

PARENT TRAINING

Parent training represents a therapeutic approach in which parents are taught how to:

- increase desirable child behavior,
- reduce children's misbehavior,
- improve parent-child interactions, and
- bring about a positive family atmosphere.

This approach is based on extensive research examining parent-child interaction patterns and the ways children learn.

Behavior therapists recognize that parents play a most important role in their children's development. Therefore, in parent training, parents are trained to become "co-therapists" in the treatment of their children's behavior problems.

Parent training has been evaluated as a treatment of children's behavior problems in hundreds of studies. Most of these studies have been conducted with families of children between 3 and 12 years of age. Children in these families showed a variety of conduct problems, including failure to obey their parents, temper tantrums, stealing, lying, and fighting.

Studies have consistently shown parent training to be effective for reducing these behavior problems. Moreover, these reductions in conduct problems have been shown to last years after treatment has ended. Some studies have also shown parent training to be valuable for the treatment of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, anxiety, depression, developmental disabilities, autism, and elimination disorders such as bed-wetting.

Sessions may be conducted with an individual parent or with groups of parents. Although many variations of parent training exist, several characteristics are shared by most programs. Parents are usually taught how to carefully observe their children's behavior in order to better understand why their children act the way they do. They observe what situations and events come before the behavior and what usually follows. Parents are taught to effectively use a number of skills and techniques for improving their children's behavior.

Specific skills often taught include praise, positive attention, administration of rewards and privileges, rule-setting, ignoring, reprimands, withdrawal of privileges, and time-out. (Time-out refers to a time-out from rewards and attention. The child is quickly removed from a pleasurable situation in which he or she is misbehaving and briefly placed in a quiet and boring area that is not enjoyable at all. Placing the child in time-out prevents him or her from getting attention or other rewards following undesirable behavior.)

Parents are taught when and how to use these skills. They are taught timing, consistency, intensity, and integration of the various skills. Even the most effective skill used at the wrong time or in the wrong way will not promote wanted changes in behavior.

Other Areas Frequently Covered in Parent Training Programs:

- establishing realistic expectations for children's behavior at particular ages,
- talking more clearly and positively with children, and

What Is Cognitive Behavior Therapy?

Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy are types of treatment that are based firmly on research findings. These approaches aid people in achieving specific changes or goals.

Changes or goals might involve:

- A way of acting, like using breathing exercises
- A way of feeling, like becoming less anxious
- A way of thinking, like learning to view anxiety-provoking stimuli as something other than a heart attack
- A way of dealing with physical or medical problems, like practicing exposure with difficult situations to reduce their effect.

Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists usually focus more on the current situation and its solution, rather than the past. They concentrate on a person's views and beliefs about their life, not on personality traits. Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists treat individuals, parents, children, couples, and families. Replacing ways of living that do not work well with ways of living that work, and giving people more control over their lives, are common goals of behavior and cognitive behavior therapy.

HOW TO GET HELP: If you are looking for help, either for yourself or someone else, you may be tempted to call someone who advertises in a local publication or who comes up from a search of the Internet. You may, or may not, find a competent therapist in this manner. It is wise to check on the credentials of a psychotherapist. It is expected that competent therapists hold advanced academic degrees and are trained in techniques for treating panic disorder. They should be listed as members of professional organizations, such as the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies or the American Psychological Association. Of course, they should be licensed to practice in your state. You can find competent specialists who are affiliated with local universities or mental health facilities or who are listed on the websites of professional organizations.

The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) is an interdisciplinary organization committed to the advancement of a scientific approach to the understanding and amelioration of problems of the human condition. These aims are achieved through the investigation and application of behavioral, cognitive, and other evidence-based principles to assessment, prevention, and treatment.

- working effectively with school personnel to help children develop academically and socially.

Among the methods used to teach child management skills are verbal instruction; video and live demonstrations of the use of skills; feedback from therapists; and, in group settings, feedback from other parents. Some parent training programs include children in the sessions to provide parents with additional opportunities to learn and practice these skills.

In most parent training programs, parents are first taught to use and practice specific skills at home to change relatively simple child behaviors. Once parents have learned a number of skills, they are taught to use combinations of skills to change more complex child behaviors.

A number of factors have been shown to enhance the success of parent training programs.

- Programs that include more than 10 hours of training and that leave open the maximum number of treatment sessions are more likely to show bigger and longer-lasting reductions in children's behavior problems than are brief, time-limited programs.
- Teaching parents the scientific principles upon which specific parenting skills are based has been shown to enhance the effectiveness of parent training programs.
- Families experiencing difficulties in addition to child behavior problems (marital problems or parental depression, for example) are more likely to show gains from parent training programs if parents receive help for these other problems as well.

Parent training is a very promising treatment for child conduct problems and appears to be useful in the treatment of other child disorders as well. Although parent training, by itself, may not reduce child conduct problems in all families, no other treatment for conduct problems has been investigated as broadly or found to be as effective.

For more information or to find a therapist:

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