

Behavioural and cognitive-behavioural interventions: can they reduce aggressive behaviour in people with intellectual disabilities?

Vanessa Jordan^{A,*} 

For full list of author affiliations and declarations see end of paper

*Correspondence to:

Vanessa Jordan
Department Obstetrics and Gynaecology,
Grafton Campus, University of Auckland,
Auckland, New Zealand
Email: v.jordan@auckland.ac.nz

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Prior D, Win S, Hassiotis A, Hall I, Martiello MA, Ali AK. Behavioural and cognitive-behavioural interventions for outwardly directed aggressive behaviour in people with intellectual disabilities. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2023, Issue 2. Art. No.: CD003406. DOI: [10.1002/14651858.CD003406.pub5](https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD003406.pub5).¹

Background

People with intellectual disabilities may demonstrate challenging behaviour to carers, family members and when they interact with service providers. These behaviours can include aggression, self-injury, stereotypic behaviour, withdrawal and disruptive or destructive behaviour.² Behavioural therapy (BT) aims to reduce or eliminate unwanted behaviours whilst encouraging desirable behaviours. Positive behavioural support (PBS) includes a range strategies that are employed to improve perceived behaviour.³

Table 1. Safety and effect of Behavioural and cognitive-behavioural interventions for reducing aggressive behaviour in people with intellectual disabilities.

Outcome measured	Success	Evidence	Harms
Aggressive behaviour: severity of incidents: Aberrant Behaviour Checklist	Comparison: Anger management vs Wait-list control People exposed to anger management showed a significant reduction in aggressive behaviour	This evidence is of moderate quality and is based on 158 participants from one study	Only three included studies assessed harms in these studies and although serious adverse events were noted in both the intervention and treatments as usual arms, none of these were considered to be treatment related
Aggressive behaviour: Aberrant Behaviour Checklist (ABC) Total – at 6 months	Comparison: Positive behavioural support vs Treatment as usual People exposed to positive behavioural support showed a significant reduction in aggressive behaviour	This evidence is of moderate quality and is based on 247 participants from two studies	
Aggressive behaviour: frequency of incidents per week during and up to 12 weeks post treatment	Comparison: Meditation based on mindfulness vs Treatment as usual People exposed to meditation based on mindfulness showed a significant reduction in the frequency of physical aggression events	This evidence is of very low quality and is only based on 34 participants from one study	
Aggressive behaviour: assessed with: number of aggressive events reported by carers	Comparison: Mindfulness based on positive behaviour support vs Positive behaviour support People exposed to mindfulness based on positive behaviour showed a significant reduction in the frequency of physical aggression events	This evidence is of low quality and is based on 128 participants from two study	

Cognitive behavioural therapy is also a well-established tool for the treatment of anger.⁴ This review aimed to determine if both BT and CBT can reduce aggressive behaviours in people with intellectual disabilities.¹

Clinical bottom line

Both BT and CBT reduced aggressive behaviour in people with intellectual disability in the short term. However, there was very little evidence to determine if these effects are maintained over time.¹ These findings support current recommendations that psychological treatments should be used as first line treatments (Table 1).²

References

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Author affiliation

^ADepartment Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Grafton Campus, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.