

Abstract

Tools4U is an individual training in cognitive and social skills, which is applied as a (penal) sanction for juvenile delinquents. The training aims to reduce lack of cognitive and social skills related to the juvenile's delinquent behavior (Albrecht & Spanjaard, 2007). Since the accreditation by the Dutch Ministry of Justice Accreditation Committee for Behavioral Interventions in 2007, a process evaluation study was conducted in 2009, which concluded that the observed problems with implementation and indication should be solved before effectiveness research can be started, (Bosma, Asscher, Van der Laan, & Stams, 2011).

Since the process evaluation, various adjustments and improvements have been made. The implementation of Tools4U can therefore be expected to be sufficient to warrant a new study assessing the level of implementation and examining whether skill deficits have diminished after Tools4U. The present study addresses the following questions: Is the target population of Tools4U reached? Is the program implementation sufficient? Do participants show the expected positive development in program goals?

To answer these research questions, a case file analysis was conducted with a random sample of one third of all juveniles who received Tools4U from May 2011 to May 2012. Furthermore, questionnaires were filled out by juveniles, trainers and parents at the start and end of 115 Tools4U trainings started between May and October 2012.

Target population

When examining characteristics of the juveniles who participated in Tools4U, the conclusion that Tools4U largely reaches its target population is warranted. Tools4U plus was imposed in a quarter of all cases, but mostly (as prescribed in the program-manual) to juveniles under 15 years of age. Parents participating in the plus version did not differ from parents of juveniles with the individual version on skill deficits.

In 16% (file analysis) to 17% (observed trainings) of the cases, the juveniles participating in Tools4U had not committed a delinquent act, but were referred to the training for truancy. Moreover, Tools4U is frequently imposed on juveniles whose risk for recidivism has not been established (in a standardized way), or whose level of risk does not fit the inclusion criteria of a medium to high recidivism risk. Finally, in 23% of the file analysis cases, juveniles met one or more exclusion criteria, and Tools4U therefore should not have been indicated. With the national implementation of the National Toolset for the Juvenile Criminal Law Chain, which will be accompanied by standardized risk assessment of recidivism by the Council for Child Protection Services, this issue will possibly be resolved.

There is no evidence that juveniles who meet the Tools4U criteria are not being referred to the training, and there are no indications of unjustified exclusion.

The drop-out rate of Tools4U (in terms of unfinished trainings) in the current study was 9%, similar to the percentage (9-12%) reported by Spanjaard et al. (2012). There were no differences in age, treatment motivation, skills, ethnicity or gender between intervention completers and drop-outs. Therefore, selective drop-out seems unlikely.

Execution

Based on trainer and juvenile report, it can be concluded that the most important techniques from the Top 10 and mandatory parts of Tool4U are used to a sufficient extent, well above Durlak and

DuPre's (2008) criterion of 60% to conclude that program integrity is sufficient. Only homework assignments and the presence of the parental evaluation reports do not reach this standard.

Moreover, it appears that parents' attendance at the final meeting only just reaches 60%. If missing out on only one homework assignment is regarded as acceptable, 80.2% of all cases provide sufficient homework assignments, and also this requirement provides for sufficient program integrity. The mandatory techniques are used to a lesser extent with the plus-version (monitoring assignment, 79%; behavior exercise, 68%), but are still sufficiently high (over 60%) to be able to ensure program integrity.

Although a number of techniques are more or less frequently used to target specific skill deficits, these techniques cannot be related on a one-to-one basis to the deficits present at pretest. Therefore, conclusions with regard to connecting techniques to specific deficits cannot be made.

In addition, the program integrity of the supervision has been studied. On average, trainers attended to a sufficient level individual and peer group review meetings (on average five individual and four group sessions). In individual cases, however, only two (peer group review meetings) were attended. Additionally, the feedback structure was not appropriately used. In 32% of the cases the competence and offense analyses were not sent to the supervisors in time. Additionally, in at most one third of the cases trainers received feedback on the competence and offense analyses, the training plan and the final report.

