

Is The Incredible Years a Trauma Focused therapy? Can IY parent and child programs be used for families where children have experienced trauma?

Carolyn Webster-Stratton, Ph.D.

Abstract

Children with conduct problems have a high prevalence of early childhood trauma family experiences. For this reason the IY parent and child programs which are “trauma informed” are appropriate for these families. In this report you will see Dr. Webster-Stratton’s answer to the question as to how the IY programs are based on trauma-informed principles.

Carolyn Webster-Stratton’s Answer:

The IY evidence-based parent and child programs have been used and evaluated for decades as treatment for children diagnosed with conduct problems, oppositional defiant disorder and ADHD (A T. A. Menting, B. Orobio de Castro, & W. Matthys, 2013; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2017; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Beauchaine, 2013). In addition these programs have been evaluated as selective and indicated prevention interventions for high risk, economically disadvantaged families, foster parents, and families referred because of abuse and neglect (Webster-Stratton, 1998; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2011; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001) and even for incarcerated parents (A.T.A. Menting, B. Orobio de Castro, & W. Matthys, 2013b). Within these populations are families whose children’s behavioral problems are a manifestation of their emotional and psychological difficulties because of single or multiple traumatic family life experiences. Multiple randomized control group studies have indicated the success of the IY parent programs in promoting more responsive and nurturing parent-child interactions, reducing child externalizing and internalizing problems and promoting positive social competence and emotional regulation (A.T.A. Menting, B. Orobio de Castro, & W. Matthys, 2013a).

IY Parent Programs

The “trauma informed” IY parent basic program begins with parents learning ways to build a sensitive, responsive, nurturing relationship with their children through child-directed play. Parents learn the importance of using emotion coaching with their children to build their children’s emotional literacy and capacity to communicate about their feelings and problems. Throughout the program, parents are helped to understand the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors for themselves as well as their children. In addition to learning developmentally

appropriate parenting skills, IY parent programs, especially the treatment protocol which includes the IY Advance parenting program (Webster-Stratton, 1994) help parents to regulate their own emotions and affect, improve their positive communication and listening skills, and how to build support networks in their communities. These goals are achieved using strategies such as challenging self-negative talk, modifying inaccurate thoughts and guilt or shame about trauma, using deep breathing, relaxation methods, positive imagery and the importance of self-care. Building support networks is integral to the group-based approach to delivering the IY programs.

The group-based parent program is designed to have therapists work collaboratively with each family in the group to address the life-context, child presenting problems, family situation, and culture. Please see parent therapist book for further information about the collaborative therapeutic process (Webster-Stratton, 2012). Therapists help families set realistic short term and long term goals based on their particular situation. So for these families where children (or parents) have experienced trauma, this would constitute a huge part of their life-context and would need to be addressed in every session as part of the tailoring group leaders do for each family. Parents are helped to understand the impact of trauma on their children's emotional or behavioral problems and how to help them feel safe and loved with consistent child-directed play, praise, predictable routines, household rules and clear limit setting. They are helped to understand the importance of not being either overly protective with their children or too permissive and are helped to appreciate their children's strengths. Please see a chapter that talks about some of the ways that the material can be presented for children with attachment or neglect problems and families who are divorced or who have experienced loss.

http://www.incredibleyears.com/wp-content/uploads/tailoring-the-incredible-years-parenting-program_9-19-07.pdf

This collaborative way of using the IY parent program can also apply to other types of trauma that children or families have experienced. So, all the information that the therapist has about each family would influence the way that the program is delivered throughout each session. Therapists working with these families in the parent group start from the life-context that these families are living with and their goals and then help parents apply each of the new skills and principles to their own unique situations. In the chapter above you will see that much more time is spent on the foundation of the parenting pyramid in terms of building relationships, attachment, and parent-child bonding in cases where those bonds are not strong to begin with. Parents in these groups share their own experiences of being parented

(which often may have been abusive) and talk about how this has impacted their parenting choices with their own children. They also identify their goals for their relationships with their children and what parenting choices they want to make to achieve these goals.

With the context of prior trauma in mind, some topics (such as ignoring and Time Out) are sometimes delayed and extra sessions offered initially to establish more secure attachment and parent-child bonding. When the ignoring, Time Out and discipline strategies are eventually presented for child destructive behaviors that cannot be redirected or self-regulation methods prompted, discussion around these strategies focuses on how these strategies are meant to encourage child and parent self-regulation with the goal to use them briefly and non-punitively without jeopardizing the child's sense of safety. Following a planned ignore or Time Out to calm down experience, parents then reunite with their child in a positive way to provide their child with new learning opportunities to use other solutions to the problem situation (such as communication about feelings, or getting help, or walking away, or finding a friend or safe person to talk to). For families where there is a history of trauma discussion time is spent talking about the difference between the positive use of these strategies and punitive or neglectful parenting behaviors. When used thoughtfully, patiently and calmly, these strategies are important skills for all parents to learn as part of non-violent and positive discipline.

