

Testing Tuning in to Teens (TINT) with adoptive parents and guardians in the U.S.: The replication phase of intervention research

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Abstract

Objectives: Ensuring the wellbeing and stability of children with foster care experiences is critical. In the US, between 5% and 20% of children experience a reentry into foster care after adoption or guardianship; adolescents are at increased risk for foster care reentry. Few interventions have been rigorously tested that aim to reduce foster care reentry. TINT is a six-week parent education program that teaches caregivers skills in responding with empathy, support and guidance when young people experience emotions while helping them to reduce their emotionally dismissive or harsh parenting responses. Previous experimental research with a generalist population in Australia demonstrated a reduction in emotion dismissing behavior by parents who received TINT and related reductions in youth internalizing and externalizing behavior. The current study sought to replicate these findings with an adoptive/guardianship population identified as at-risk for a return to foster care. Adaptations were made to the intervention to use with an adoption/guardianship population, resulting in one additional session added to the six-session format. Groups were facilitated by: (1) an experienced clinician and (2) agency adoption/guardianship staff, with regular coaching of the facilitators by the purveyor of the program.

Methods: A post randomized consent trial was used, with 1,212 families in the target population (769 intervention, 443 comparison). Adoptive parents and guardians were included in the study if permanence occurred for their child after age 5 or the child had been in congregate care, and the child was currently between the ages of 10-13. The program successfully made contact with 477 (62%) of intervention cases, and 94 (12%) participated. Twenty-two groups (154 sessions) were run, organized in 7 cohorts. A short questionnaire (10 questions) was distributed to all intervention and control cases after the fourth cohort, as it was determined that just 12% of eligible families were participating in the intervention, to assess differences that might emerge between groups in the study. Outcomes included warmth in the child-caregiver relationship and caregiver struggling to manage the child's behavior, confidence in meeting the child's needs, and thoughts about ending the adoption/guardianship. Forty-three percent (n=244) responded to the questionnaire.

Results: The first set of analyses explored differences between those who were offered TINT versus those in the comparison group. An intent-to-treat analysis and a treatment-on-the-treatment analysis found no statistically significant differences between the groups on outcomes. However, exploratory analyses indicated that null effects may be because those assigned to the intervention group who participated in TINT differed from those assigned to the intervention group who did not participate in TINT. Participants noted more struggles to manage their child's behavior ($t=-2.24$, $df=169$, $p\leq.05$), and

were less confident that they could meet the child's needs ($t=2.75$, $df=172$, $p<.01$). To account for baseline differences, a linear mixed effects model was estimated. Results indicated a statistically significant intervention effect of TINT on struggling to manage the child's behavior (interaction of the TINT with time); $z = -1.74$, $p = .041$. The treatment group had an additional decrease over time on the outcome variable compared to the comparison group ($\chi^2(3) = 35.25$, $p < .001$).

Conclusions: Consistent with previous studies on the experiences of adoptive and guardianship families, this study provides evidence that most families are adjusting well. However, those who were struggling to manage children's behavior, less confident in their parenting, struggling to respond to their children appropriately seemed receptive to TINT, suggesting that these families may welcome a multi-session parent training after adoption or guardianship.