PREDICTORS OF OUTCOME FOR SEVERELY EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED CHILDREN IN TREATMENT

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The project from which this thesis arises – the Arndell Evaluative Research Program - was conducted by the candidate following his appointment (1990 – 2001) to the new position of clinician/clinical researcher at the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Royal North Shore Hospital, St Leonards, NSW.

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Otherwise, the work presented here is my own. The work embodied in this thesis is the result of my original research, no part of it has been submitted for any degree or diploma of any other university or institution and no material published or written by another person has been included except where due acknowledgement has been indicated.
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Abstract

Despite general agreement that severely emotionally disturbed children and adolescents are an "at risk" group, and that ongoing evaluation and research into the effectiveness of services provided for them is important, very little outcome evaluation actually takes place. The absence of well-conducted and appropriately interpreted studies is particularly notable for day or residential treatment programs, which cater for the most severely emotionally disturbed youths.

This thesis outlines the main areas of conceptual, pragmatic and methodological confusion and neglect which impede progress in research in this area. It argues for plurality of data analytic strategies and research designs. It then critically reviews the reported findings about the effectiveness of day and residential treatment in specialist facilities, and the predictors of good outcomes for this treatment type. This review confirms that there is very little to guide practice.

Having argued for the legitimacy of its methods and the necessity to address basic questions, the thesis reports the results of a naturalistic study based on data accumulated during a decade-long evaluative research program taking place at Arndell Child and Adolescent Unit, Sydney. The study addresses the question of what child, family and treatment variables predict outcome for 159 children and adolescents treated at this facility from 1990 to 1999.

Statistically significant results with large effect size were obtained. Among the most disturbed subgroup of forty three children, (a) psychodynamic milieu-based treatment was shown to be more effective than the “empirically-validated” cognitive-behavioural treatment
which superseded it in 1996, and (b) children from step-families showed better outcome than those from other family structures. Furthermore, it was found for the study sample as a whole that severe school-based problem behaviours were associated with a limited trajectory of improvement in home-based problem behaviour.

These results are discussed with regard to implications for treatment, research methodology, policy and further studies.