The early risers programme improved academic competence in children at high risk of aggressive behaviour


QUESTION: In children at high risk of aggressive behaviour during the kindergarten year, is an early risers programme effective?

Design
2 year cluster randomised (unclear allocation concealment*), unblinded*, controlled trial.

Setting
20 demographically matched elementary schools at 2 regional sites in Minnesota, USA.

Participants
245 children (mean age 7 y, 69% boys) who were at high risk of aggressive behaviour during the kindergarten year, with a T score ≥58 on the 25 item aggressive scale of the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) teacher rating form (using sex specific norms) or with a T score ≥85th percentile relative to all kindergarten students in their school without dropping below a T score of 55. Exclusion criteria included an intelligence quotient <80. Follow up was 100%.

Main outcome measures
Academic competence (Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement Revised given to children), Behavioral Assessment System for Children Teacher Rating Scale (BASCTRS) completed by teachers, Teacher’s Scale of Child’s Actual Competence and Social Acceptance, and Teacher Observation of Classroom Adaptation (Revised), behavioural self regulation (10 scales from 2 parent and 2 teacher measures), social competence (3 scales from teacher and parent BASCTRS), and parent investment in child (Alabama Parenting Questionnaire) measured at baseline and annually for 2 years.

Main results
Academic competence improved over a period of 2 years in the intervention group, but declined slightly in the control group (difference in change from baseline for effect size 0.26, p < 0.018). Improvement in behavioural self regulation was greater in the intervention group than the control group for children with the most severe levels of aggression but not for children with low or moderate levels of aggression. The groups did not differ for improvement in social competence or parent investment in child (p values > 0.05).

Conclusion
In children at high risk of aggressive behaviour during the kindergarten year, an early risers programme improved overall academic competence but not social competence or parental investment.

*See glossary.
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