

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ESSENTIAL 5 BASIC COURSE

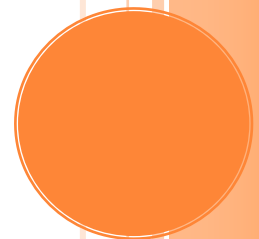
Academic study

This academic report describes the findings regarding the effectiveness of The Essential 5 Basic Course. The results within a small population show that both the wellbeing of parents and the functioning of the family, and the parenting qualities of parents improve considerably.

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Summary

The Essential 5 Basic Course was provided to the parents of children with autism in a number of Dutch municipalities. The course provides parents with knowledge about autism and tools that help them deal with the day-to-day problems in raising a child with autism.

The effectiveness of the course for parents was studied using questionnaires and behaviour observation sessions between parent and child prior to and following completion of the course.

The Essential 5 Basic Course very quickly leads to a significant improvement in parent-child interactions, the parenting qualities of the parents, more positive experiences in parenting and fewer health problems among parents. The course consists of four teaching days, spread over four months.

Offering The Essential 5 Basic Course preventively to families with a child with autism could result in reduced stress among parents, fewer behavioural problems in the child and eventually better social participation for the entire family.

The study reveals that The Essential 5 Basic Course results in improved quality of parent-child interaction, more positive parenting experiences among parents and fewer health problems.

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The Essential 5 Basic Course

At the request of a number of Dutch municipalities, The Essential 5 Basic Course was provided to the parents of children with autism. The course provides parents with more information about exactly what autism is and the problems they may experience in raising a child with autism. The course provides parents with tools for making their interaction with their child more positive and helps reduce the experienced problem behaviour.

Raising a child with autism is perceived by parents as more demanding than raising a child without a developmental disorder or a child with other developmental disorders. This relates to the nature of the disorder. Autism is an information processing disorder. The problems in information processing are reflected in every aspect of the child's functioning. If parents are aware of this information processing problem, they can adjust the way in which they communicate with their child, so that the information is presented in a clearer and more structured manner.

Children with autism experience a great deal of stress due to the many uncertainties they come up against in their day-to-day life. This stress is the underlying cause of the problem behaviour that many children with autism exhibit. Parents report this problem behaviour by their children as the key factor in the perceived parenting stress. By altering the behaviour of parents in their communication and interaction with the child, the child will enjoy greater clarity and as a consequence experience less stress. Reduced stress results in less problem behaviour by the child, which in turn reduces the parenting stress.

The study into the effectiveness of The Essential 5 Basic Course is based on questionnaires about parenting stress and parent-child interactions

Study

To study the effectiveness of the course for parents, the parents were asked to participate in the study, on a voluntary basis. This academic study consisted of two parts: questionnaires and behaviour observation sessions. Parents were asked to complete a questionnaire on two occasions, relating to the stress perceived in raising a child with autism. The questionnaire used is the Parenting Stress Questionnaire (OBVL). This questionnaire investigates both positive and negative parenting experiences and the health problems experienced by parents in respect of their child with autism.

Because parents were aware of the intervention, there is a risk that during the post-measurement, the questionnaires were completed more positively because of the effect of being offered support. In addition to the questionnaires, therefore, the behaviour of the parents in interaction with their child was also observed prior to and following completion of the course. Whereas questionnaires run the risk of being completed in a manner that is 'socially desirable', this is less easy to achieve in behaviour.

The behaviour was observed on the basis of two home visits during which the researchers filmed an interaction between the parent and the child in question. This 15-minute interaction consisted of three tasks; two play tasks and a short interview. The home visits took place prior to the course for parents and after completion of the course for parents. During the interactions, the 'autism sensitivity' of the parents in respect of the child with autism was measured according to the EAS (Emotional Availability Scales).

It is expected that the course for parents will lead to a more positive attitude towards the child's behaviour. As a result of the course, parents are made more aware of the information processing problems experienced by their child every day. Studies show that adaptation by the child takes longer to emerge. First there must be a prolonged change in the behaviour of parents, before a significant change in the child's behaviour is observed.

Results

Study results of the questionnaire

The OBVL is divided into three aspects: positive and negative experiences in parenting and health problems of parents. The questionnaire prior to the study was compared with the questionnaire following completion of the study. In these analyses, the potential changes per parent-child pair were considered.

Group comparisons were also made pre and post-course. The average values for the groups and the distribution within the group (SD) appear in table 1.

Table 1. Overview of average score on questionnaires prior to and following completion of The Essential 5 Basic Course

| | Average (SD) 1 | | Average (SD) 2 | |
|----------------------|----------------|---------|----------------|--------|
| Positive experiences | 111.67 | (11,53) | 126.83 | (9,38) |
| Negative experiences | 85.00 | (14,53) | 83.00 | (8,02) |
| Health problems | 38.50 | (5,35) | 35.17 | (4,83) |

Positive parenting experiences

Analyses relating to the positive experiences of parents in their parenting show that following completion of the course, parents described their experience of interaction with their child as significantly more positive ($p=.027$) (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Positive parenting experiences for parents prior to and following completion of The Essential 5 Basic Course

If we look at the changes in positive experiences across the entire group, this effect is ever greater ($p<.01$).

