

TIPS: Time-limited Intervention with Parents Service

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This article describes a “Time-limited Intervention with Parents Service” (TIPS) to support children displaying certain behaviour, emotional and social difficulties. This service was set up on the assumption that addressing parents’ management strategies potentially has a powerful multiplier effect i.e. a relatively brief period working with parents can lead to substantial and sustained changes in their interactions with their children, and these changes can have an ongoing influence over a prolonged period. At the heart of the approach is a carefully designed structured interview with the parents which has been developed over many years. Evidence from recent cases is offered to demonstrate the effectiveness of the service.

Introduction

Herbert (1993) argues that a relatively brief input of professional time with parents can be translated into several hundred hours of different experiences for children over a few weeks. What he is describing is, in essence, a powerful “multiplier” effect, as the resulting alterations in parent-child interactions make a sustained impact over a long period. However, bringing about effective changes in parents’ behaviour within the time constraints of the busy professional is no easy matter. An approach to achieving this, within the scheme known as “TIPS”, is outlined later.

It would be unrealistic to claim that all children’s behaviour, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) could be tackled this way, thus an important aspect of the scheme is careful targeting. This is also outlined below, after a brief description of the background and structure of the service.

Background

TIPS began in September 2000 as an additional input to the Behaviour and Attendance Support Service (BASS) in North Tyneside, from the Educational Psychology Service. Referral routes were from schools to the BASS family support team and then to TIPS. In several cases, other EPs were involved in the initial decision to refer.

The time allowed for this project was one half day per fortnight (i.e. five per cent of an EP week) to cover all administration, preparation, writing, travel time, interviews and liaison. Over two years, 39 intervention sessions were arranged, plus 12 liaison sessions with the BASS family support team. The focus of the work was on improving

home based behaviour; it was hoped, however, that some of this change would spin off into school. As implied by the title, the interventions were time limited, with a target of about three parent discussions (although this was treated flexibly), the main emphasis being on the first interview.

From previous experience of this kind of work in a normal EP patch, discussions with BASS and other colleagues, and in view of the need to make best use of the limited time available, a rationale was established. As explained in leaflets made available, the purpose of TIPS was to provide short term support in the form of parent training. This support would be to a selection of families with children displaying behaviour difficulties – particularly those of an irritating, disruptive, attention seeking nature, which appear to be very common, but difficult to deal with (Mellor 1997). The families were not expected to have the kind of multiple problems which required lengthy involvement from other agencies such as children’s services. Discussions with BASS and review of all available documentation served to select the most appropriate referrals (see Mellor & Harvey, 2003, for further details of this selection process).

The format described above took some time to establish reliably. In addition, although focusing on the parents the interventions quite naturally included some discussion with the children, the schools and other agencies.

Sigston (2003) and Dyson (2003) at the British Psychological Society (DECP) conference both pointed to a “pyramid of need”. In local authority provision, the most pressing cases, at the apex of the pyramid, are provided for by existing services (e.g. CAMHS teams, children’s services and special provision within the education system). Low level need at the base of the pyramid is tackled by existing within –school or within-nursery provision. The middle portion of support, however, may be relatively under-resourced for children displaying BESD (see Green Paper “*Every Child Matters*” HMSO 2003 p.21). The TIPS scheme is targeted directly and specifically at this population. The TIPS intervention also fits well with the recommendations in the Green Paper e.g. “targeted and specialist support to parents and carers” (p.8); “a stronger focus on parenting and families” and “earlier intervention” (p.20/21); “parent education programmes” (p.41).

The pattern of working

Two leaflets explaining the scheme were produced, for parents and schools. After some experimenting the following approach evolved:

(A) The service was provided in the child’s local school, rather than as an office-based or home-based service. The office-based approach, which has worked in the past and saves EP time, can put extra strain on parents and has lead to a number of failed appointments. A home-based service, while convenient for parents, has led to more unsuccessful discussion, as the home environment has the potential to create too many distractions.

The school-based service, while putting the EP in successive unfamiliar environments, and adding traveling time and (not insignificant) practical problems with finding acceptable rooms and seating, provides parents with a relatively neutral, local, non-

threatening setting. Here they can put uninterrupted time aside to focus on their child. Discussion with teachers arises quite naturally in this location and any contrast between home and school behaviours can more readily be unearthed. “Ownership” potentially remains much more school centred than with an office or clinic– based service.

It was agreed that the patch EP would carry on any additional involvement such as statementing, although TIPS information would obviously contribute to this.

