ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Randomized clinical trial to change parental practices for drug use in a telehealth prevention program: a pilot study

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Received 24 October 2017; accepted 7 February 2018

KEYWORDS
Prevention; Adolescent; Drug use; Parent programs; Telehealth; Motivational intervention

Abstract

Objectives: Programs for parents have been found to have a direct positive impact on reducing the consumption of psychoactive substances by adolescents, as well as having an indirect impact on reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors. The present study aimed to verify if a telehealth prevention program based on a brief motivational intervention helps to reduce parental risk practices and increase parental protective practices for drug use in comparison with psychoeducation.

Methods: A pilot randomized controlled trial was performed at the National Service of Guidance and Information on Drug Use (Ligue 132), from September 2014 to December 2015, with the parents of adolescents (n = 26). The outcome measures were parental style, risk, and protective parental practices.

Results: The brief motivational intervention was found to be more effective than psychoeducation in reducing the negligent behavior of parents. Furthermore, when comparing pre- and post-intervention data, the brief motivational intervention helped to change parental style and the large majority of parental practices: increasing positive monitoring, as well as decreasing physical abuse, relaxed discipline, inconsistent punishment, and negative monitoring.

Conclusions: These results demonstrate that the telehealth intervention is effective in modifying the parental practices known to help in preventing drug use. Studies with more number of subjects are required so that the results can be substantiated and generalized.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jped.2018.02.004
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Introduction

Alcohol and other drugs are well known causes of morbidity, mortality, and social damage around the world, and are considered an important component of the global burden of disease.\(^1\) In this scenario, prevention programs have been used to help these young people to avoid involvement in substance abuse. Skills training programs for parents have been found to have a direct positive impact on reducing the use of psychoactive substances by adolescents, as well as an indirect impact on reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors.\(^2,3\) Monitoring, supervision, communication, support, and parental involvement are protective behaviors associated with lower rates of use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.\(^4\) In contrast, negligence,\(^5\) authoritarianism, and physical abuse by parents are described as risk factors, as they have been associated with increasing the vulnerability of adolescents to drug abuse.\(^6\)

Despite the knowledge that parental styles influence resilience and vulnerability to drug use by adolescents, the effectiveness of prevention programs based on parental behaviors deserve further exploration.\(^7\) Considering the need for drug prevention programs to offer training in parenting skills in their curricula, the motivational intervention (MI) can be an excellent tool to help in the behavior change processes.\(^7\) MI has been previously evidenced in the literature related to prevention programs,\(^8\) and in drug use treatments,\(^9\) including in the telehealth approach.\(^10\)

In this prevention scenario, telehealth prevention programs can make an important contribution, as they offer advantages over traditional programs of drug prevention, including cost reduction, remote intervention, and the guarantee of anonymity.\(^11\) Telehealth, in the context of this article, is defined as the provision of distance services by health professionals through technological means of information transmission.\(^12\)

There is considerable evidence for the effectiveness of internet interventions targeting mental health and addictions disorders.\(^13\) Promising studies indicate that existing telehealth prevention programs for adolescents in schools have the potential to reduce drug use.\(^14\) A recent systematic review showed that there is evidence for computer-based delivery of parental interventions for alcohol use prevention.\(^15\) A family program that features the mailing of booklets with follow-up telephone calls significantly reduced the prevalence of smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol among adolescents,\(^16\) as well as a computer-based prevention program for parents that reduced adolescent alcohol use and risky behaviors.\(^17\) Although the emerging evidence demonstrating that telehealth prevention programs for drug use among adolescents is an area of increasing promise, further replication work is required in order to determine their broader impact.\(^18\)

Here, the objective is to present a pilot study of a randomized clinical trial performed to evaluate the feasibility and preliminary efficacy of a telehealth prevention program based on a brief motivational intervention (BMI) to help reduce parental risk practices and increase parental protective practices for drug use, in comparison with psychoeducation (PE).
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