



# Incredible Years Parent and Teacher Programmes: Emerging Themes and Issues.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Incredible Years Parent and Teacher Programmes that have originated from the work of Webster-Stratton. It provides a brief background on the programmes and a critical analysis of the issues as identified in current literature. The issues can be grouped into four main categories, the first being government decision-making which includes policy directives, the costs and benefits, and policy borrowing from other contexts and economic settings. The second category focuses on working definitions of the term Conduct Disorder (CD). The third category relates to implementation, and illuminates the concerns about staff training and supervision including the impact of this on implementation fidelity. Finally, the gaps and implications for further research are explored.

## Practice Paper

**Key Words:** Conduct-disorder, Incredible Years, supervision

## Background to Incredible Years Parent and Teacher Programmes

There are three programmes (Child, Parent, and Teacher) in the Incredible Years series, with this review focusing on the Incredible Years Parent (IYP) and Incredible Years Teacher (IYT) programmes. Created by Webster-Stratton and her colleagues in the USA in the early 1980s working in the fields of child psychology and as nurse practitioner, these programmes have been created, originally in clinical settings, in response to the need to provide treatment programmes for children diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Conduct Disorder (CD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (The Incredible Years, 2007, p. 1). The prevalence of such conditions ranges from estimates of 5 percent to 35 percent (Bywater, 2009; Hutchings, Gardner & Lane, 2004; Jones, Daley, Hutchings, Bywater & Eames, 2008) in some populations, making it a considerable problem to solve.

The purpose of the teacher and parent programmes is to help teachers and parents to support children to develop skills in social competence, emotional regulation and problem-solving to regulate their own behaviour (The Incredible Years, 2007).

Each programme is set up for teachers or parents to meet as a group with two trained facilitators. Participants are provided with opportunities both from the course material and the discussion within the group, to learn a range of strategies for managing their child/ren. The course has a focus on using group or paired role-plays, in-group discussion of DVD footage, homework between sessions, and through the setting of personal goals in relation to reflection on session outcomes and feedback. All participants are supported with handouts and activities to try out with their children.

The IYT programme (in the New Zealand context) has six full day sessions with different content in each session building on the previous session/s. The content development starts with a focus on relationship-building between teacher and student, and setting up for success by building predictable routines and schedules that support the students to start to develop self-regulation skills.

Details are built into the programme to support the teachers to learn specific strategies themselves for increasing student participation in the setting of the routines and expectations in the classroom, building trusting relationships and skills in empathy and social skills.

The Incredible Years Programmes have been shown by multiple repeated randomised controlled trials (Bywater, 2009) to be replicable, making them evidence-based programmes. Under these conditions the results have shown benefits in terms of a reduction in levels of student aggression, increasing teacher capability and confidence in managing their classes, improvements in learning for the targeted students and others in the class.

So far the results (Baker-Henningham, 2010; Hutchings, Daley, Jones, Martin, Bywater & Gwyn, 2007; Wilson, Minnis, Puckering & Bryce, 2008) also show benefits across culturally-diverse groups and the programmes have been used in both preventative and therapeutic roles.

### **Policy Directives**

The origins of the Incredible Years Interventions Series stems from the increasing prevalence of students diagnosed with ODD, CD and ADHD as seen by Webster-Stratton and colleagues in the clinical setting. Politically, world leaders are increasingly aware of possible future costs on society in the health, social development and justice domains (Bywater, 2009; Hutchings et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2008), if environments are not created to support the development of skills in social and emotional competence. Prevalence percentages across the countries in the studies range from figures of 3-6 percent up to 5-10 percent in the United Kingdom and 5-35 percent in the United States of America (Bywater, 2009; Jones et al., 2008), justifying the level of government concern.

As part of policy concern about a preventative approach, the literature also reveals the political push from government level to ensure that any interventions and treatments that are used are those proven to be effective and evidence-based, that is to say that the programmes/ interventions which have had at least two randomised controlled trials to prove efficacy (Werry, et al., 2010). Policy makers looked for a range of programmes/ interventions across the age levels that reported the same or similar levels of effectiveness and included provision for parents to be well-supported (Stanley, 2008; Wilson et al., 2008).

