



Treatments for childhood and early-onset schizophrenia

Introduction

Childhood-onset schizophrenia is defined as schizophrenia with onset prior to the age of 13 years, and early-onset schizophrenia describes schizophrenia between the ages of 13 and 17 years.

Method

We have included only systematic reviews (systematic literature search, detailed methodology with inclusion/exclusion criteria) published in full text, in English, from the year 2000 that report results separately for people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, schizophreniform disorder or first episode schizophrenia. Reviews were identified by searching the databases MEDLINE, EMBASE, CINAHL, Current Contents, PsycINFO and the Cochrane library. Hand searching reference lists of identified reviews was also conducted. When multiple copies of reviews were found, only the most recent version was included. Reviews with pooled data are prioritised for inclusion.

Review reporting assessment was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist that describes a preferred way to present a meta-analysis¹. Reviews reporting less than 50% of items have been excluded from the library. The PRISMA flow diagram is a suggested way of providing information about studies included and excluded with reasons for exclusion. Where no flow diagram has been presented by individual reviews, but identified studies have been described in the text, reviews have been checked for this item. Note that early reviews may have been guided by less stringent reporting checklists than the PRISMA, and that some reviews may have been limited by journal guidelines.

Evidence was graded using the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development

and Evaluation ([GRADE](#)) Working Group approach where high quality evidence such as that gained from randomised controlled trials (RCTs) may be downgraded to moderate or low if review and study quality is limited, if there is inconsistency in results, indirect comparisons, imprecise or sparse data and high probability of reporting bias. It may also be downgraded if risks associated with the intervention or other matter under review are high. Conversely, low quality evidence such as that gained from observational studies may be upgraded if effect sizes are large or if there is a dose dependent response. We have also taken into account sample size and whether results are consistent, precise and direct with low associated risks (see end of table for an explanation of these terms)². The resulting table represents an objective summary of the available evidence, although the conclusions are solely the opinion of staff of NeuRA (Neuroscience Research Australia).

Results

We found one review that met our inclusion criteria³.

- Moderate quality evidence finds supportive therapy may be better than cognitive behavioural therapy for improving mental state, however cognitive behavioural therapy may be better than supportive therapy at improving insight.
- Moderate quality evidence finds psychoeducation may be beneficial for improving symptoms and functioning.
- Moderate to low quality evidence suggests cognitive remediation may improve verbal memory, executive functioning, daily living, and adaptive functioning.



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Armando M, Pontillo M, Vicari S

Psychosocial interventions for very early and early onset schizophrenia: a review of treatment efficacy

Current Opinion in Psychiatry 2015; 28(4): 312–323

[View review abstract online](#)

Comparison 1	Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) + treatment as usual vs. supportive therapy + treatment as usual vs. treatment as usual.
Summary of evidence	Moderate quality evidence (large sample, unable to assess precision, direct) suggests supportive therapy may be better than CBT for improving mental state, and CBT may be better than supportive therapy at improving insight in people with early-onset schizophrenia.
Mental state and insight	
1 RCT (N = 303; 71 < 21 years [mean age 19.6 years], and 233 > 21 years [mean age 32.9 years]). Authors report that younger participants responded better to supportive counseling than to CBT or treatment as usual alone, whereas older participants showed better responses to CBT and treatment as usual alone than to supportive counseling. CBT improved insight more than supportive counseling or treatment as usual alone.	
Consistency in results[‡]	Unable to assess; no pooled data.
Precision in results[§]	Unable to assess; no measure of precision is provided.
Directness of results	Direct
Comparison 2	Cognitive remediation with or without psychoeducation vs. psychoeducation + treatment as usual.
Summary of evidence	Moderate to low quality evidence (unable to assess precision or consistency, direct) suggests cognitive remediation may improve verbal memory, executive functioning, daily living, and adaptive functioning.
Cognition and functioning	
1 RCT (N = 50, mean age 16.7 years, all with cognitive deficits) Authors report that there were medium-to-large size significant improvements in verbal memory,	



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executive functioning, daily living, and adaptive functioning that were maintained at 3-months.

1 RCT (N = 26, aged 12 to 18 years). Authors report no significant differences between those who received cognitive remediation + psychoeducation and those who received psychoeducation + treatment as usual. However, pre- post-test analyses showed that only the cognitive remediation group had significant improvements on early visual information processing, and visual long-term memory.

At 6-month follow-up, the cognitive remediation group showed significantly more improvement than the control group on early visual information processing.

Consistency in results	Unable to assess; no pooled data.
Precision in results	Unable to assess; no measure of precision is provided.
Directness of results	Direct
Comparison 3	Psychoeducation vs. control conditions.
Summary of evidence	Moderate quality evidence (large sample, unable to assess precision or consistency, direct) suggests psychoeducation may be beneficial for improving symptoms and functioning.

Mental state, hospitalisations, and functioning

1 RCT (N = 366, aged 14 to 17 years) using the Early Psychosis Prevention and Intervention Centre model (seminars, problem-solving sessions, educational programs for parents and teachers).

Authors report that at the 7.4 year follow-up, individuals with early-onset schizophrenia reported significantly fewer positive symptoms, improved global functioning, and better vocational outcomes compared to those with adult-onset schizophrenia.

