Update on our findings from the PREDICTORS study

PREDICTORS study recap

The PREDICTORS (Parent Resources for Decreasing the Incidence of Change-Triggered Temper Outbursts) study set out to develop and evaluate a set of web-based caregiver training resources aimed at trying to reduce the temper outbursts which some children show following changes to their routines and plans.

Specifically, one group of caregivers who took part in the study were trained to use a ‘Change Card’ to signal upcoming changes to children’s routines/plans because previous work by our research team suggests that doing so decreases the likelihood that change-related outbursts will occur and also reduces the severity of any change-related outbursts which do occur. In order to scientifically evaluate the efficacy of this Change Signalling strategy in reducing temper outbursts, we compared the severity (i.e. frequency, duration and intensity) of children’s temper outbursts before and after their caregivers had been trained to use the Change Signalling strategy.

We also compared any changes in temper outburst severity reported by caregivers in the Change Signalling strategy group to those reported by a comparison group of caregivers who were trained to use an alternative temper outburst reduction strategy. This comparison group of caregivers was trained to plan ahead to minimise unexpected changes to children’s routines/plans which may cause temper outbursts and to use appropriate ways of communicating these plans to the children they care for, e.g. via the use of visual schedules or calendars on their smart phone or tablet. We selected this Planning Ahead strategy because visual schedules and similar communication aids are routinely recommended and popular in education and other settings for use with individuals who have difficulties with change.

Overall then, the PREDICTORS study asked the question: ‘how does the use of our Change Signalling strategy compare with another recommended strategy in its ability to alter change-related outburst behaviours’?

Preliminary findings from the PREDICTORS study

1. Was the Change Signalling Strategy effective at reducing temper outbursts?

   Overall, there were no scientifically conclusive differences between the Change Signalling strategy group and the Planning Ahead strategy group in terms of changes in reported temper outburst severity after having completed the online training compared with before training commenced. But, some subtle differences between the two training groups were revealed which we intend to analyse on an individual rather than a group basis.

   Notably, however, neither the Change Signalling strategy nor the Planning Ahead strategy led to a significant reduction in temper outburst severity for the groups in this study. It may be that some strategies for reducing change-related temper outbursts are more appropriate for some individuals and/or situations than others. This is something we would like to investigate in future studies by offering caregivers a range of strategies which they can draw upon.

2. What was caregivers’ experience of taking part in the online training?

   This question is pertinent since only a small number of participants (10 out of a possible 37) completed the online training. Interviews with caregivers highlighted some important barriers to completion which will be used to guide future PREDICTORS research.
Although accessing the training online was generally quick and efficient, some caregivers felt more supported and motivated by direct contact with researchers. Therefore, future PREDICTORS research will aim to use a combination of online and direct training.

Some caregivers were put off by the strategies themselves, finding them either too simplistic, or too similar to strategies they had already ‘tried-and-tested’ themselves, or inappropriate given the particular child’s age/ability. On a related point, some caregivers reported that they would have been more likely to engage with the training had they been informed of the theoretical background to the strategies used. Therefore, future PREDICTORS research will aim to enable caregivers to implement the strategies more flexibly to suit them and the children they care for by incorporating into the training information on why and how the strategies are intended to work.

Some caregivers suggested that the strategies may be more appropriate for implementation with younger children, which points to a need for early intervention. We have recently secured funding to develop an early intervention strategy aimed at preventing change-related behavioural difficulties from developing by using ‘Flexible Scheduling’. If you would like to know more about our Flexible Scheduling Project, which will apply much of the knowledge gained from the PREDICTORS study, or if you think that some of your members would like to take part in this study, please contact us using the details below.

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