reviewed studies involving the treatment of elopement in individuals with developmental disabilities. Systematic searches of three electronic databases, journals, and reference lists identified 10 studies meeting the inclusion criteria. These studies were evaluated in terms of: (a) participants, (b) procedures used to assess elopement, (c) intervention procedures, (d) results of the intervention, and (e) certainty of evidence. Across the 10 studies, intervention was provided to a total of 53 participants aged 3–47 years. Assessment procedures included anecdotal staff reports, participant interviews, direct observation, and modified analog functional analysis. Intervention approaches included differential reinforcement, extinction, functional communication training, response blocking, non-contingent reinforcement, shaping, and scheduled exercise. Positive outcomes were reported in 80% of the reviewed studies. The evidence base suggests that function-based assessment (e.g. functional analysis procedures) and function-based treatments (e.g. functional communication training) may be most effective in the treatment of elopement in this population. Directions for future research are offered.

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Elopement, which can be defined as leaving an area without supervision or caregiver permission, is prevalent among persons with developmental disabilities (Jacobson, 1982; Lowe et al., 2007) and may expose a person to dangerous situations (e.g. open bodies of water, traffic). Additionally, elopement can disrupt classroom instruction, complicate residential living, and require additional staff support to ensure the person's safety (Padgett, Garcia, & Pernice, 1984; Perrin, Perrin, Hill, & DiNovi, 2008; Thorne, 1947). Without appropriate assessment and treatment, elopement tends to persist in people with developmental disabilities (Murphy et al., 2005).

The assessment and treatment of elopement presents unique challenges. In particular, a sophisticated understanding of contextual variables (e.g. the setting the individual is running away from) may be required for assessment (Piazza et al., 1997). Additionally, because infrequent elopement is still potentially life threatening, interventions successful in reducing, but not eliminating, elopement are not likely to be considered socially valid. Despite such challenges and the relatively high prevalence of elopement in persons with developmental disabilities, no reviews on the treatment of elopement in persons with developmental disabilities currently exist to guide evidence-based practice.

To facilitate evidence-based practice in this important area, we herein provide a systematic review of studies on the treatment of elopement for individuals with developmental disabilities. The objective of this review was to describe the characteristics of these studies (e.g. participants, target behaviors, intervention procedures), evaluate intervention outcomes, and appraise the certainty of the evidence for the existing corpus of intervention studies. A review of this type was primarily intended to guide and inform evidence-based practice in the assessment and treatment of elopement in individuals with developmental disabilities. A secondary aim was to identify gaps in the existing database so as to stimulate future research efforts aimed at developing new and more effective assessments and interventions for this dangerous and common behavior.

1. Method

This review involved a systematic analysis of studies that focused on the treatment of elopement in individuals with developmental disabilities. Each identified study that met pre-determined inclusion criteria was analyzed and summarized in terms of: (a) participants, (b) procedures used to assess elopement, (c) intervention procedures, (d) results of the intervention, and (e) certainty of evidence. To assess the certainty of evidence, we critically appraised each study's design and related methodological details (e.g. procedural descriptions and reliability of data).

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