

RESTACKING THE ODDS

PARENTING PROGRAMS: THE INGREDIENTS LINKED TO BETTER CHILD MENTAL HEALTH



Key messages

- Parenting programs that teach specific behaviour management techniques, like positive reinforcement, have positive effects on child behaviour
- Longer, broader, one-to-one or in-person programs aren't necessarily more effective
- Policymakers, funders and service providers should prioritise access to parenting programs that teach evidence-based behaviour management strategies

To make informed decisions about which parenting programs to implement, early childhood services need to know what works and which program characteristics are reliably linked to better outcomes for children.

Parenting practices are among the most important and modifiable influences on children's social, emotional and behavioural development.¹ In Australia and overseas, parenting programs are widely used to support parents and improve child outcomes.

However, parenting programs vary considerably.² Some programs focus on behaviour management, while others include additional topics such as child development information, parent wellbeing, emotional regulation or relationship-building.

There are also many modes of delivery – some programs are brief while others extend over longer periods of time, and some are provided in group formats while others involve individual consultation. Providers also vary, with some delivered by highly qualified specialists and others by trained peers or support staff.

Programs are also delivered in many different settings, including in homes, clinics or hospitals, and community venues. They are also increasingly available online and may be self-directed. The wide range of options can make it difficult for practitioners, services and policymakers to know which programs and components are likely to benefit children and families most.³

In this study, we wanted to understand whether particular program features might consistently be associated with better mental health outcomes for children. We also wanted to identify evidence gaps to guide future research, policy and practice.

What did we do?

We completed a systematic review of reviews (an umbrella review). This brought together findings from previous systematic reviews and meta-analyses that explored parenting program components and child mental health outcomes. We wanted to know if any of the following features might consistently be associated with positive effects:

- program content (e.g. behaviour management, relationship enhancement)
- teaching techniques (e.g. modelling, role-play)
- provider characteristics (e.g. qualifications, competencies)
- program structure (e.g. number of sessions, duration of program)

- program format (e.g. group-based, individual)
- program setting (e.g. home, clinic, community).

What did we find?

Programs that explicitly teach evidence-based behaviour management strategies appear most likely to improve children's mental health, and there may be some flexibility in how parenting programs are delivered.

Most research focused on programs that prevent or reduce outward behavioural difficulties, like impulsivity or hyperactivity. Reviews that explored the skills taught in programs generally found those teaching behaviour management strategies had larger positive effects than those that did not. Behaviour management strategies associated with larger effects included positive reinforcement, praise, natural or logical consequences, time-out and planned ignoring.⁴ Importantly, programs with more topics did not necessarily have larger effects.^{5,6} In some cases, additional content was associated with smaller effects.⁷

Several reviews explored other program characteristics like structure, format and setting. We found that longer programs are not generally any more effective than shorter programs; programs designed for individual delivery are not generally any more effective than those delivered in groups; and in-person programs are not generally more effective than online programs.

The review also found gaps in the literature where more research is needed. For example, just one review considered whether differences were associated with staff training. No reviews looked at whether programs that invest in best-practice delivery, like staff training in trauma-informed care and cultural competence, achieve better outcomes.



Implications for policy and practice

- ▶ Policies should support access to parenting programs that teach evidence-based behaviour management strategies, particularly positive reinforcement and non-violent discipline approaches.
- ▶ Services should consider family challenges and preferences, and program accessibility and feasibility, when selecting programs.
- ▶ Program funders and policymakers should invest in research to understand which program features, provider characteristics and organisational practices might contribute to the most positive outcomes.

Restacking the Odds is working with parenting program providers and sector leaders to develop and test indicators of service quality and support continuous improvement.

For more information

Beatson, R., Davy, G., Macmillan, C.M., Molloy, C., Hilton, O., Wood, A., & Goldfeld, S. (2026). Parenting program components linked to improved child mental health: A review of reviews. *Child & Youth Services* <https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2026.2724531>

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Restacking the Odds (RSTO) is an evidence and learning partner to local early years partnerships, working to give every child an equitable start.

For more information about RSTO

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A joint initiative led by the Centre for Community Child Health at Murdoch Children's Research Institute, in collaboration with Social Ventures Australia and Bain & Company, RSTO works alongside partnerships to help them measure what matters, see what's working and take action.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and pay our respect to Elders past and present.