The other significant policy issue closely related to programme effectiveness is the cost of the programmes as it is taxpayer dollars (Lewis, 2011) being used. This issue will be further explored in the section on costs and benefits of the programmes.

### **Definitions of Behaviour and Intervention Suitability**

The difficulty with the prevalence figures quoted in the studies is that ways of defining behaviour differ from country to country. It may well be that anti-social behaviour, defined as the “development of depression, school drop-out, violence, drug abuse and delinquency” (The Incredible Years, 2007, npg) in later life is strongly related to significant conduct problems in childhood and adolescence (Werry et al., 2010) and thus it is possible to use the terms ‘conduct disorder’ and ‘antisocial behaviour’ interchangeably in this literature. Within this

interchangeable definition lie the broader spectrum of behaviours labelled as Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Conduct Disorder (CD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Webster-Stratton also suggests the programmes are suitable for “high-risk families” (The Incredible Years, 2007, p. 1) and many of the studies reviewed, notably those with culturally-different bases to the original programme, discuss working with high-risk families. The common factor in these studies that defines high-risk families is the low-income threshold and minority status of most of the targeted participants (Baker-Henningham, 2010; Davenport & Tansey, 2009; Hutchings, 2012). In the New Zealand context, the focus is on Māori and Pasifika families, and the teachers in low decile schools (Ministry of Education, 2012).

### **Implementation**

A key feature of literature under review is the implementation of the Incredible Years Programmes. As an evidence-based intervention it is expected that the implementation of the programmes will be standardised, regardless of where and who delivers them, to meet the parameters of being replicable. The literature reviewed, however, presents a varying picture in regards to the issues around the implementation of the programmes.

There are differences in the timeframes over which the courses are run (Hutchings et al., 2007), difference in the service contexts, clinical and community settings (Lewis, 2011), selection of staff, including their training and supervision (Hutchings, 2012; Hutchings et al., 2007; Hutchings et al., 2004; Lewis, 2011), dilution and redefinition of the programme reducing effectiveness (Hutchings et al., 2004), and flexibility of implementation in which the participants and the contexts in which they live and work are heard and used (Webster-Stratton, Renke, Herman & Newcomer, 2011).

In critically analysing these differences identified in the literature, the most significant in terms of effect outcomes are the implementation issues surrounding the selection, training and supervision of staff to run the programmes, which includes the aspect of the dilution and redefinition of the programme. It is clear that Webster-Stratton envisaged that the personnel running the Incredible Years Programmes were well-trained, clinically-educated and supervised, as she presents training to personnel who will then be responsible for training others, such as those from in the New Zealand education setting and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (Ministry of Education, 2010) to become group leaders.

Selection of staff to run the programmes, as shown in the literature, has run the gamut from poorly-educated NGO workers (Hutchings et al., 2007) to the training of those with clinical psychology as their background (Lewis, 2011); it is no wonder then that there will be a difference in implementation.

Following this are concerns around the training of those personnel. The literature reveals that the training, especially in the case of those working in delivering the teacher programmes, is to take three full days under the tutelage of already accredited group leaders. As Lewis (2011) suggests, training alone is not enough to create effective implementation. This is all the more important when seen alongside Webster-Stratton's desire for the implementation to be flexible to the needs of the participants and their context. In the requirement to incorporate the basic elements and strategies of the programmes in an individualized way for the participants (Webster-Stratton, 2011), how is it possible that three days training, which covers both the content of the programme and how it should be facilitated, is enough to provide the knowledge and skill level to successfully run the programme for those without a clinical psychology background?

