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Ecologically based family therapy outcome with substance abusing runaway adolescents

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Abstract

Runaway youth report a broader range and higher severity of substance-related, mental health and family problems relative to non-runaway youth. Most studies to date have collected self-report data on the family and social history; virtually no research has examined treatment effectiveness with this population. This study is a treatment development project in which 124 runaway youth were randomly assigned to (1) ecologically based family therapy (EBFT) or (2) service as usual (SAU) through a shelter. Youth completed an intake, posttreatment, 6 and 12 months follow-up assessment. Youth assigned to EBFT reported greater reductions in overall substance abuse compared to youth assigned to SAU while other problem areas improved in both conditions. Findings suggest that EBFT is an efficacious intervention for this relatively severe population of youth.

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Introduction

This paper reports findings from the first randomized clinical trial examining treatment outcome for family therapy with substance abusing runaway youth. Overall, many researchers

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have concluded that family based intervention for substance abuse is an effective therapeutic modality (Gurman, Kniskern, & Pinsof, 1986; Craig, 1993; Stanton & Shadish, 1997). It has been recognized as particularly effective with adolescent substance abusers and behaviour problem youth (Bry, 1988; Szapocznik, Kurtines, Foote, Perez-Vidal, & Hervis, 1983; Szapocznik, Kurtines, Santisteban, & Rio, 1990; Liddle, Dakof, & Diamond, 1991; Joanning, Thomas, Quinn & Millen, 1992). Reviews of formal clinical trials of family based treatments consistently found that more drug-abusing adolescents enter, engage in, and remain in family therapy longer than in other modalities, and family therapy produces significant reductions in pre to posttreatment substance use (Liddle & Dakof, 1995; Stanton & Shadish, 1997; Waldron, 1997; Ozechowski & Liddle, 2000).

Fifteen randomized trials have evaluated substance use outcomes for adolescents and their families (for reviews: Kaminer & Slesnick, *in press*; Ozechowski & Liddle, 2000; Stanton & Shadish, 1997). All adolescent family therapy studies showed significant pre to posttreatment reductions in substance use for the family based intervention utilized, with eight of the 12 studies that used a non-family therapy control showing superior effects for those youth assigned to family therapy. In addition to substance use, recent studies have shown that family therapy positively impacts school performance and attendance, family functioning, delinquency and aggression (Henggeler, Pickrel & Brondino, 1999; Liddle et al., 2001; Henggeler, Clingempeel, & Brondino, 2002; Santisteban, Perez-Vidal, Coatsworth, & Kurtines, 2003).

Family preservation model

Ecologically based family therapy (EBFT), evaluated in this study, is based upon the Homebuilders family preservation model. In the early 1980s, a variety of family-based prevention and reunification programs called home-based, family preservation or family-based services were utilized in several states (Nelson & Landsman, 1992). The prototypical intensive family preservation service program, Homebuilders, was started by clinical psychologists in 1974 to provide an alternative to foster care and institutional placement of children in Washington state (Kinney, Haapala, Booth, & Leavitt, 1990). The Homebuilders family preservation services are based on crisis intervention theory which postulates that families are most open to change when they are faced with a crisis, and their normal modes of coping no longer work. The program was structured to provide immediate, intensive services over a brief time period. In most cases, the crisis is precipitated by the threat of removal of a child by Child Protective Services, a child's running away, or a child's ejection from the family (Barth, 1990; Kinney, Haapala, Madsen, & Fleming, 1991). In this model, families are seen by a single counsellor and services include a wide range of behavioural, cognitive, and environmental interventions, depending on the family's needs. The program does not require all family members to be present or involved, and both family and individual sessions are used.

Numerous studies have evaluated intensive family preservation services, but most have lacked a comparison group and limited their measures of change to whether out-of-home placement occurred (Nelson, 1994). In general, Homebuilders programs have found placement rates of 9–38% compared to 72–100% in comparison groups for samples of youth in juvenile justice, child welfare and mental health programs (Kinney et al., 1991; Nelson & Landsman, 1992). In a more controlled study, Feldman (1991) found that those in the family preservation program, compared

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