1 RCT (N = 55, mean age 16.4 years) of problem-solving psychoeducation + pharmacological therapy compared with non-structured group intervention + pharmacological therapy. The psychoeducation group had significantly less emergency department visits, a trend toward less hospitalisations, better negative symptoms, but no differences in symptoms or functioning.

Consistency in results	Unable to assess; no pooled data.
Precision in results	Unable to assess; no measure of precision is provided.
Directness of results	Direct

Explanation of acronyms

CBT = cognitive behavioural therapy, N = number of participants



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Explanation of technical terms

* Bias has the potential to affect reviews of both RCT and observational studies. Forms of bias include; reporting bias – selective reporting of results; publication bias - trials that are not formally published tend to show less effect than published trials, further if there are statistically significant differences between groups in a trial, these trial results tend to get published before those of trials without significant differences; language bias – only including English language reports; funding bias - source of funding for the primary research with selective reporting of results within primary studies; outcome variable selection bias; database bias - including reports from some databases and not others; citation bias - preferential citation of authors. Trials can also be subject to bias when evaluators are not blind to treatment condition and selection bias of participants if trial samples are small⁴.

† Different effect measures are reported by different reviews.

Prevalence refers to how many existing cases there are at a particular point in time. Incidence refers to how many new cases there are per population in a specified time period. Incidence is usually reported as the number of new cases per 100,000 people per year. Alternatively some studies present the number of new cases that have accumulated over several years against a person-years denominator. This denominator is the sum of individual units of time that the persons in the population are at risk of becoming a case. It takes into account the size of the underlying population sample and its age structure over the duration of observation.

Reliability and validity refers to how accurate the instrument is. Sensitivity is the proportion of actual positives that are correctly identified (100% sensitivity = correct identification of all actual positives) and specificity is the proportion of negatives that are correctly identified (100% specificity = not identifying anyone as positive if they are truly not).

Mean difference scores refer to mean differences between treatment and comparison groups after treatment (or occasionally pre to post treatment) and in a randomised trial there is an assumption that both groups are comparable on this measure prior to treatment. Standardised mean differences are divided by the pooled standard deviation (or the standard deviation of one group when groups are homogenous) which allows results from different scales to be combined and compared. Each study's mean difference is then given a weighting depending on the size of the sample and the variability in the data. Less than 0.4 represents a small effect, around 0.5 a medium effect, and over 0.8 represents a large effect⁴.

Odds ratio (OR) or relative risk (RR) refers to the probability of a reduction (< 1) or an increase (> 1) in a particular outcome in a treatment group, or a group exposed to a risk factor, relative to the comparison group. For example, a RR of 0.75 translates to a reduction in risk of an outcome of 25% relative to those not receiving the treatment or not exposed to the risk factor. Conversely, a RR of 1.25 translates to an increased risk of 25% relative to those not receiving treatment or not having been exposed to a risk factor. A RR or OR of 1.00 means there is no difference between groups. A medium effect is considered if $RR > 2$ or < 0.5 and a large effect if $RR > 5$ or < 0.2 ⁵. lnOR stands for logarithmic OR where a lnOR of 0 shows no difference between groups. Hazard ratios



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measure the effect of an explanatory variable on the hazard or risk of an event.

Correlation coefficients (eg, r) indicate the strength of association or relationship between variables. They can provide an indirect indication of prediction, but do not confirm causality due to possible and often unforeseen confounding variables. An r of 0.10 represents a weak association, 0.25 a medium association and 0.40 and over represents a strong association. Unstandardised (b) regression coefficients indicate the average change in the dependent variable associated with a 1 unit change in the independent variable, statistically controlling for the other independent variables. Standardised regression coefficients represent the change being in units of standard deviations to allow comparison across different scales.

‡ Inconsistency refers to differing estimates of effect across studies (i.e. heterogeneity or variability in results) that is not explained by subgroup analyses and therefore reduces confidence in the effect estimate. I^2 is the percentage of the variability in effect estimates that is due to heterogeneity rather than sampling error (chance) - 0% to 40%: heterogeneity might not be important, 30% to 60%: may represent moderate heterogeneity, 50% to 90%: may represent considerable heterogeneity and over this is considerable heterogeneity. I^2 can be calculated from Q (chi-square) for the test of heterogeneity with the following formula⁴;

$$I^2 = \left(\frac{Q - df}{Q} \right) \times 100\%$$

§ Imprecision refers to wide confidence intervals indicating a lack of confidence in the effect estimate. Based on GRADE recommendations, a result for continuous data (standardised mean differences, not weighted mean differences) is considered imprecise if the upper or lower confidence limit crosses an effect size of 0.5 in either direction, and for binary and correlation data, an effect size of 0.25. GRADE also recommends downgrading the evidence when sample size is smaller than 300 (for binary data) and 400 (for continuous data), although for some topics, these criteria should be relaxed⁶.

|| Indirectness of comparison occurs when a comparison of intervention A versus B is not available but A was compared with C and B was compared with C that allows indirect comparisons of the magnitude of effect of A versus B. Indirectness of population, comparator and/or outcome can also occur when the available evidence regarding a particular population, intervention, comparator, or outcome is not available and is therefore inferred from available evidence. These inferred treatment effect sizes are of lower quality than those gained from head-to-head comparisons of A and B.



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References

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