Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)

Scientific Rating: 1
Well-Supported by Research Evidence
See scale of 1-5

Child Welfare System Relevance Level: Medium
See descriptions of 3 levels

About This Program

The information in this program outline is provided by the program representative and edited by the CEBC staff. Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) has been rated by the CEBC in the areas of: Disruptive Behavior Treatment (Child & Adolescent) and Parent Training Programs that Address Behavior Problems in Children and Adolescents.

Target Population: Children ages 2.0 - 7.0 years old with behavior and parent-child relationship problems; may be conducted with parents, foster parents, or other caretakers

For children/adolescents ages: 2 – 7

For parents/caregivers of children ages: 2 – 7
**Brief Description**

*Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)* is a dyadic behavioral intervention for children (ages 2.0 – 7.0 years) and their parents or caregivers that focuses on decreasing externalizing child behavior problems (e.g., defiance, aggression), increasing child social skills and cooperation, and improving the parent-child attachment relationship. It teaches parents traditional play-therapy skills to use as social reinforcers of positive child behavior and traditional behavior management skills to decrease negative child behavior. Parents are taught and practice these skills with their child in a playroom while coached by a therapist. The coaching provides parents with immediate feedback on their use of the new parenting skills, which enables them to apply the skills correctly and master them rapidly. *PCIT* is time-unlimited; families remain in treatment until parents have demonstrated mastery of the treatment skills and rate their child's behavior as within normal limits on a standardized measure of child behavior. Therefore treatment length varies but averages about 14 weeks, with hour-long weekly sessions.

**Program Goals:**

The goals of the Child-Directed Interaction part of *Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)* are:

- Build close relationships between parents and their children using positive attention strategies
- Help children feel safe and calm by fostering warmth and security between parents and their children
- Increase children's organizational and play skills
- Decrease children's frustration and anger
- Educate parent about ways to teach child without frustration for parent and child
- Enhance children's self-esteem
- Improve children's social skills such as sharing and cooperation
- Teach parents how to communicate with young children who have limited attention spans

The goals of Parent-Directed Interaction part of *Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)* are:

- Teach parent specific discipline techniques that help children to listen to instructions and follow directions
• Decrease problematic child behaviors by teaching parents to be consistent and predictable
• Help parents develop confidence in managing their children's behaviors at home and in public

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Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)

Parent-child interaction therapy (PCIT) is a behavior-based, family-oriented therapy designed to help improve the parent-child relationship through interaction. In this modality, child-directed interaction can help facilitate the development of effective parenting techniques and reductions in behavior issues and may also lead to a stronger familial relationship.

This approach is often effective for children who are at risk, who have experienced abuse, and/or who have conduct issues or other behavioral concerns. Parents who are seeking therapy to address these concerns in their children or to improve interactions with their children may find this a beneficial approach.

**Development of PCIT**

This approach, which was primarily developed by Sheila Eyberg in the early 1970s while she completed her postdoctoral residency in pediatric psychology, is grounded in social learning theory and attachment theory. Other notable contributors to the development of PCIT include Cheryl McNeil, Toni Hembree-Kigin, Anthony Urquiza, Robin Gurwitch, and Beverly Fundersberg.

During the initial development of the approach, Eyberg sought to incorporate techniques from both play therapy and behavior therapy. She soon realized a unifying theory and novel structure were needed to effectively merge concepts from both methodologies. Eventually, she found a suitable theory based on Diana Baumrind's developmental research work on authoritative parenting styles. She also expanded on the work of Constance Hart, who had developed a two-stage behavioral program to train mothers with developmentally disabled children, in order to form a unifying structure for PCIT.

Eyberg first referred to her approach as "PCIT" when she submitted an application to the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Association in 1974 to test its efficacy. Over the next three decades, positive research findings and subsequent funding from the National Institute of Mental Health facilitated further expansion and study of PCIT. Today, PCIT is widely recognized as one of the most effective and empirically-supported forms of treatment in the world.

**How Does PCIT Work?**

In PCIT, parents have the opportunity to learn new skills that can help them become better able to provide a caring, nurturing, and beneficial environment for their child. An ultimate goal of this approach is to help adapt negative behaviors into more positive behavior patterns.

A typical PCIT program involves two phases: relationship enhancement and discipline and compliance. At the start of the program, the therapist will speak with the parents about the key principles and techniques for each phase. The therapist will then use a one-way mirror to observe as the parents play with their children, using the skills and techniques they were taught. The therapist also provides live coaching to the parents via an ear bud device. Targeted behaviors are tracked and graphed over time to highlight the progress being made by both parents and children.