It is also important for parents to assess and understand whether their child's misbehavior stems from needs for parental attention which the child can't get consistently and regularly with positive behaviors, or whether the child's misbehavior occurs because of prior modeling and the fact that s/he hasn't been taught other more prosocial behaviors to get what s/he wants, or whether the child is acting out because of fear and insecurity in their relationship due to prior traumatic experiences of being abandoned, neglected or abused. The minimum number of sessions recommended for the parent treatment protocol based on our research is 2-hour weekly sessions for 18-20 weeks. However, with the added attention needed for trauma focused situations where more time is spent on parent interpersonal issues (e.g., depression, marital conflict, thoughts of guilt and shame), safety issues and relationship building as well as the added inclusion of the Advance program content, more sessions are often needed. In one study where the full advance program was combined with the basic parent program the average number of sessions was 24-26 sessions (Webster-Stratton, 1994).

IY Small Group Treatment Programs

Similarly therapists delivering the child dinosaur small group treatment program with the help of large life-size puppets help children to learn and practice emotion language, to manage their anger, fears and depression through self-regulation strategies such as deep breathing, positive self-talk and positive imagery (happy places), to problem solve and to develop social skills in order to build supportive friendships (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2005, 2008). Strategies in both the IY parent and child programs include cognitive, affective, and behavioral strategies which are also key elements in trauma-focused therapy. In essence, trauma-focused elements are woven throughout the IY parent and child programs. Frequently the child dinosaur program is offered alongside the parent program so that the language and methods used in the child program can be reinforced at home by the parents using similar strategies.

In the small group Dinosaur treatment program therapists using large life-size puppets develop scenarios (such as a trauma narrative) for the puppets that mirror some of the children's problems. For example, one puppet might be living with his grandmother or is in foster care because his mother is unable to care for him safely. This puppet talks to the children about what s/he does to stay safe and who s/he can talk to feel loved and then asks the children for their ideas about what to do when s/he feels unsafe when she visiting her mother. Or, a puppet might talk about her worries when s/he hears her parents fighting and ask the children for help knowing what to do when this happens. Recently, in one school where they experienced the loss of one of the students, the therapist prepared a lesson on loss and grief. The puppet shared with the children his sad and confused feelings about the recent loss of his grandfather. This allowed the children to talk about grief and sadness when they lose someone, the normality of these feelings, things to do to cope with these feelings and ways to keep the memory of a loved person going. While all the children learn emotion vocabulary and the basic steps of problem solving and anger management, they are helped by therapists to practice these strategies by showing the puppet how s/he can talk about and solve his or her particular problems which are designed to mirror some of their own experiences. The children learn not only how to talk about traumatic experiences but also how to cope with them through positive self-talk, positive imagery, behavioral practices, methods to stay safe and making friends often times with children who have had similar experiences.

Using both the IY parent and child programs together offers promise for helping families who have experienced trauma develop supportive, nurturing relationships

within a family that models developmentally appropriate parenting skills, emotional regulation, and effective problem solving. In turn, this leads to the development of children who feel safe, socially and emotionally competent and supported to cope with life's challenges.

References

- Menting, A. T. A., Orobio de Castro, B., & Matthys, W. (2013). Effectiveness of the Incredible Years Parent Training to Modify Disruptive and Prosocial Child Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Clinical Psychology Review, 33*(8), 901-913.
- Menting, A. T. A., Orobio de Castro, B., & Matthys, W. (2013b). A trial of parent training for mothers being released from incarceration and their children. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 43*(3), 381-396.
- Webster-Stratton, C. (1994). Advancing videotape parent training: A comparison study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 62*(3), 583-593.
- Webster-Stratton, C. (1998). Preventing conduct problems in Head Start children: Strengthening parenting competencies. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 66*(5), 715-730.
- Webster-Stratton, C. (2012). *Collaborating with Parents to Reduce Children's Behavior Problems: A Book for Therapists Using the Incredible Years Programs* Seattle, WA Incredible Years Inc.
- Webster-Stratton, C., & Reid, J. (2017). The Incredible Years Parents, Teachers and Children Training Series: A Multifaceted Treatment Approach for Young Children with Conduct Problems In A. E. Kazdin & J. R. Weisz (Eds.), *Evidence-based psychotherapies for children and adolescents, 3rd edition*. New York Guildford Publications
- Webster-Stratton, C., & Reid, M. J. (2005). Treating conduct problems and strengthening social and emotional competence in young children: The Dina Dinosaur Treatment Program. In M. Epstein, K. Kutash, & A. J. Duchowski (Eds.), *Outcomes for children and youth with emotional and behavioral disorders and their families: Programs and evaluation best practices* (2nd ed., pp. 597-623). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed, Inc.
- Webster-Stratton, C., & Reid, M. J. (2008). Adapting the Incredible Years Child Dinosaur Social, Emotional and Problem Solving intervention to address co-morbid diagnoses. *Journal of Children's Services, 3*(3), 17-30.
- Webster-Stratton, C., & Reid, M. J. (2011). The Incredible Years: Evidence-based parenting and child programs for families involved in the child welfare system. In A. Rubin (Ed.), *Programs and interventions for maltreated children and families* (pp. 10-32). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Webster-Stratton, C., Reid, M. J., & Beauchaine, T. P. (2013). One-Year Follow-Up of Combined Parent and Child Intervention for Young Children with ADHD. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 42*(2), 251-261.
- Webster-Stratton, C., Reid, M. J., & Hammond, M. (2001). Preventing conduct problems, promoting social competence: A parent and teacher training partnership in Head Start. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 30*(3), 283-302.

