Managing the Challenging Behaviors of Preschool Children: Effectiveness of Teacher-Child Interaction Training in a Head Start Classroom

Katrina M. Poppert, Brittany K. Liebsack, Laura Hasemann, Abby Wachholtz, Chelsie Potter, and Christopher Campbell
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Introduction

Empirical research suggests that children who have problematic relationships, characterized by high levels of conflict with their teachers, demonstrate a range of academic and behavioral problems resulting in problems with overall school adjustment (e.g., Janisse et al., 2008). For instance, children with problematic behaviors are at high risk for school absences, expulsion, and eventually school drop-out, delinquency, substance abuse, and violence (e.g., Gillian, 2005; Webster-Stratton & Tayler, 2001). Further, children who are at the highest risk for problematic behaviors are often taught by teachers who are least prepared to handle challenging behaviors (Webster-Stratton et al., 2008). Therefore, it is not surprising that teachers report that disruptive behavior is one of the single greatest challenges they face in providing quality programming (Arnold, McWilliam-Teed, & Arnold, 1998), and early childhood educators often identify behavioral interventions targeted at one of their most significant training needs (Joseph, Strass, & Skinner, 2004).

Research findings also indicate that challenging behaviors in the classroom lead to an increased rate in teacher burnout and occupational dissatisfaction (Carey, 2009). With increasing societal and occupational demands, many teachers are leaving the profession within five years (Ballew, 2010). Thus, teacher interventions are necessary to reduce the number of early childhood educators leaving the profession due to increased prevalence of challenging behaviors (Quasnenren, 2007), and improve the critical shortages of teachers available to work with young children with special needs and challenging behaviors that currently exists (Alkins & Gillkerson, 2008). However, evidence-based school interventions for children ages 3 to 6 years of age are relatively scarce (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2006), and many of the current school-based programs are expensive and may prove prohibitive for many Head Start programs.

The TCIT program also places enormous value on teacher-child relationships based on a growing body of empirical evidence that suggests the quality of the teacher-child relationship is one of the greatest predictors of school success (Joseph, Strass, & Skinner, 2004). Therefore, the teacher-child relationship is a primary focus of the intervention. The TCIT program utilizes didactic sessions where skills are taught and role-plays where participants practice these skills with a partner. The program also includes a Teacher-Directed Interaction phase (TDI) to improve the critical shortages of teachers available to work with young children with special needs and challenging behaviors that currently exists (Alkins & Gillkerson, 2008). However, evidence-based school interventions for children ages 3 to 6 years of age are relatively scarce (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2006), and many of the current school-based programs are expensive and may prove prohibitive for many Head Start programs.

Methods

Participants

Participants were four female preschooal teacher and 17 children at a Midwestern Head Start Center. The teacher was 34 years of age at the time of participation and identified as European American. The teacher had a Bachelor’s Degree in Elementary Education, and three years of previous teaching experience in Head Start settings. Participating children ranged from 3 to 5 years of age (M = 4.31, SD = 0.67, with 86.7% being female. The majority of children (86.7%) were European American, and 13.3% were Hispanic.

Materials

The TCIT program uses the Parent-Child Interaction Coding System: Third Edition (PCICS-III; Eyberg et al., 2000). The PCICS-III is a robust system designed to assess the quality of the parent-child interaction. The PCICS-III is an updated version of the original PCICS (Eyberg & Robinson, 1982), which has also been found to be sensitive to treatment effects (e.g., Eyberg & Robinson, 1982; Webster-Stratton, Kellman, & Krakauer, 1989). For the purposes of this study, the PCICS-III was slightly modified for use in the classroom to reflect teacher versus parental behaviors (e.g., the word ‘‘parent’’ is substituted for ‘‘teacher’’). Using the modified PCICS-III, teacher verbal behaviors were recorded over a 10-minute period.