The relationship enhancement phase of PCIT teaches parents how to minimize any negative characteristics within the relationship. It also guides them in developing new behaviors and communication skills that provide support and encouragement. The discipline and compliance phase of the approach emphasizes effective and safe disciplinary techniques that can then be used to help the child improve behavior by addressing and managing symptoms and issues leading to a negative behavior. Parents are encouraged to put these skills into practice until they are able to use them easily. Children who are exposed to PCIT can often learn how to adapt their behavior, and many families experience vast improvement in child behavior and the parent-child relationship.

**PCIT Techniques**

PCIT's in vivo training methods are specially designed to help adults improve their parenting and language skills and to help children learn how to better control emotions.

The relationship enhancement phase, also called child-directed interaction, aims to improve and strengthen the bond between parent and child. The child decides which activities or toys will be used for play and, under the guidance of the therapist, the parent plays along while using the positive reinforcement skills previously learned from the therapist.

These skills are represented with the acronym PRIDE:

- **Praise**: The child is praised for good or appropriate behavior.
- **Reflection**: The child’s words are repeated and expanded upon by parents, which encourages communication.
- **Imitation**: Parents teach and show approval by mimicking what their child is doing.
- **Description**: Parents describe what the child is doing in order to help their child build vocabulary and show that they (the parents) are paying attention to the child’s activities.
- **Enjoyment**: Parents demonstrate enthusiasm for the child’s activities

As part of their training, parents are encouraged to ignore any negative behaviors that are not serious or harmful. They are also coached to refrain from using negative words (such as don’t, can’t, no, etc.), criticism, and sarcasm. Once the parent masters these skills, the program typically progresses to phase II.

In the discipline and compliance phase (parent-directed interaction) the parent takes the lead. As part of the process, parents learn to provide direct, easy-to-understand instructions to the child, with clear, consistent repercussions for obedience and disobedience. If the child is compliant, the parent provides specific praise such as “Thank you for picking up your toys.” If the child is non-compliant then the parent issues a time-out warning such as: “Pick up your toys or you will take a time-out.” Further non-compliance results in the time-out procedure being carried out.

**How Can PCIT Help?**

PCIT’s effectiveness has been demonstrated through a number of studies. In a 2011 study of children between the ages of 8 and 10 who had specific language impairments, children treated with PCIT experienced greater language gains than the control group. In a second study in 2011, 150 mothers with a history or high risk of mistreating their children were separated into two groups. One group participated in PCIT, and the other group was put on a waiting list. After a 12-week period, the mothers participating in PCIT were observed to have better parent-child interactions, and they reported improved child behavior and less stress.

This approach, which has been shown to have the greatest impact on children between the ages of 2 and 7, is considered an effective method of addressing common childhood behavioral issues such as aggression, defiance, short temper, and non-compliance. PCIT promotes healthy relationships between parents and children, and it has become a widely used intervention for many at-risk families. This treatment method is often used with foster and adoptive families, and by people involved with the child welfare system, but any family experiencing challenges with interaction between parent and child may find PCIT helpful.

According to research, PCIT may be especially helpful for:

- Building positive parent-child interactions,
- Developing positive child-rearing strategies
- Reducing the likelihood of child physical and verbal abuse
- Reducing child behavior issues (anger, aggression, defiance, etc.)
- Increasing communication and interaction skills within the family

Children who participate in PCIT may develop greater self-esteem, experience less anger and frustration, see an improvement in social, organizational, and play skills, feel safer and calmer, and communicate more effectively. Parents typically learn consistent, predictable techniques for parenting and may experience greater confidence when dealing with behavioral concerns, whether public or in the home.

**Concerns and Limitations of PCIT**

PCIT is an evidence-based treatment that is considered an effective treatment approach for a variety of issues. However, in some situations, this treatment option may not be recommended. If parents have little to no contact with their children, PCIT may not be indicated. Parents who have hearing or language impairments or who are experiencing severe mental health concerns (for example, a condition characterized by hallucinations or delusions) may see little to no improvement from PCIT. Further, PCIT may not be recommended when parents are experiencing substance abuse issues or have been sexually abusive or physically abusive in a sexual way.

