

- Depression

Kids need early emotional intervention

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A study from Washington University's School of Medicine in Saint Louis demonstrates that an interactive therapy involving parents and their depressed children can reduce rates of depression and lower the severity of symptoms.

The findings were published in the American Journal of Psychiatry on June 20.

The researchers at the university adopted a treatment known as ParentChild Interaction Therapy (PCIT) that was developed in the 1970s and added a series of sessions focused on emotions to correct disruptive behavior in preschoolers.

Then they studied 229 parent-child pairs. Children in the study were 3 to 7 years old and had been diagnosed with depression. Half received the adapted therapy, called PCIT-ED.

Compared with children who were placed on a wait list before starting the therapy, those who received the intervention right away had lower rates of depression after 18 weeks and less impairment overall. If depression continued after the treatment, it tended to be less severe than that seen in the kids who had not yet received therapy. Children in the study will be followed to see how long the effects of the therapy last. The researchers are analyzing data gathered three months after treatment ended to see whether improvements were maintained or whether any depression symptoms had returned by that point. They hope to follow the children into adolescence to see whether intervention in early childhood provides sustained benefits.

The researchers also are conducting brain-imaging as part of the study. In previous research, they found that brain changes linked to depression can alter the brain's structure and function, making the children potentially vulnerable to future problems. Now they want to learn whether this interactive therapy might prevent or reverse those previously identified brain changes.

In the study, the researchers also found that symptoms of clinical depression improved in the parents who worked with their children during the study.

"Even without targeting the parent directly, if a parent has been depressed, his or her depression improves," a researcher said. "By identifying depression as early as possible and then helping children try to change the way they process their emotions, we

believe it may be possible to change the trajectory of depression and perhaps reduce or prevent recurrent bouts of the disorder later in life.”