Procedures

A single subject case-study design was used to design the study. The teacher completed the PCIT training in 16 weeks with two sessions per week. The study was conducted by the teacher on the correct use of the PRIDE skills and application of the skills to the classroom. The PRIDE skills are comprised of (1) praising appropriate behaviors; (2) reflecting appropriate verbal communication; (3) maximizing appropriate interactions; (4) providing child choice; (5) praising appropriate positive behaviors; and (6) emotionally interacting with the child. By acquiring those skills, the Head Start teacher learned to enhance children’s appropriate behaviors and to increase their prevalence (Hawkins-Keppl & Quasnenren, 1993). The teacher was evaluated for mastery of the PRIDE skills throughout the intervention. Mastery level criteria includes ten labeled praises, ten behavior descriptions, ten reflections, and less than three voids, commands, and negative talk.

The 14-session TCIT intervention occurred over a period of one month with two sessions per week. The study was conducted by two Master’s level graduate students using the 33-page TCIT manual (Campbell et al., 2010; adapted from Eyberg et al., 1995) to support treatment fidelity. The intervention utilized a concurrent single case-study design (Kazdin, 2003) to evaluate the acquisition, generalization, and maintenance of PRIDE skills by the Head Start teacher (data was collected initially at baseline, throughout the intervention, and one month post-treatment).

Results

In Session

Overall, the small N design demonstrated the teacher’s ability to master PRIDE skills in session. The teacher’s use of labeled praises, reflections, and behavior descriptions all increased and she met mastery by the final graduation session. The mean number of labeled praises increased from the first coaching session to the eighth session and then decreased slightly. However, the mean number of labeled praises still remained above the mastery cut off of 10 in the fifth and final coaching session (Figure 1). The use of reflections also increased significantly throughout coaching. Although her use of reflections was higher during the CDI phase of training, she reached unprecedented levels during graduation. The amount of behavior descriptions used fluctuated around the mastery line throughout training, but did demonstrate a significant increase overall (Figure 5). Means are not shown for weeks 2 and 11 because these sessions were strictly teaching and no data were collected. For all three behaviors, an increase in observations was made. The teacher successfully graduated from TCIT in the third session by meeting mastery criteria for all PRIDE skills, as well as graduation.

In Classroom

In order to recognize the effects of each phase of training, figures include vertical lines, which separate the baseline, CDI, TDI, and follow-up periods. During the three week baseline period, average labeled praises increased during CDI. During TDI, the labeled praises increased once more. Average labeled praises in the classroom increased, once again, and during the follow-up period (Figure 2). Similarly, the average amount of reflections used increased during each phase, but showed a downward trend overall (Figure 3). Behavior descriptions decreased slightly in the classroom from baseline to CDI. However, the use of behavior descriptions increased during TDI and again during the follow-up period (Figure 6). The use of behavior descriptions increased significantly after graduation and during follow up. Negative talk in the classroom decreased significantly throughout the 16 week classroom observations. The average number of times negative talk was used in the classroom during the baseline period was 7.5. This average decreased to 3.9 during CDI and again to 2.33 during TDI. During the follow-up period the average negative talk in the classroom was only 1.88 (Figure 7).

Discussion

Overall, the results from this study indicate that the teacher was able to acquire the PRIDE skills in the training room, and, more importantly, generalize many of the PRIDE skills to the broader classroom environment. Equally important, the teacher’s utilization of PRIDE skills was maintained over time. In fact, the teacher demonstrated increased use of Labeled Praise and Behavior Descriptions in the classroom during the post-treatment follow-up observation periods.

The TCIT program also makes a difference in the behavior of her students. She also mentioned that CDI skills allowed her to make new connections with her students and helped them to develop new social skills. Overall, the small N design demonstrates the teacher’s ability to master PRIDE skills in session. The teacher’s use of labeled praises, reflections, and behavior descriptions all increased and she met mastery by the final graduation session. The mean number of labeled praises used increased from the first coaching session to the eighth session and then decreased slightly. However, the mean number of labeled praises still remained above the mastery cut off of 10 in the fifth and final coaching session (Figure 1). The use of reflections also increased significantly throughout coaching. Although her use of reflections was higher during the CDI phase of training, she reached unprecedented levels during graduation. The amount of behavior descriptions used fluctuated around the mastery line throughout training, but did demonstrate a significant increase overall (Figure 5). Means are not shown for weeks 2 and 11 because these sessions were strictly teaching and no data were collected. For all three behaviors, an increase in observations was made. The teacher successfully graduated from TCIT in the third session by meeting mastery criteria for all PRIDE skills, as well as graduation.

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