**References:**


http://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/types/parent-child-interaction-therapy

10/30/2016
Parent Child Interaction Therapy

Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) is an evidence-based treatment using very specific, step-by-step, live coached sessions with both the caregiver and the child. PCIT places emphasis on improving the quality of the parent-child relationship and changing negative parent-child interaction patterns. In PCIT, parents are taught specific skills to use with their child to establish, improve, or maintain a nurturing and secure relationship while increasing their child's positive behavior and decreasing negative behavior. PCIT is a family centered treatment approach tailored for each parent and child's specific needs. PCIT can include multiple siblings and both parents.

PCIT was introduced in the 1970s as a way to treat children with serious behavioral problems. Since then, PCIT has been heavily researched and is proven to be effective across socio-economic status, race, single and dual parent families, and with children ages 2-12. Research has shown that as a result of PCIT parents learn more effective parenting techniques, the behavior problems of children decrease, and the quality of parent-child relationship improves.

The benefits of PCIT include:

- Improvement in the quality of the parent-child relationship
- Improvement in parenting skills, including positive discipline
- Improvement in parent's attitude about parenting or about their child – the "I love my child but I don't like my child" scenario
- Improvement in the child's behavior at home, in school, daycare and with peers
- Decrease in parental stress
- Lasting effectiveness
- Useful in treating multiple issues such as negative attention seeking behaviors, oppositional, defiant and other externalizing behavior problems, separation anxiety, depression, self-injurious behavior, ADHD, adjustment following divorce, reunification with a previously absent parent, and attachment disorders
- Adaptable for variety of populations – effective across gender, socioeconomic status and across a variety of ethnic groups
- Reduction in risk of child abuse

The distinctiveness of PCIT lies in the use of live coaching of the parent and child together. While many other treatments target either the parent or the child, PCIT focuses on working with both in the actual moment that they are interacting. Parents learn to model positive behaviors that children can learn from and are taught to act as agents of change for their children's behavior. Live coaching provides immediate prompts to parents while they interact with their children. During the course of this hands-on treatment, parents are guided to demonstrate specific relationship-building and discipline skills. Live coaching allows the PCIT therapist/coach to tailor the treatment based on the observations of the child and parent together.

The benefits of live coaching are significant:

- Parents are provided with opportunities to practice newly taught skills
- Therapists can correct errors and misunderstandings on the spot
- Parents receive immediate feedback
- Parents are given support, guidance and encouragement as they learn

Please contact ITSNW to discuss your specific needs. Scheduling an appointment is easy, call (253) 460-7248 and we will be happy to help you.

Success is the sum of small efforts, repeated day in and day out.

Robert Coll

PCIT Endorsement

"ITS NW, PLLC provides outstanding PCI services to families in Pierce Co. Both Jeanne and Jacqui are gifted coaches who adhere to the evidence-based protocols and practices of PCIT. Their professionalism sets a standard among providers. They interact with parents and children in a professional yet warm and personal manner. They have demonstrated success with difficult cases by helping parents and children establish healthier attachments. In addition, they are skilled at helping parents learn and successfully utilize appropriate discipline measures. I give ITS NW, PLLC my highest recommendation for their leadership and skill in providing PCIT services."

Keri Newport, MS
PCIT trainer/coach/consultant
King County Sexual Assault Resource Center
PCIT involves a two phase approach. Sessions are generally divided between relationship enhancement skills and positive discipline and compliance skills. During the relationship enhancement portion, parents are coached in relationship building and self-esteem enhancing skills with their children through positive reinforcement techniques. Parents also learn the first form of positive discipline. During the second phase the parent is coached in effective delivery of commands and strategies designed to increase compliance as well as additional positive discipline skills. Skills are gradually expanded from the very structured in clinic setting to less structured situations in the home and public. In order for PCIT to be effective, the parent/caregiver and the child must have regular, ongoing contact to all for homework assignments to be completed. The homework is designed to reinforce skills coached in session.

PCIT is a short-term therapy provided in about 14-20 sessions depending on the needs of the family. PCIT requires weekly in office sessions and 5-10 minutes of homework each day. In order to help ensure long term success, boost sessions are offered at 1 months, 3 months, 6 months and 1 year following completion of treatment.

For more information about PCIT please visit the resources below.

**Resources**

**PCIT International**

[www.pcit.org](http://www.pcit.org)

*Presented by the University of Florida Department of Clinical and Health Psychology*

**UC Davis Health System PCIT Program**


**Child Welfare Information Gateway**

*Parent-Child Interaction Therapy With At-Risk Families* (PDF)

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