

Teacher training for Head Start classrooms

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Abstract. The goal of this study was to provide Head Start teachers with specific skills in developing positive relationships with students and in more effectively managing problematic child behavior in the classroom. The hypothesis was that teacher behavior management training (BMT) would reduce child problem behavior and create a more supportive social environment in Head Start classrooms compared to standard teacher practices, or treatment as usual (TAU). Ten teachers serving twenty classrooms in three centers received six hours of specialized training in addition to training as usual, while seven teachers serving fourteen classrooms in two centers received training as usual. Training as usual consisted of standard teacher training provided by Head Start. BMT entailed the addition of 6 hours of group teacher training grounded in “The Incredible Years: Promoting Positive Academic and Social Behaviors” approach, and individualized in-class mentoring. Repeated measures ANOVAs (group X time) were used to assess group differences in change in children’s behavior from fall to spring of the school year. There was a significant group X time interaction ($p = .013$) in observed rates of child disruptive and aggressive behavior which increased over time in the TAU group and decreased in BMT group.

1. Introduction

Head Start program seeks to enhance the physical health, social-emotional competence, cognitive development, and school readiness of children from economically disadvantaged families. The goal of this study was to provide Head Start teachers with specific skills in developing positive relationships with students and in more effectively managing problematic child behavior in the classroom. The hypothesis was that teacher behavior management training (BMT) would reduce child problem behavior and create a more supportive social environment in Head Start classrooms compared to standard teacher practices, or treatment as usual (TAU).

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Ten teachers serving twenty classrooms in three centers received six hours of specialized training in addition to training as usual (BMT treatment condition), while seven teachers serving fourteen classrooms in two centers received training as usual (TAU control condition). Training as usual consisted of standard teacher training provided by Head Start. BMT entailed the addition of 6 hours of group teacher training grounded in “The Incredible Years: Promoting Positive Academic and Social Behaviors” approach, and individualized in-class mentoring. BMT training focused primarily on using positive behavioral supports to promote constructive child behavior. To assess the impact of BMT compared to TAU, the behavior of five children from each classrooms was observed, three of whom were identified by the teacher in the fall of the school year as displaying problematic behavior and two as not displaying problem behavior. Observational data were collected in a baseline (fall) to post-treatment (spring) design, and consisted of naturalistic observations of the behavior of target children and peer behavior toward those children. Observers were blind to intervention status.

Repeated measures ANOVAs (group X time) were used to assess group differences in change in children’s behavior from fall to spring of the school year. There was a significant group X time interaction ($p = .013$) in observed rates of child disruptive and aggressive behavior which increased over time in the TAU group and decreased in BMT group. There were also marginally significant group X time interactions ($.10 < p > .05$) in observers’ ratings of the overall peer behavior toward the target children, with reductions in peer rejection and aggression in the BMT but not in the TAU classrooms.

This study indicates that brief and affordable teacher training in behavior management skills reliably decreases children’s disruptive and aggressive classroom behavior. These results are salient and promising for two reasons. First, they were engendered in classrooms serving economically disadvantaged children who evidence increased risk for behavior problems. Second, reductions in aggressive and disruptive behavior were apparent even

for children who were nominated by teachers as evidencing the most serious behavior problems, and in the social reactions of peers to those children. Enhancing the social adjustment of children in preschool programs provides the foundation for children's school readiness in social-emotional domains, and is also likely to facilitate children's attention to early literacy and numeracy instruction.

3. Conclusions

The results of the analysis support the stated hypothesis, in that BMT both significantly reduced child aggressive and disruptive behavior as well as peer rejection and aggressive acts toward target children. Additionally, BMT shows a reduction of problem behavior and an increase in supportive social environment over and above TAU. This program shows promise in reducing problematic behavior in high risk children and those with serious behavior problems, as well as increasing social-emotional functioning in preschool children.

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