

Effects of Psychotherapy With Children and Adolescents Revisited: A Meta-Analysis of Treatment Outcome Studies

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A meta-analysis of child and adolescent psychotherapy outcome research tested previous findings using a new sample of 150 outcome studies and weighted least squares methods. The overall mean effect of therapy was positive and highly significant. Effects were more positive for behavioral than for nonbehavioral treatments, and samples of adolescent girls showed better outcomes than other Age \times Gender groups. Paraprofessionals produced larger overall treatment effects than professional therapists or students, but professionals produced larger effects than paraprofessionals in treating overcontrolled problems (e.g., anxiety and depression). Results supported the specificity of treatment effects: Outcomes were stronger for the particular problems targeted in treatment than for problems not targeted. The findings shed new light on previous results and raise significant issues for future study.

Over the past decade, applications of the technique known as meta-analysis (see Cooper & Hedges, 1994; Mann, 1990; Smith, Glass, & Miller, 1980) have enriched our understanding of the impact of psychotherapy with children and adolescents (herein referred to collectively as "children"). At least three general meta-analyses encompassing diverse treatment methods and diverse child problems have indicated that the overall impact of child psychotherapy is positive, with effect sizes averaging not far below Cohen's (1988) threshold of 0.80 for a "large" effect. Casey and Berman (1985) reported a mean effect size of 0.71 for a collection of treatment outcome studies with children 12 years of age and younger (studies published from 1952-1983). Weisz, Weiss, Alicke, and Klotz (1987) reported a mean effect size of 0.79 for a collection of studies with youth 4-18 years old (studies published from 1958-1984). Kaedin, Bass,

Ayers, and Rodgers (1990) assembled a collection of studies published between 1970 and 1988 focused on youth 4-18 years of age; mean effect sizes were 0.88 for treatment versus no-treatment comparisons and 0.77 for treatment versus active control comparisons. Combined, these three meta-analyses suggest that psychotherapy may have significant beneficial effects with children and adolescents (for a more detailed review of the meta-analytic procedures, findings, and implications, see Weisz & Weiss, 1993; Weisz, Weiss, & Dusenberry, 1992).

In addition to generating overall estimates of therapy effectiveness, meta-analyses can provide evidence on factors that may be related to psychotherapy outcome. For example, meta-analytic evidence has fueled a lively debate over whether therapy outcomes differ as a function of the type of intervention used. Much of the adult therapy outcome literature has suggested that various forms of therapy work about equally well. One of the general conclusions reached by Smith et al. (1980) in their landmark meta-analysis was as follows:

Psychotherapy is beneficial, consistently so and in many ways. . . . Different types of psychotherapy (verbal or behavioral, psychodynamic, client-centered, or systematic desensitization) do not produce different types or degrees of benefit. . . . [It is]. . . clearly possible that all psychotherapies are equally effective, or nearly so; and that the lines drawn among psychotherapy schools are small distinctions, cherished by those who draw them, but all the same distinctions that make no important differences. (pp. 184, 186)

This conclusion has come to be called "the Dodo verdict" (i.e., "Everybody has won and all must have prizes"; see Parloff, 1984).

The picture may be different in the area of child psychotherapy, but the evidence is somewhat mixed thus far. Casey and Berman (1985) initially found that behavioral methods yielded significantly larger effect sizes than nonbehavioral methods;

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Effects Of Psychotherapy With Children And Adolescents

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