The final concern with regard to implementation is that of the supervision requirement for those running the programmes. The literature reveals a vast difference in the supervision given to those running the programmes from those being supported with three hours supervision per week (Lewis, 2011) to those with supervision for two hours per month, as is the situation as a facilitator of IYT in the New Zealand context. Alongside the issue of the amount of time given for supervision, another factor identified as being of concern is the training and skills of those providing the supervision of others. In the original, supervision was provided by the creators of the programme, leading to high quality levels of support. As the interventions have been picked up and used in other settings, the quality of the supervision has depended on the training and understanding of those given the role of supervision (Hutchings et al., 2004; Lewis, 2011), at times resulting in no improvement to group leader practice or substituted practices (Hutchings et al., 2004).

### **Fidelity**

Closely linked to the issue of implementation is that of the fidelity of the intervention/s. Fidelity is defined as the "degree of fit between the original programme and its application in a given service setting" (Hutchings et al., 2004, p. 77). Fidelity in relation to the Incredible Years Programme has

five main components: adherence to programme design; exposure, which involves ensuring a match with the frequency and length of the original programme; quality programme delivery; participant responsiveness, and programme differentiation.

It is already clear from the issues in implementation that there are issues with fidelity if we are using the definition provided by Hutchings et al., (2004). If we use Webster-Stratton et al.'s (2011) definition of programme design as the "order of activities taken and materials utilized" (p. 511) we can regard the fidelity measure as high, as the order of activities and the materials to use are highly regulated by their provision to enable easy following of the order and sequence of delivery (Hutchings, 2012).

However, it has already been shown that there are differences in exposure from the original programme to others run, especially in the case of different cultural context. Baker-Henningham (2010) and Webster-Stratton et al. (2011) suggest that a higher number of sessions than those in the original situation, and quality delivery, help create more robust treatment effects. It can also be argued, given the implementation difficulties surrounding selection of staff, training and supervision, that the quality of delivery (Webster-Stratton, et al., 2011) is compromised and therefore so is the fidelity.

What these studies collectively indicate in regards to fidelity is that more needs to be understood about the particular components of treatment implementation that contribute positively to stronger results (Webster-Stratton et al., 2011).

### **Incredible Years Intervention Applicability in Other Cultural and Economic Contexts – Adaptation and Tailoring**

A major consideration for the choice of evidence-based interventions is the cultural relevance and applicability of said interventions. The research suggests that some evidence-based intervention programmes, such as the Incredible Years Parent and Teacher Programmes, are more transportable across countries and cultures than others.

Issues around the Incredible Years applicability in countries other than the USA, as its place of origin, have been tested through the application of the intervention in other settings such as Jamaica, Wales and Ireland. While some adaptations, such as increasing the training time to include more time on the areas unfamiliar to the Jamaican environment, (Baker-Henningham, 2010), delivering the course bilingually (Hutchings et al., 2007), creation of culturally-relevant role plays and activities that link

to the participants own lives and contexts (Hutchings et al., 2007) have occurred to the original programme. The conclusion of all of these studies is that the intervention, with the tailoring made, is beneficial and culturally-relevant for the participants. Part of the success factor with regard to the tailoring of the programme is the training of local personnel to implement and supervise the implementation of the intervention (Hutchings, 2012; Werry et al., 2010).

### **Costs**

The previous section related to policy directives, and revealed governmental concerns with the financial costs of intervention purchase and implementation (Ford et al., 2012; Hutchings, 2012) for the prevention, treatment and or management of CD or antisocial behaviours, in an economic environment in which budget cuts were being called for. Given the budget constraints, those making decisions regarding programme choice selected this intervention from Webster-Stratton (amongst others such as Triple P and PATHS) and collectively agreed that costs need to be weighed against the effectiveness of the intervention in reducing the ongoing incidence of antisocial behaviours and conduct disorder and the associated health, educational, social and justice costs.

In regards to the use of the intervention as a preventative cost-effective measure, the Incredible Years Parent and Teacher programmes (Bywater, 2012; Ford et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2008) promote working with a preventative mindset to reap longer-term rewards. The use of the Incredible Years Teacher Programme is seen as cheaper than working directly with individual challenging children (Ford et al., 2012) as teachers are supported to understand challenging child behaviour and can use the strategies and coaching opportunities provided in the programme over the duration of their teaching careers. Thus, the preventative use of the intervention potentially decreases the costs associated with teachers leaving the profession as a consequence of burnout as well as the costs of reduced educational achievement to the individual and society.

