

A National Evaluation and Comparison of Parenting Programs: The One Year Effects



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Introduction

Over the past decades various group-based parenting programs have been developed to prevent children's conduct problems. Some programs are based on behavioral theories. Others are categorized as non-behavioral programs and they are based on different theoretical approaches such as parent-child attachment, family communication, or family-systems models. However, we have a limited understanding of whether these different theoretical approaches affect program effectiveness. This is a knowledge gap that might prevent full implementation of the programs in regular care.

In their meta-analysis, Lundahl and colleagues (2006) tried to compare the short- and long-term effects of behavioral and non-behavioral parenting programs. Short term they found no significant differences. However, they were not able to compare long-term effects of the programs since there were too few non-behavioral long-term evaluations. Today, there are more studies on non-behavioral programs overall. Yet, no study has compared behavioral and non-behavioral programs. Nonetheless, recent research suggests that the long term effects are seemingly similar across behavioral and non-behavioral programs. However, the studies differ on measurements, time-lags, and samples. Therefore it is difficult to draw firm conclusions. In order to compare behavioral and non-behavioral programs the programs need to be evaluated within the same research design, using the same measures.

The Present Study

In the present study we aimed to compare short, and long-term effectiveness of two behavioral (Incredible Years: Webster-Stratton, 1984; Comet: Kling, Forster, Sundell, & Melin, 2010) and one non-behavioral, attachment-based program (Connect: Obsuth, Moretti, Holland, Braber, & Cross, 2006). Comet and the Incredible Years are based on behavioral theories, in particular Patterson's coercion theory. Techniques for positive parenting practices and consistent rule setting are core components of these programs. Connect on the other hand, aims to enhance a secure attachment within the parent-child relationship through enhanced parental reflections on everyday parent-child situations. Hence, both the theoretical base of the programs and the program impact components differ. As a consequence, the programs might affect parents and children differently, immediately and over time. The aim of this study is to report the findings from an evaluation of these three programs, when they are used in regular care.

Method

This study uses pre-, post-, and one-year data from a randomized control trial with a three group design. 547 parents with a child between 3 and 12 years were randomized to the programs. Of those, 460 parents started. In 84.1 % of the cases the primary reporter was the mother.

Analysis

We used latent-change models to estimate changes over time.

We examined whether;

1. the changes in child and parent outcomes from pre-test to post-test differ across programs?
2. the changes in child and parent outcomes from pre-test to one-year follow up differ across programs?
3. the reductions in child problems and improvements in parent behaviors were retained from post-test to one-year follow up?

Results

Immediate short-term results

- For both parents and children Comet came out as the most effective program, overall. (figures 1, 2 and 4)
- For children the Incredible Years showed equal or greater reductions compared to Connect (figures 1 and 2).

Results between posttest and the one-year follow-up

- The parents and children in Connect continued to improve, see figures 1, 2 and 3.
- The parents and children in Comet either maintained their immediate levels or worsened (figures 1-4).

The development between pretest and the one-year follow-up

- No significant differences between the programs were found, see figures 1-4.

Figure 1 Pre-, post and one-year mean values of children's externalizing behaviors

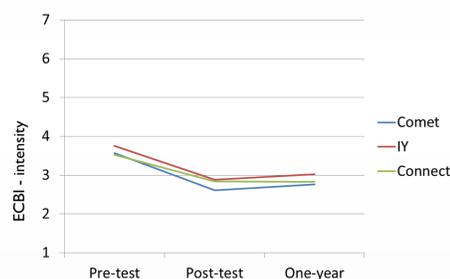


Figure 3 Pre-, post and one-year mean values of parent's positive behaviors

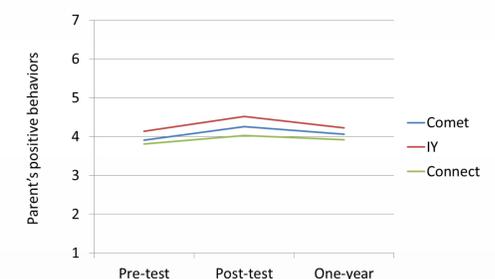


Figure 2 Pre-, post and one-year mean values of parent's perceptions of their children's externalizing behaviors

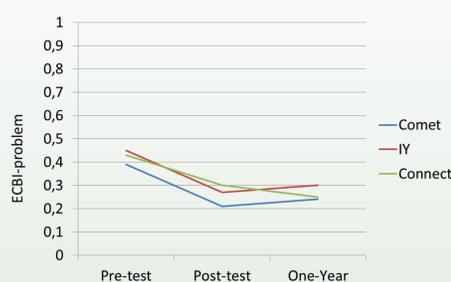
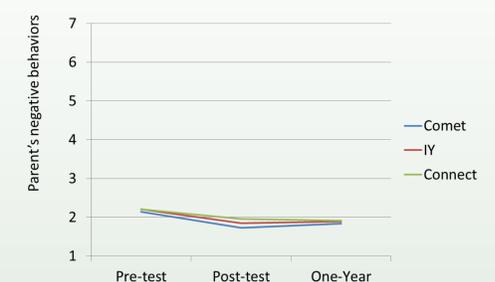


Figure 4 Pre-, post, and one-year mean values for parent's negative behaviors



Measures

Primary outcome measure

Eyberg's Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI: Eyberg & Ross, 1978)

Parental outcomes

Positive and negative parenting behaviors (PPI: Webster-Stratton, 1998)

Conclusion

Our results indicate that the specific programs affect parents and children differently. From pre-test to the one-year follow-up (approximately 16 months), changes took place. However, they were slightly different for the three programs. Ultimately though, at the one-year follow-up, there were no significant differences between them. This is important knowledge for those policy and decision makers responsible for program implementation.

