A study into the effectiveness of a postural care education programme

The study is based on a collaboration involving four institutions across the south east of England. Understanding, Knowledge & Confidence in Postural Care for Children with a Disability (UKC–PostCarD), is funded from an award from the NIHR Research for Patient Benefits scheme (Ref: PB-PG-0110-21045).

What is postural care?

Postural care describes the daily care, routine and activities that enable children with physical disabilities to participate in school and home life and improve their wellbeing. The postural care needs of children are different for each child. Carers, parents and teaching staff play an important part in supporting children and managing their postural care needs.

We know from previous research that those who manage the postural care needs of children with a physical disability at home and school can feel unsupported and overwhelmed. There are particular challenges for teachers in mainstream schools who have limited experience of teaching a child with a physical disability.

Our aim was to design a package of training resources for parents, carers and teaching staff based on the A to Z of Postural Care that could be used by occupational therapists and physiotherapists in schools. We wanted to find out whether the programme:

- increased knowledge and understanding about postural care.
- promoted confidence and reduced the concerns of those who took part.

Advisory group

The project was developed in co-operation with a long-standing advisory group, comprising professionals and parents with a range of experience in caring for children with disabilities. The group provided input and guidance throughout the study.
What we did

The programme was delivered in ten locations in three counties in the south east. Local parents, teachers and teaching assistants who support a child with postural care needs attending a mainstream primary school were invited.

The education programme recruited parents, teachers and teaching assistants to a 6-week intervention that comprised an interactive workshop training in postural care and one-to-one support from physiotherapists and occupational therapists. Workshop participants’ knowledge of postural care and confidence in providing care was assessed before and after participation using a validated tool that was developed specifically for this study. The evaluation also involved focus groups to consider the benefits of the intervention from the perspective of workshop participants and the children of these participants.

The training programme draws on research in psychology that highlights the importance of providing support alongside information in order to instill confidence. Following the workshop, therapists offered parents and teachers opportunities to carry out postural care tasks with support. Parents and teachers also observed others carrying out tasks successfully while receiving encouragement and supportive feedback and there were opportunities for them to discuss any worries or concerns they had.

Questionnaire findings

The study produced a unique validated tool to measure knowledge and understanding of postural care, Understanding, Knowledge and Confidence in Postural Care questionnaire (UKC-PC). Seventy-five parents and teaching staff took part in the training programme and follow-up. All participants completed the questionnaire before the training (Time 1) and sixty five participants completed the same questionnaire at the end (Time 2).

The graph below illustrates workshop participants felt more confident and knowledgeable about postural care after training. They also had fewer concerns about providing postural care. These findings suggest that the postural care training intervention is an effective tool to improve confidence in carers of a child with a physical disability.
What we found from talking to parents, therapists and children ...

We ran focus groups and interviews with those who took part in the training to find out what they thought about the training. We also talked to the therapists who facilitated the workshops and provided support and asked them for their feedback and finally we spoke to children about their views on postural care at home and school.

- Overall, the training was well received by parents, teachers, teaching assistants and therapists alike.
- Practical elements of the training were often remembered best and seen as most valuable.
- Parents, teachers and therapists all enjoyed the “learning by doing”.
- Participants liked that they could try out postural care from the point of view of the child rather than simply receiving instructions.
- Those who took part gave us lots of feedback and recommendations so that we can improve the training programme further. Therapists also had lots of ideas about how to make the training better.
- Many therapists enjoyed training parents, teachers and teaching assistants although for some it was quite challenging because they had never run training sessions of this type before. Parents and teachers who took part thought they had done really well!
- The interviews with children gave a rare insight into children’s experiences of their own postural care at home, and at school. This part of the project was exploratory - we think it is worthwhile developing this and involving children in future research.
- Most of the children did not mind having to work with ‘the kit’ in school and at home. It is something they are used to but sometimes it can get in the way.

What are the outcomes of the research?

- Occupational therapist and physiotherapists have been trained in facilitating the postural care training programme.
- Parents, teachers & teaching assistants have been trained across the south east
- An advisory group comprising parents of children with disabilities, therapists, teachers, educationalists, health psychologists, academics have worked in partnership.

We have developed the following resources:

- A *manual* that provides all the information those delivering the training programme need to run the training programme successfully.
- A *slide show presentation* and suggestions for interactive activities demonstrating the importance of postural care.
- A *questionnaire* (UKC-PC) that can be used to assess how effective the training programme is in installing confidence and addressing concerns that parents and carers have when providing postural care.
- An awareness raising booklet called the *A to Z of Postural Care*.

What next?

We need to report back to the National Institute of Health Research who funded this study. We will want to share what we have learnt about the training programme with parents, teachers and academics and we will do this in many different ways using different media to get our message across.

We will try to ‘keep the kettle hot’ - a phrase that one of our parents made at the beginning of this research and ensure that our work improves the lives of children with disabilities and their families.

“I think the best part was doing some hands on experiments ourselves. Actually getting up and using the balance board and doing tasks. That made it more helpful and pertinent to see it from a disabled child’s point of view.”

(Teacher, Surrey).
The Research Team

Eve Hutton is the Chief Investigator for the study she is an occupational therapist and researcher. Eve is happy to answer any questions about the research study; she can be contacted by email eve.hutton@canterbury.ac.uk.

Kate Hamilton-West is a co-investigator on the project. She is a chartered psychologist, research fellow (CHSS) and quantitative research advisor (NIHR Research Design Service South East).

Sarah Hotham is a Research Associate at the University of Kent. Her background is in psychology and research methods. Her role is focused on managing the project on a day-to-day basis, alongside analysing the data and disseminating the results.

Annette King is a co-investigator on the Study. Her background is in qualitative methods. She is leading on the qualitative arm of the study: the focus groups and interviews with children.

Maggie Gurr is the research physiotherapist on the team. Her professional background is mainly in community paediatric physiotherapy. She is currently combining this research position with a clinical role in Folkestone.

Ian Townsend is the advisory teacher for physical impairment in Medway, working with pupils of all ages, their parents and schools. He is also a counsellor. His particular interest in the project is in ensuring that pupils’ posture is seen as crucial to their inclusion across the curriculum and in all school activities.

Jan Jensen is Principal Lecturer in the Department of Allied Health Professions at Canterbury Christ Church University. Before entering higher education she worked as an occupational therapist in several areas of practice including children’s services.

Judi Mortimer is a mum of two boys, the eldest of whom has a physical disability and attends a mainstream primary school. She’s been involved in the project from its early stages when the A-Z booklet was initially produced. Her role on the project is to represent a parent’s perspective, to try and help to make the research as relevant and understandable to other parents as possible.

Nicola Abbott runs the focus groups we planned with parents, teachers, therapists and children. Nicola’s background is in Developmental Social Psychology.

Members of the research team are based at
Specialist Services Division, East Kent Hospitals University Foundation Trust.
Research Centre for Children, Families & Communities, Canterbury Christ Church University.
Centre for Health Services Studies, University of Kent.
Chailey Heritage Clinical Services, Sussex Community NHS Trust.

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