### **Benefits**

The use of the Incredible Years Programmes have already been shown that from a societal standpoint and cost-effectiveness analysis to be money wellspent (Ford et al., 2012; Lewis, 2011). In this section the reported benefits of the implementation of Incredible Years Parent and Teacher Programmes to the children, families, teachers and high-risk populations are considered along with the robustness of the measures used.

A variety of measures, including teacher satisfaction questionnaires, inter-rater reliability scores, effect sizes, parent interviews (Hutchings et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2008; Little et al., 2012) and endorsement of these programmes as effective in the area of violence prevention in youth justice (Webster-Stratton et al., 2011), are used in the literature to provide evidence of the benefits of using these interventions. From an empirical standpoint, the quantitative measures of effect size and inter-rater reliability are deemed more robust than those using qualitative measures, which rely heavily on the opinion of the interviewee.

The qualitative benefits reported from the use of Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme include students being able to engage and attend to tasks with improved self-esteem and empathy for others (Hutchings et al., 2007) for both the students targeted in the intervention process and their classmates. For families, the benefits are seen in stronger family relationships and reduced annoying behaviours (Little, et al., 2012). For teachers, the benefits are seen in having increased confidence in their capability and competence to manage challenging students in the classroom, with an increased range of effective strategies and more use of proactive approaches.

Those studies reporting quantitative measures with effect sizes have shown consistency in the effect size within the period of time covered by this review. Encouragingly, those effect sizes of 0.33 to 0.39 which measure the amount of change for the students pre- and post-intervention on measures of antisocial/ conduct disorder behaviours (Little et al., 2012), indicate significant effects for the participants in terms of a reduction in conduct disorder behaviours. The data also supports that this change is lasting over time and those participants who are have high ratings on the conduct disorder scales, indicating the severity of the cases, and boys, benefit the most (Jones et al., 2008).

### **Gaps and Implications**

There are multiple gaps in the current literature which have implications for both future research potential and practice. Those gaps fall into three main areas: the first, implementation and fidelity; the second, the costs associated with the implementation of the programme, and the third, the extent of the outcome when running just a single component of the Incredible Years Programme series. Much has already been said, in this review, about the fidelity and implementation differences within and across the programmes. It would be worthwhile comparing the fidelity of the group leaders' methods, process and principles, and the success of both teacher-outcomes

and student-outcomes under these conditions. At the same time it would be worth a closer look at the impact that the level and type of supervision of the group leaders running the programmes makes to the outcomes for both teachers and students.

With regard to the second aspect, there are three possible areas of further study. It will be valuable, from a costs point-of-view, to have more work done on the measurable outcomes of implementation of these programmes over a longer and shorter time-frame. Secondly, the impact on outcomes of implementation of the IYT programme with, and without, the individual in-class coaching component, and finally, the outcomes versus cost of a self-administered version of IYT compared with the group-based delivery. This question could be addressed by asking questions such as 'What value is added?' and 'By how much is the cost to the individual and society, both short-term and over the longer term, reduced?'

The third area for further consideration is that of individualising the effect-outcomes by looking specifically at one programme intervention only, as many of the studies to date are not pure, in that they reflect the impact of more than one intervention in play. Once this single effect is understood then it would be beneficial to link programmes together to create the greatest success outcomes from the intervention.

## CONCLUSIONS

While the IYT and IYP have been proven to be successful over time in reducing the incidence of conduct disorders, across multiple cultural and settings contexts, and are cost-effective, there are issues with the implementation and fidelity of the programmes due to selection, training and supervision of those delivering them.

Concerns re policy-borrowing with change of context (Lewis, 2011) have been addressed by the studies from multiple settings, showing that the cross-cultures impact is mitigated by the presence of locally-trained facilitators from the same cultural group as those undertaking the programmes. Further research is required in relation to the implementation and fidelity of the programmes, the cost of the programme implementation, and the size of the outcome from running a single component of the Incredible Years series.

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