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The Spontaneous Coping Strategies of Children who live with Chronic Pain

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KAREN ELAINE RAMSAY
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Abstract

The spontaneous coping strategies of children who experience chronic disease-related pain have received little research attention. Ten children aged between 7 and 13 years were interviewed. The interview data was analysed using the grounded theory method of qualitative data analysis. The participant children described using a variety of cognitive and behavioural coping strategies in order to manage their pain. The children also described changes over time in the types of coping strategies that they utilized. Most children also described subjective habituation to pain. A local theory was generated from the data which describes the changing process over time of the children's getting used to living with pain. Children's ways of being changed over time, along with their appraisals of pain and their use of coping strategies. Similarities between this process and strategies that have been found to be adaptive in the adult chronic pain literature were noted. Strategies that were pervasively described were cognitive-behavioural distractions and behavioural interventions. Coping strategies that have not been previously documented among children were also found. "Keeping going" was a purposefully used coping strategy, as was seeking social support and minimizing pain. The implications of these findings including the contexts which impact on use and effectiveness of the children's coping strategies are discussed.

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PART ONE

Introduction

Overview of Introduction

Children's experience of chronic pain is a relatively uninvestigated area, and there is a dearth of literature on the coping strategies that children may utilize in response to chronic pain. There exist however, a variety of bodies of literature that bear relevance to the topic, and a broad review is undertaken in the introduction to this study in order to cover multiple aspects of children's likely responses to chronic pain. The body of literature which describes children's experience of pain is discussed, and also literature that describes children's use of coping strategies in response to acute pain. Relevant concepts of coping that arise from the adult coping literature as well as factors that have been suggested to influence the use of coping strategies in children are reviewed. Literature which describes psychosocial aspects of chronic pain in children is surveyed, along with salient literature which is relevant to the use of coping strategies in children's chronic pain. Lastly, the reasons for choosing qualitative methodology are reviewed, and some advantages and disadvantages of the grounded theory method of data analysis discussed.

It is necessary to define the different categories of pain. Varni(1983) has identified four primary categories of pediatric pain, and the category of relevance to the present report is pain associated with a disease state (e.g. arthritis, haemophilia or malignant processes). In addition to these categories, pain in children is classified as either acute, chronic, or recurrent (P.A.McGrath,1990). Acute pain is defined as relatively brief, caused by a well-defined noxious stimulus, and usually with sudden onset. Chronic pain has been defined as pain that has a less well defined stimulus, and persists beyond the usual time period required for healing (P.A.McGrath,1990). Recurrent pain is similar to chronic pain, but with no obvious physical stimulus, and children otherwise appear healthy. In keeping with the adult literature, chronic pain in the present report is pain that has persisted for a minimum of six months. The participant children all experienced disease-related pain, as in the category provided by Varni(1983), and the terms long-term disease-related pain, and chronic disease-related pain are used interchangeably.