

Behaviour change interventions to reduce risky substance use and improve mental health in children in care: the SOLID three-arm feasibility RCT

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Declared competing interests of authors: Eileen Kaner sat on the Public Health Research Research Funding Board (2010–16) and reports National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Public Health Research grants during the conduct of this study. Denise Howel was a member of NIHR Health Services and Delivery Research Commissioning Board (2012–15) and is a member of NIHR Programme Grants for Applied Research Subpanel (2017–20). Elaine McColl was a member of the NIHR Journals Library Editorial Group; she was an editor for the NIHR Programme Grants for Applied Research programme (2013–16) and was a member of the NIHR Clinical Trials Unit Standing Advisory Committee until 2016. She reports grants from NIHR Public Health Research programme during the conduct of this study and other NIHR Journals Library-funded grants outside the submitted work.

Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

Published September 2020

DOI: 10.3310/phr08130

Plain English summary

The SOLID three-arm feasibility RCT

Public Health Research 2020; Vol. 8; No. 13

DOI: 10.3310/phr08130

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Plain English summary

This study tried to find out whether or not we could adapt and test two counselling approaches called motivational enhancement therapy and social behaviour and network therapy to reduce drug and alcohol use and improve mental health in children in care aged 12–20 years. These young people live away from their parents and are supported by social workers while in foster care or group homes. Many have experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse, or neglect, which increases their risk of drug or alcohol use and mental health problems.

We talked to children in care and people who support them (social workers, foster and residential workers, drug and alcohol practitioners), using interviews and group discussions to make changes to the existing counselling approaches. Social workers then asked children in care to complete a short questionnaire about their alcohol and drug use. We tried out the adapted counselling approaches with children in care who drank alcohol or used drugs in the north-east of England. We did this to see if children in care would take part and to see if we could contact them again after 1 year to answer another questionnaire.

We included 112 children in care in the pilot study and we managed to contact 60 after 1 year. However, just one in five children attended any of their counselling sessions. Our way of offering counselling support did not work in the way we expected. One reason for this was that children in care often move around in the care system. However, drug and alcohol workers found the counselling approaches helpful and used them with other young people they support.

We need to find a different way to help children in care who use drugs or alcohol, and simpler ways of doing research in busy social care settings.

Public Health Research

ISSN 2050-4381 (Print)

ISSN 2050-439X (Online)

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Editorial contact: journals.library@nihr.ac.uk

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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the PHR programme as project number 14/183/08. The contractual start date was in March 2016. The final report began editorial review in May 2019 and was accepted for publication in October 2019. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The PHR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the PHR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the PHR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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