Finally, improvements after the previous process evaluation have been examined. Parental involvement, in the sense of presence at the introductory meeting or at the final meeting, did not increase since 2009, but the number of Plus variants did. Training and supervision have improved since 2009: of the 53 trainers, 41 trainers meet the training requirements and the remaining 12 are still being trained. Nevertheless, sending and receiving feedback on the competence and offense analyses remains a point of attention.

Program goals

Juveniles show significant changes in most of the assessed skills from pre- to post-test/from start to end of the training. Juveniles show improvements on cognitive distortions (HIT), impulsivity (APSD), social information processing (SIP-AEQ), coping (UCL), perceived competence (CBSA) and the family and skills domains of the National Toolset for the Juvenile Criminal Law Chain.

When a distinction is made between juveniles who reported skill deficits at pre-test and juveniles who did not, juveniles showing deficits at pre-test reported improvement in almost all cases. Juveniles who did not show skill deficits at pre-test did not show any change in most cases and in some cases even a decline. Parents punish (VSOG) more often when they rarely did so at pre-test, but show no changes in any of the other skills. There were no differences in change between juveniles who were referred to the training for a delinquent act and juveniles that were referred for truancy.

Additionally, we examined which program or participant characteristics are associated with changes in skill deficits. These analyses reveal relatively little significant effects. Younger, native and male participants show a larger positive change in only few skills between pre- and posttest. No differences are found when comparing the different Tools4U training variants. If trainers use more Top 10 techniques, however, juveniles show larger positive changes in hostile intent, negative emotional response and active problem solving.

General conclusion

In answer to the question if the right target population is reached, it can be concluded that indication and selection can be improved. There is insufficient use of standardized selection instruments and therefore juveniles with a low recidivism risk and juveniles who did not commit a delinquent act (truants) are wrongly referred to Tools4U. Furthermore a proportion of the juveniles (23%) met one or more exclusion criteria, mostly concerning ADHD (17%) and was therefore possibly incorrectly included. Parents of juveniles who received the plusvariant of Tools4U did not differ from parents of juveniles with the individual variant in skill deficits. Better application of indication and selection criteria could possibly change that as well. The majority of the juvenile receiving Tools4U, however, meet the inclusion criteria of the intervention as far as could be assessed with this study. Furthermore, there is little unjustified exclusion, juveniles in general meet the target population characteristics and there are no signs of selective drop-out.

In answer to the question if the program implementation is sufficient, it can be stated that there is sufficient – or even ample – program integrity on almost every part of the training according to the 60% norm of Durlak and Dupre (2008). Parental involvement is – just like in the process evaluation study (Bosma et al., 2011) – vulnerable and apparently difficult to influence. Only with regard to the supervision, the integrity is insufficient: trainers do not receive the prescribed feedback on trainer reports with every training.

In answer to the question whether the participants show the expected development in program goals, it can be concluded that goal attainment seems probable. Skill deficits in general have diminished after the training and adequate skills have been reinforced. Juveniles show improvements on cognitive distortions (HIT), impulsivity (APSD), social information processing (SIP-AEQ), coping (UCL), perceived competence (CBSA) and the family and skills domains of the National Toolset for the Juvenile Criminal Law Chain. Especially juveniles who reported skill deficits at pretest show improvements on the regarding skills after training. Parents barely show any changes at post-test. Moreover, Tools4U is a fairly brief intervention for a not so serious group of delinquent juveniles, and therefore only relatively small effects could be expected.

Given that the program seems largely implemented as intended, it is time to find out whether the reported positive changes in cognitive and social skills can be attributed to Tools4U. The present study should therefore be extended with a comparison group, so that conclusions about the effectiveness of the program can be drawn. With this extension the difference in improvements between Tools4U juveniles and juveniles with another punitive measure can be examined. To test the effectiveness with regard to recidivism prevention, it is advisable to also include long term official delinquency data (recidivism rates) in a follow-up study.