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Residential treatment of adolescents with severe behavioural problems

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Abstract

The development of adolescents with severe behavioural problems receiving residential treatment in Holland was empirically studied during 1 year. Treatment methods included a standard program comprising behavioural modification and three specific treatment programs: psychodynamic treatment, structured community living and adventurous learning. The development of the youngsters who remained in the programs ($N = 78$) was compared with the development of the youngsters who prematurely dropped out ($N = 20$). All programs had positive developmental outcomes, adventurous learning and structured community living yielded the most behavioural improvement and the standard program the least, and psychodynamic treatment lay in between. Despite the positive developmental outcomes, for many of the youngsters prolongation of the treatment was still needed after 1 year. Requirements for outcome research in residential care are discussed.

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Keywords: Residential treatment; Troubled adolescents; Behavioural difficulties; Treatment outcome; Premature dropout

Introduction

It is estimated that in Western societies about 15% of the adolescents are coping with behavioural and emotional difficulties (Rutter & Smith, 1995). Although many youngsters

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overcome their difficulties on their own or with the help of parents, teachers or professionals like social workers or psychologists, sometimes the difficulties are so hard to handle that the youngsters have to be placed out-of-home. To help these youngsters and their families most Western societies have established residential institutions for the upbringing of adolescents displaying behavioural difficulties (Colton & Hellinckx, 1993). These institutions aim to offer a new perspective on healthy, social and emotional development by providing a caring primary living environment, usually a group populated with approximately eight to twelve adolescents under the guidance of a professional caregiver, as well as opportunities for vocational learning and participation in pro-social life (Lewis, Summerville, & Graffagnino, 1996; Lyman & Campbell, 1996).

In the past the outcome figures of these residential institutions were not very positive. Studies found that between 30% and 50% of the youngsters leave the residential homes prematurely, usually because of unmanageable problem behaviour (Baekeland & Lundvall, 1975; Blotsky, Dimperio, & Gosset, 1984; Curry, 1991; Jansen, Schüller, Oud, & Arends, 1996; Klingsporn, Force, & Burdsal, 1990; Scholte, 1997). To offer troubled adolescents a better perspective, residential care institutions in the Netherlands have recently implemented treatment programs specifically designed for adolescents with severe behavioural problems. Treatment programs are regarded as a way of promoting developmental adjustment. Four different treatment methods can be used: (1) enhancement of social competence by behavioural modification according to the model of Teaching Family Homes (Kazdin, 1997)—this approach can also be qualified as the standard treatment method in residential care for youngsters with behavioural problems in the Netherlands; (2) psychodynamic treatment (Redl & Wineman, 1952); (3) structured community living (Kok, 1995); and (4) adventurous learning (Gass, 1993; Miles & Priest, 1999).

The aim of this study is to collate figures about the effectiveness of the four treatment methods. To this end the behavioural and emotional development of the adolescents in these programs was monitored over a period of 1 year.

Based on the abovementioned studies regarding dropout from residential care the following hypotheses were put forward:

1. It was expected that the dropout rate of the residential treatment programs would be lower than the dropout rate experienced by the residential care institutions in previous years.
2. It was expected that the behavioural and emotional development of the adolescents in all treatment programs would be positively remedied compared to the development of a reference group of behaviourally difficult adolescents that prematurely dropped out of residential care.

Methods

Participants and setting

The sample is composed of adolescents admitted to four different residential programs for the treatment of youngsters with severe behavioural and emotional difficulties in the Netherlands. The following treatment methods were applied: a standard program that aimed at enhancement of social competence by means of behavioural modification and three special programs that

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