



Effectiveness of a parent training program in (pre)adolescence: Evidence from a randomized controlled trial

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A B S T R A C T

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The present randomized controlled trial examined the effectiveness of the parent training program Parents and Children Talking Together (PCTT) for parents with children in the preadolescent period who experience parenting difficulties. The program is focused on reducing child problem behavior by improving parents' communication and problem solving skills, and disciplining behavior. Largest effects were expected for families with higher SES, and with children in mid-adolescence. Multi-informant and multi-method data were used from 78 self-referred families with children aged 9–16 ($M = 13.09$, $SD = 1.75$). Intention-to-treat analysis (retention rate 95%; immediate posttest only) showed that participation in PCTT significantly improved parents' communication and problem solving skills ($F(1,70) = 11.77$, $p < 0.01$ and $F(1,70) = 12.87$, $p < 0.01$), and reduced their dysfunctional disciplining behavior in conflict situations ($F(1,70) = 5.25$, $p < .005$). The PCTT intervention was most effective for parents with higher SES and for parents with children between the ages of 14 and 16. No consistent gender effects were found.

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Externalizing behavior problems put children at risk for several developmental difficulties, such as academic failure, substance abuse, developing an antisocial personality, and delinquent behavior (Loeber & Hay, 1997; Moffitt, 1993). One of the most promising types of interventions aimed at reducing child problem behavior is parent training. Several meta-analyses have shown that parent training leads to more adequate parental disciplining practices and reduces child problem behavior – and is generally cost-effective in doing so (Dretzke et al., 2005; McCart, Priester, Davies, & Azen, 2006). However, not all parent training programs are equally effective. Behavioral parent training programs that teach parents disciplining skills to change their child's behavior are generally more effective in reducing child behavior problems than nonbehavioral parent training programs that alter parental attitudes towards childrearing (Lundahl, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2006). Although parent training programs are extensively studied, knowledge about the effectiveness of parent training programs for parents of (pre)adolescent children outside the USA is limited. In the present study, we therefore examined the effectiveness of a European parent training called Parents and Children Talking Together (PCTT).

Theoretical background of PCTT

PCTT was developed for parents with preadolescent and early adolescent children, who are characterized by starting or relatively mild behavior problems (Van As & Janssens, 1995). The content of PCTT is based on theoretical insights from Parent

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Effectiveness Training (PET; Gordon, 1980) and Parent-Management Training-Oregon Module (PMTO; Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999). Just as with PET, the PCTT module works toward family relationships that are characterized by (1) acceptance, being non-judgmental toward other family members, and (2) genuineness, being honest in expressing one's feelings. In addition, just as with PMTO, the PCTT module is based on the view that the parent-child relationship is a hierarchical one, in which parents are responsible for guiding and disciplining their children (Patterson & Forgatch, 1987). These insights are reflected in the main goal of PCTT: to decrease child problem behavior by stimulating parents to pay attention to their child's (increasing) need for autonomy and involvement in arguments, but at the same time 'stay in control' and use adequate disciplining strategies when necessary.

The main goal of PCTT is specifically tailored to fit the parent-child dyad in transition. Early adolescence is known to be a period of change in both structure and content of parent-child interactions (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). Parental lack of skills in handling these changes might set the stage for coercive cycles in which children's problem behavior and parental disciplining practices negatively reinforce one another (Patterson & Forgatch, 1987). PCTT emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the growing needs and capabilities of preadolescent children to form their own opinions, norms, and values. Consequently, children should be allowed a certain degree of freedom and decisiveness in problem solving. Parents, however, should demand their children to be responsible and to keep agreements, and determine the degree of influence their children have in decision making (Van As & Janssens, 1995).

Over the past decades, several RCTs have examined the effectiveness of parent training programs in the USA, Australia, UK, and elsewhere (e.g., Scott et al., 2001). Most of these studies focused on the effectiveness of parent training programs for disruptive behavior in young children, such as the Incredible Years program (Webster-Stratton, 2001) focusing on children aged three to six or six to twelve, or focus on broad age ranges such as PMTO (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999). PCTT in contrast focuses exclusively on the (pre)adolescent period with children ranging ten to fifteen years of age. Parenting programs concerning (pre)adolescent problem behavior are less prevalent, although some programs have specifically targeted adolescent populations (e.g., Functional Family Therapy, Alexander & Parsons, 1973; Teen Triple-P, Sanders & Ralph, 2002). Outside the USA, however, knowledge on the effectiveness of these programs is still limited.

For whom does PCTT work?

One previous, though quasi-experimental, study found increased constructive and less negative communication between mothers and children of families participating in the PCTT program (Van As, 1999). In the previous study though, no evidence was found for an effect of PCTT on child problem behavior. This may be explained by the fact that statistical power was limited to find a possible secondary effect of PCTT on child problem behavior. Also, it is difficult to interpret the previous results, because the non-randomized design in which parents were allocated to either the intervention or the control group based on the city they lived in may have led to biased group comparisons. We therefore aim to replicate and extend the findings of Van As (1999) in a randomized controlled trial.

Apart from the question how PCTT works, it is crucial to examine which families benefit most from the intervention. Meta-analyses have shown that parent training programs are more effective for families with higher socioeconomic status (Lundahl et al., 2006). This may be due to the fact that the organizational setting of group interventions (e.g., sharing experiences with other parents and practicing skills in role plays) matches the needs and abilities of higher educated families better than those of families with lower educational levels, who may benefit more from individual therapy (Lundahl et al., 2006). We therefore expected larger effects of PCTT for families with higher educational levels. With regard to child characteristics, we expected influences of children's gender and age on the PCTT effect. These hypotheses are based on empirical findings that families with more severe problems at the start of an intervention benefit most (e.g., Hautmann et al., 2010). More specifically, we expected to find larger effects of PCTT for boys than for girls, and for older children than for younger children. PCTT's main focus is on improving family communication. Girls are known to be more skilled and interpersonally sensitive than boys when it comes to family communication (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2004). Therefore, boys may benefit most from the PCTT intervention that focuses on improving their communication skills. When it comes to age, parent training programs are usually more effective for younger children, because their behavior is less persistent and therefore more malleable (e.g., Gardner, Hutchings, Bywater, & Whitaker, 2010). However, due to increased frequency as well as intensity of parent-child conflict in middle adolescence (Laursen et al., 1998) it may be that in our study especially families with children in middle adolescence (i.e., aged 15–16 years) benefit most from the intervention.

The present study

Based on observational and survey data from 78 families, we examined whether PCTT is effective in improving parental problem solving, communication skills, and disciplining behaviors, and in reducing child problem behavior. First, we hypothesized that participation in PCTT would improve parental communication and problem solving skills in conflict interactions, as well as reduce laxness and overreactiveness in parents' disciplining behavior. Second, we hypothesized that children's communication and problem solving skills would improve and that their problem behavior would decrease. Third, we expected that families with higher educational level would benefit more from PCTT, as well as families with children in middle adolescence, and families with boys.

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