

The Effectiveness of Short-Term Treatment Programs in Children and Adolescents

Fall Literature Review Thesis Proposal

Abstract

Background: Social, emotional and behavioral challenges within children and adolescents present a large issue within development, and can develop into more significant psychiatric illnesses. Public policy and health professionals have pushed treatment towards short-term interventions. The purpose of this thesis would be to review the effectiveness of these short-term programs in treating the range of psychological disorders that present in children and adolescents. Method: PsychInfo, Medline, Pubmed, & ERIC will be searched along with bibliographies of relevant sources and information from figures in the field of child and adolescent psychology. Results: will indicate whether or not these short-term programs are effective in treating children, and whether or not the continued and increasing use of such programs is justified.

Introduction

For children and adolescents with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges, treatment becomes a crucial part of early life development. In treating their challenges, children and their families have many options in different capacities, ranging from more traditional cognitive behavioral therapy to positive psychotherapy to pharmacological regimens. While many children are able to undergo whatever treatment is necessary in a home or school setting, for a portion of youth, this option is not enough. Short-term treatment programs exist in a variety of capacities across the nation as both residential and day-treatment centers, and ranging from specializing in single disorders to treating a broad spectrum. Compared to long-term treatment facilities such as psychiatric hospitals,

short-term treatment programs provide a relatively brief (generally 30-45 day) treatment period in which patients undergo intensive treatment, the goal of which is often to give individuals skills with which they can return to family, school, or whatever environment they came from, as quickly as possible. Currently, the debate in the literature revolves around whether or not this short of an intervention period can be effective enough for the majority of children and adolescents to justify the continued use of these treatment programs (Hurley, Ingram, Czyz, Juliano, & Wilson 2006; Tahhan, St.Pierre, Stewart, Leschied, & Cook, 2010; Zimmerman, 1993)

When researchers study the treatment of different mental disorders, the result is often some form of “best practice” recommendation. In general, studies are conceived and experiments performed to assess how much improvement can be expected as a result of a particular method of treatment, and after time, the most effective treatment becomes the recommended course of action. While these recommendations are often evaluated, contested, and reevaluated, the degree to which they are followed varies widely based on the facility and the individual caregivers within that facility. In looking at the effectiveness of a given facility and program, determining whether or not that program is utilizing the most current methods and recommendations in providing treatment to their patients is paramount.

Additionally, there exists a push in public policy to encourage the use of short-term treatment programs as less intrusive, more cost-effective alternatives to long-term treatment (Zimmerman, 1993). In evaluating the efficacy of these programs, this thesis will attempt to provide a logical conclusion as to whether or not this increased promotion is justified, and add weight to a currently ongoing mental health and public policy debate.

Literature Review

Search Strategies

To select studies, PsychInfo, Medline, PubMed, and ERIC will be queried for studies relating to the effectiveness of short-term treatment programs, in particular, their impact on children and youth. Additionally, the search will look primarily for studies that limited their scope to the effectiveness of psychotherapy or psychotherapy when combined with pharmacotherapy. The following key words will be used: short-term treatment or short-term; children or youth or adolescent; therapy or psychotherapy. In addition, bibliographies of related articles and books will be examined for further sources. A preliminary search of the aforementioned sources provided more than one hundred results without applying any further exclusion criteria. Should further sources be necessary, information will be sought from two Ph.D. – level psychologists within the field of child and adolescent psychology with whom I worked at Wediko Children's Services.

Exclusion and Inclusion Criteria

To limit the sources used, studies will be excluded from the review based on a variety of criteria. As methods and implementation can change frequently, studies that examine the effectiveness of any given program or short-term treatment facility will be kept as modern as possible to account for the adaptation of new techniques. Any sources published before the release of the DSM-IV-TR (2000) will be excluded. Tentatively, a treatment length of 30-60 days is preferred for any residential facilities examined, with the possibility to expand to day-treatment programs should more information be needed.

Spectrum of Disorders and Interventions

As the disorders and difficulties treated in short-term programs are often widely varied, it would be logical to assume that a variety of treatments are utilized. For the purpose of the proposed review, this means that a large portion of determining success will stem from whether or not a program is utilizing best practice methods. This means that the proposed review must take a comprehensive look at literature regarding the most effective methods for treating the social, emotional, and behavioral issues most commonly seen at these treatment facilities. Studies included in the review will need to address the efficacy of interventions on the range of disorders treated. From preliminary research and experience, this range includes – to name a few – diagnosed cases of Attention Deficit Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. However, further research will need to be done as to the prevalence of these disorders and others within treatment programs.

Predicted Limitations

In conducting the research necessary for this review, it is unlikely that data found will fall into strictly homogeneous categories. As a result, analysis will have to happen as a strict literature review and not in the form of a meta-analysis. As argued by Gliner & Morgan (2000), two of the chief drawbacks of a meta-analysis as a form of literature review is the inability to handle diverse forms of methods – such as the different interventions used to treat a disorder – and heterogeneity of the methodological approaches used to collect the data. As the studies used for this review will cover a range of intervention programs and a broad range of psychological disorders, these issues exemplify why a meta-analysis would be an ineffectual way of analysis.

Summary and Discussion

While a results section will contain several components for a review of this nature, a crucial portion for the organization of information and critical comparison of studies is a data table. Unlike a meta-analysis, where a results table would consist primarily of numerical data and statistical analysis, a literature table allows for the comparison of the studies themselves. Example table headers from preliminary research would involve sections for: Study name; intervention length and population; disorders treated; intervention type; design; outcome measures; and an abbreviated results section. This table would allow for comparisons based on a variety of different criteria across heterogeneous studies.

Within the context of a treatment facility, there are several effects that would influence the effectiveness of any given treatment. Studies on deviancy training effects have looked at the idea that adolescents can learn deviant behavior from their peers when part of a group, a concept that is particularly worrying in the context of treatment programs (Cardoos, Zakriski, Wright, & Parad, 2008). As many of these programs divide the children up by small developmental groups to facilitate peer-to-peer interaction, the environment becomes one in which a child could learn or mimic behaviors – either positive or negative – from their peers. In evaluating the efficacy of a short- versus long-term program, the existence of concepts like the deviancy effect will play a role. The multitude of factors contributing to whether or not a short-term facility is truly the place for children with difficulties becomes one of the most compelling reasons to conduct such a review, and to truly understand the issue at hand in a complex way.

Conclusion

While it is difficult to say what the results of such a review will be, the benefit to the field of psychology – as well as human services in general – would be large, regardless of the outcome. Should a comprehensive review determine that short-term programs are effective in treating children with difficulties, this will further reinforce their continued use. Should the opposite be found, and short-term programs be deemed fruitless or only useful in particular children and disorders, this will allow such programs to improve upon the services they offer. Additionally, being able to draw a confident conclusion as to whether or not short-term programs provide a service that justifies their increased promotion and use means that further efforts could be aimed at bettering the standard of treatment and understanding the disorders themselves. Perhaps most importantly, should the current treatment be lacking in any identifiable way, a review on this topic would allow corrections and changes to be made, further benefiting both the caregivers and the patients.

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