

A multidisciplinary infant mental health informed early years education program to improve the life chances for children living with significant stress and social disadvantage: the Early Years Education Program randomised controlled trial.

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BACKGROUND

Early life experiences critically influence brain architecture, genetic development and physiology. Chronic early adversity can lead to impairments in self-regulation capacities and the ability to cope with stress, compromising physical and mental health and learning success. Early adversity contributes to alterations in immune function and an increased risk of lifelong physical and mental health problems.

AIMS

The Early Years Education Program for 0-3-year-old children was initiated by the Children's Protection Society, an independent not-for-profit child welfare organisation, with the aim of ensuring that vulnerable children arrived at school developmentally equal to their peers and able to be successful learners. EYEP is being evaluated using a randomised controlled trial.

METHODS

145 children were recruited into the EYEP trial when aged less than 36 months (72 randomised to EYEP, 73 to the control group who receive usual care). The intervention involved children attending the centre based, infant-mental-health-informed, EYEP program for 5 hours a day, 5 days a week for 3 years. Data is collected at baseline and 1, 2- and 3-years post-randomisation and in the first year of school. The primary outcome measure is IQ (Bayley/WPPSI scores) and secondary outcomes are social and emotional development, parent mental health and parenting practices.

RESULTS

After one year, the children who participated in EYEP had an increase in IQ relative to the control group. Two-year results will be available for the conference.

CONCLUSION

These early results are encouraging, and High quality, trauma-informed early education programs using relational pedagogy, have the potential to improve the life chances of children living with high levels of stress. Working collaboratively with parents, they can provide a secure base for children and their families and redress the harms to children caused by toxic stress.