(B) Following initial discussion with BASS (and patch EP where already involved), then a referral and acknowledgement letters, events followed this sequence:

- “Pre-session change” letter to the teacher (to capitalise on informal changes)
- Observation of, and discussion with, the pupil (usually brief)
- Preliminary discussion with the teacher (usually brief)
- Main discussion with the parents (about 90 minutes) – the key interview.
- Feedback to teacher and further modification of classroom targets (usually brief)
- Follow up discussions with parents (about 60 minutes) and other agencies (some home visits occurred)

(C) Overall, the pattern of cases was as follows:

- Time scales (from first school visit to final school visit) ranged from three months to 11 months (average five months) (all averages rounded to nearest whole number)
- Involvement of other agencies (such as BASS, Children’s Services, Child and Family Psychiatry, the Regional Psychiatric Unit) was one to five per family (average two)
- The children ranged from Nursery to Y7 (mainly below Y4)
- Three children were eventually statemented (two for BESD, in Y1 and Y7)

In practice the actual work included, for each case:

- One or two child interviews
- One to nine teacher interviews (average four – rather more than had been anticipated)
- Two to five parent interviews (average three – about what had been expected)

The parent interviews

As mentioned earlier, at the heart of the scheme is a set of parent interviews, the first of these being the key. Given the limited time available to practitioners for this type of work, an efficient approach was developed over many years by the author’s late colleague, Eric Harvey, senior social worker. This was adopted, with minor amendments, into the TIPS service.

The interview technique for all the stages is described in detail in Mellor and Harvey (2003). The main session (often the first contact with the parents) is built round a highly structured social-behavioural interview. This is carefully designed to win parents' trust and promote a frank exploration of problems, in a period of about 90 minutes. The interview moves from less challenging to more challenging issues, as trust deepens. To give insight, a wide selection of social stories is employed (see Beaver, 1996), along with clear, practical "down to earth" strategies. Although very demanding, the interviews have been very well received by parents.

The impact of the scheme

As background to this kind of targeted support, Mellor (2000) presents 12 illustrative case studies of children from nursery to age 16 whose parents were involved in similar work. After successful intervention, these children were followed up two to five years later and found to be still settled at home.

With regard to the TIPS scheme, the first year, during which practices were being established, also included some children from multiple problem families and several "failed to attend". The second year of the scheme, by which time referral routes and procedures were clearer, had fewer "less appropriate" referrals, and eight cases either completed or underway. This appears to be a sustainable number. At the time of this review of the provision (September 2002), 13 cases in total were completed or in hand.

Now, a proportion of BESD cases can be expected to spontaneously remit before first involvement. It seems likely that the children in the TIPS scheme, however, were drawn from that population which would not improve without support. Indeed, many of them had at least one or two other agencies involved prior to TIPS (although the extent of involvement was very variable).

Indications of improvement in TIPS were obtained from parents' report. Although the focus was on home based behaviour, school behaviour was also noted, from teacher report. Of the 10 completed cases available, at the time of review of the scheme, home and school discussions revealed:

Home perspective

- Five were felt to be sufficiently settled at home to be closed
- Four showed some or reasonable improvement at home, but were closed because of time restrictions (one was given a further appointment because of later difficulties following parental separation)
- One showed no improvement

School perspective

- Five showed improved and settled behaviour at school (one of these showed later problems following parent separation)
- Two were settled at school throughout, and the focus was simply on home behaviour
- Three showed no improvement at school. Of these, two required BESD statements

(Y1 and Y7)

Feedback

Parents were asked to complete a one page feedback form containing seven five-point scales (very good to very poor) to answer the following questions :

How did you feel your educational psychologist acted with regard to:

- Putting you at ease in your discussions?
- Helping you to tackle those areas you found it difficult to discuss?
- Helping you understand your child's problems?
- Providing helpful practical advice or information?
- Working in the best interests of your child?
- Dealing promptly and efficiently with your concerns?
- How do you rate the quality of the work overall?

There was also room for additional comments; these were very positive. From six returned forms (i.e. a total of 42 available rating scales):

- 30 scales were rated very good
- 10 were rated good
- Two were rated average (apparently from parent of the oldest child in the project, at high school, and one of the earliest referrals, with multiple family problems)

No formal feedback was sought from schools, but discussion obtained several pleasing comments and no negative comments.

The current situation

Following re-organisation of BASS, TIPS was brought fully into the EP service and the scheme has continued to date. Referrals now come directly from EPs, again following discussion and review of existing information to target cases. This selection appears relatively accurate and in the last two years referrals have been seen to be appropriate although advice and support from the BASS family support team has not been available. There has been almost 100% parental attendance at interviews (despite being quite challenging as mentioned above) and the nature of the difficulties presented has been open to this kind of short term discussion of behaviour management. Occasionally a short waiting list has developed, but on the whole, demand for TIPS has broadly balanced supply (the full extent of the potential demand which could be uncovered through greater advertising of the service is, however, unknown).

Training in the short term parent intervention approach used in TIPS has been provided to EPs from across the country on two day schools. Feedback from these, attended on the whole by very experienced EPs, had been very positive. More day schools are planned, including one in Northern Ireland in October 2004.

As regards evidence of effectiveness, neither of the two data sets (from Mellor, 2000, or

TIPS above) provides fully reliable information; they should both perhaps best be seen as indicative pilot projects. What is needed now is well designed investigations, carried out by independent practitioners and researchers, using appropriate controls and relying on concrete measures of behaviour change at home and school. However, in the meantime research is currently underway into attention seeking, its causes and incidence; and its usefulness as a concept and as a focus for intervention.

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