Negative parenting experiences

Analyses relating to the negative experiences of parents in their parenting show that within the parent-child pairs, no significant difference is found ($p>.05$) (see figure 2). However, the group analyses show a clear and significant reduction in the number of negative experiences ($p<.01$).

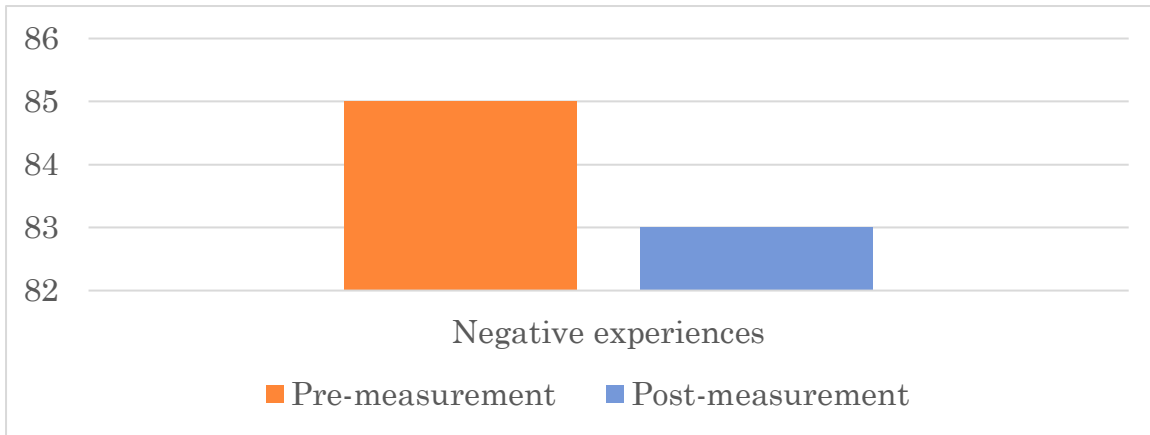


Figure 2. Negative parenting experiences for parents prior to and following completion of The Essential 5 Basic Course

As concerns health problems, after completing the course, parents reported significantly fewer health problems ($p=.028$) when considered within each parent-child pair (figure 3). This effect is even greater when viewed for the entire group; health problems of parents following completion of the course are significantly lower than prior to the course ($p<.01$).

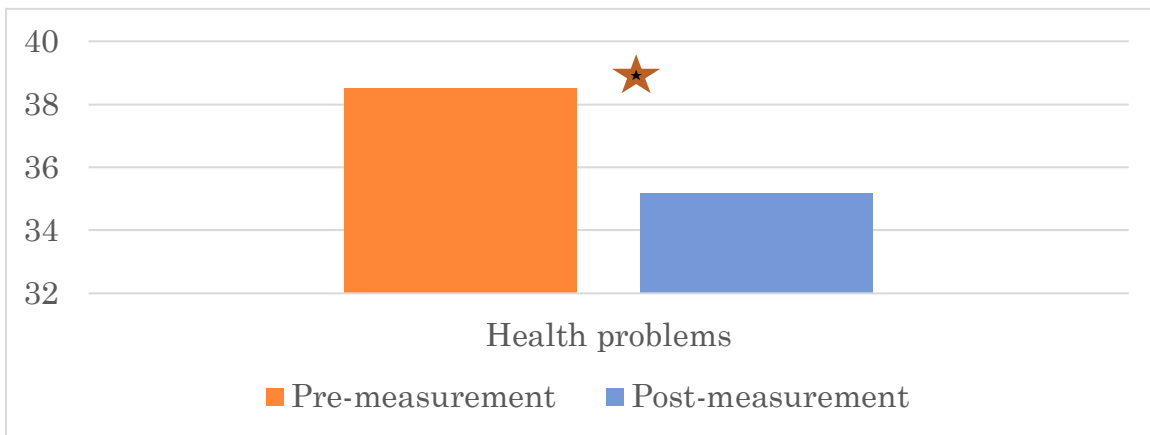


Figure 3. Health problems among parents prior to and following completion of The Essential 5 Basic Course

The analyses of questionnaires about parenting stress show that prior to the course, parents reported a considerable level of parenting stress. After completing the course, positive parenting experiences increased considerably and health problems declined considerably.

Results of parent-child interaction

Results relating to parent-child interaction, measured according to the EAS, show that the course for parents leads to a real improvement in the quality of interaction between parent and child.

The averages of the measured interactions prior to and following completion of the course for parents appear in table 2.

