



Children should learn self-control

This user abstract presents the following Campbell systematic review:

*Piquero A, Jennings W, Farrington D: [Self-control interventions for children under age 10 for improving self-control and delinquency and problem behaviours](#). *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 2010:2. DOI: 10.4073/csr.2010.2*

This article was written by Madina Saidj, SFI Campbell, and has been approved by the authors of the systematic review.

This scenario will be familiar to many: a screaming child, out of control by the candy shelves in the supermarket. The child was refused a piece of candy. New research indicates that intervening against this type of behaviour pays off. Teaching children self-control at an early age can prevent antisocial behaviour and delinquency later on. This is what a new Campbell systematic review of the most robust international research results in the area shows.

LOW SELF-CONTROL CAN HAVE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES

As early as around the age of three, children should be able to show internal self-control and refrain from doing things they have been told not to do. However, not all children learn self-control. On the contrary, many children have problems e.g. containing emotions and acting on sudden impulses.

Self-control is an interesting personal attribute. According to the recognised General Theory of Crime by Gottfredson and Hirschi, antisocial behaviour and delinquency are the results of low self-control. As opposed to people who have a high degree of self-control, and who are able to control their behaviour and restrain from sudden impulses and emotional reactions, people with low self-control are far more spontaneous. They are much more emotionally expressive and react spontaneously on their own impulses and sudden ideas. Six characteristics in particular are typical in people with low self-control: impulsivity and inability to delay gratification; lack of persistence, tenacity or diligence; partaking in novelty or risk-seeking activities; little value of intellectual ability; self-centredness; and a volatile temper. According to the theory, these traits are why children with low self-control will be prone to taking part in criminal activity and antisocial activity. Moreover, research experience demonstrates that self-control is learned in the early years of life and is difficult to change later on.

This Campbell systematic review sets out to examine whether programmes aimed at teaching children self-control (self-control improvement programmes) have an effect.

IMPORTANT TO LEARN SOCIAL SKILLS

‘Self-control improvement programmes’ is a generic term for the various different programmes which, in this systematic review, aim at children up to the age of ten. The majority of the programmes included in the review are based on a form of social skills training. Social skills training focuses in particular on communication: to be able to express oneself and communicate one’s thoughts, needs and feelings; and to be better at reacting to and understanding other people’s thoughts, needs, and feelings. The idea is that these skills will help children avoid and/or tackle unpleasant situations

One example of a method used is the Control Signal Poster, which uses a traffic-light approach. The teacher uses a poster of a set of traffic lights: Red = Stop and calm down. Yellow = Slow down and think of a plan. Green = Go and try the plan. The children learn not to act on their direct impulse when they get frustrated, for example while playing in the school yard or when doing their homework. They learn instead to go to the red light, stop, and think before they act. They also learn to put the situation and their feelings into words and thus identify the problem, before proceeding to the yellow light. Here, they consider the possible solutions and select the best one. The next step is the green light, namely testing their plan and then evaluating whether it has worked. If the plan does not work, the child will have to go through all of steps again to solve the problem and will ultimately end up having found the best way to tackle the given situation.

TEACHING CHILDREN SELF-CONTROL PAYS OFF

The systematic review is based on the best of the available studies examining the effect of self-control improvement programmes aimed at children. The outcome is clear: the programmes successfully improve children’s self-control. Furthermore, they reduce children’s antisocial behaviour and delinquency.

This tells us that teaching children better self-control at an early age pays off. Rather than throwing money at expensive sanctioning policies, the authors of the systematic review recommend that priority is given to preventive work and self-control improvement efforts. Self-control improvement programmes aimed at children can be a good investment, if the aim is to prevent antisocial behaviour and petty crime.

ABOUT THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

- This review includes 34 studies covering a total of 4,386 children, aged from to 10 years.
- Of these, 31 studies are from the US, 2 are from Canada and 1 is from Israel.
- The review covers a time span of 33 years (1975-2008).
- The children studied were 6.23 years old on average, lived in low-income areas, and were recruited via their schools.
- Included were only studies using randomized controlled trial design with post test measures of self-control and/or child behaviour problems for the experimental and control participants.
- Studies with mentally and/or physically handicapped subjects were not included.
- Both published and unpublished studies were included, however only studies available in English.
- Outcomes were collected reports from parents and/or teachers, clinical reports, direct observation and/or reports from the children themselves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Campbell Collaboration wishes to thank SFI Campbell for its generous support for the production of this user abstract. See also: www.sfi-campbell.dk.

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