Reviewer's report

Title: A Gloomy Picture: Disappointing Effectiveness of Programs Aiming at Preventing Child Maltreatment. A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials

Version: 2
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Reviewer: Alexander Butchart

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This largely well-written paper explores whether outcome evaluation studies of parent training and parent support programmes show evidence of effectiveness in preventing child maltreatment from happening in the first place, and reducing its re-occurrence in families where it is already occurring.

Major compulsory revisions

The following concerns should be addressed before the paper can be published.

1. The definitions of prevention and reduction (at the end of paragraph one in the “intervention programs” section) should be made earlier, ideally in the abstract.

2. The distinction between “training” and “support” requires clarification.

3. The third paragraph of the “methods” section notes that studies were excluded if they used clustered randomization. The earlier “design characteristics” section should state that cluster randomized trials were excluded, and explain why. Ideally, the paper would have reviewed both randomized control trials and cluster randomized trials and compared their findings. Cluster randomized trials are increasingly used to evaluate the outcomes of programmes to prevent violence (especially in low- and middle-income countries), and it would therefore be of value if this paper could have examined how such a design might affect the findings. At the very least, the paper should indicate how many studies were excluded because they were cluster randomized. It is also noted in the “literature search” section that, although it was a cluster randomized trial (with counties as the unit of randomization), the Prinz et al study was excluded not because of that, but because it was “impossible to calculate an effect size”. This suggests inconsistency in how cluster randomized trials were treated.

4. The reporting of the results in the abstract and other relevant sections is somewhat confusing, since while the abstract states that significant effects on maltreatment were not found, the section on “moderator analyses” states that “programs with a focus on parenting training, either with … or without support … were significantly more effective than programs that solely provide support”.

5. The finding that programmes to reduce maltreatment show more promise than programmes to prevent maltreatment contradicts what most other meta-analyses and reviews conclude, which is that the evidence for prevention is stronger than the evidence for treatment. For instance, a 2013 systematic review by the United States Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality of interventions to reduce
(psychological) trauma and further abuse in children following maltreatment concluded that: “Given the nascent state of the field, it is too early to make strong recommendations based on the available comparative effectiveness research” (see http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK137808/). These differing conclusions should be discussed.

6. The “future directions” section makes some useful suggestions. However, in light of there still being almost no outcome evaluation studies of parenting programmes from low- and middle-income countries (with the exception of several cluster randomized trials), this section would be stronger if recast to address the specific challenges facing such studies in low- and middle-income countries.

The data analysis section refers to an outlying sample size as having been “winsorized”. This jargon should be replaced by a plain English explanation of what was done.

Minor essential revisions

None.

Discretionary revisions

None.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.