Table 2. Overview of average score for the quality of on parent-child interaction prior to and following completion of The Essential 5 Basic Course

| | Average (SD) 1 | | Average (SD) 2 | |
|----------------------|----------------|--------|----------------|--------|
| EAS total | 24.89 | (3.08) | 28.00 | (2.89) |
| EAS parenting scales | 16.44 | (2.43) | 18.28 | (1.67) |
| EAS child scales | 8.44 | (0,84) | 9.72 | (1,23) |

Results total quality of Parent-child interaction

The total scores show that following the course for parents increases the quality of parent-child interaction. Within the parent-child pairs, the quality of interaction rises significantly ($p=.005$) (see figure 4). If we consider the total averages for the group prior to and following completion of the course for parents, the overall quality of interaction improved ($p=.004$)

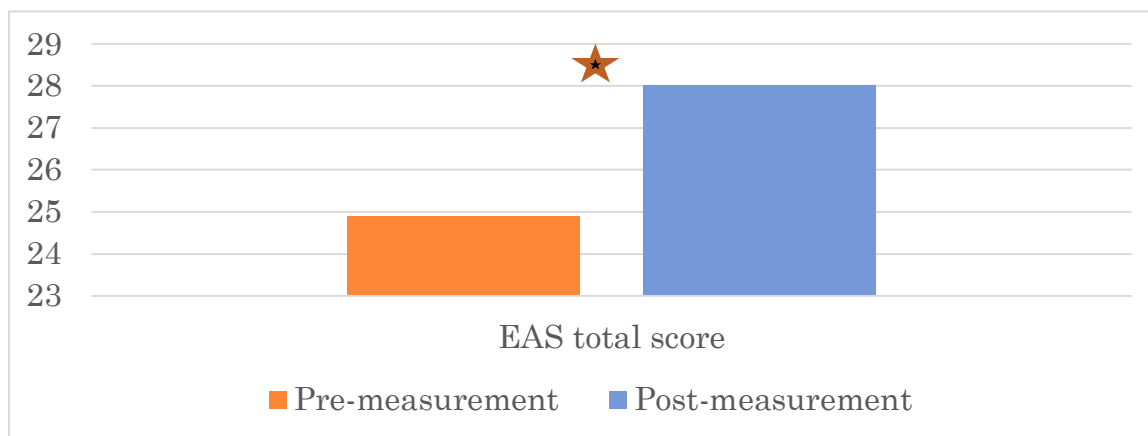


Figure 4. Average scores for quality of parent-child interaction prior to and following completion of The Essential 5 Basic Course

Results for quality of interaction from the point of view of the parent

The total scores show that the quality of parenting rose considerably during the interaction ($p=.062$) (see figure 5). If we consider the total averages for the group prior to and following completion of the course for parents, overall quality improved significantly ($p=.005$).

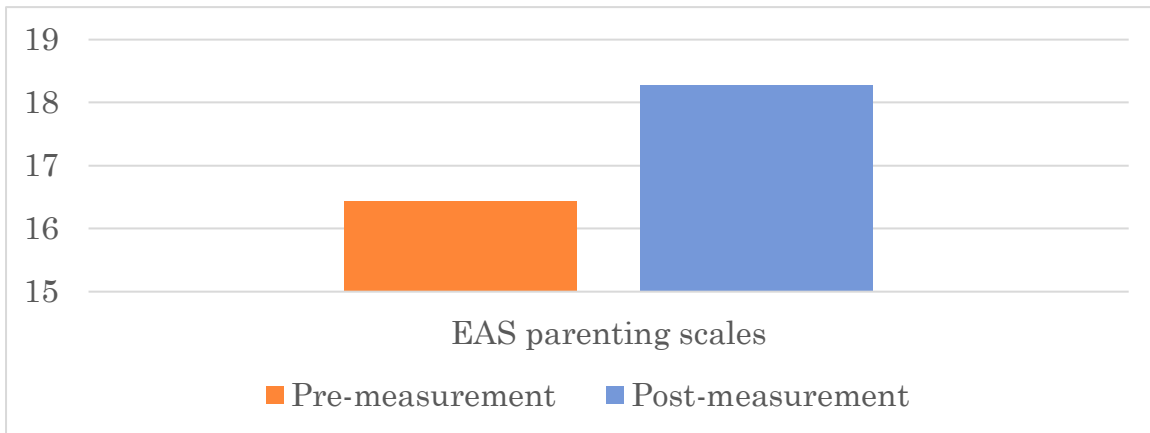


Figure 5. Average scores for quality of parenting during the parent-child interaction prior to and following completion of The Essential 5 Basic Course

Results for quality of interaction from the point of view of the child

The total scores show that from the point of view of the child, interaction improves, although not significantly within the specific parent-child pairs (see figure 6). If we consider the total average for the group of children prior to and following completion of the course for parents, the total quality did increase significantly ($p=.005$).

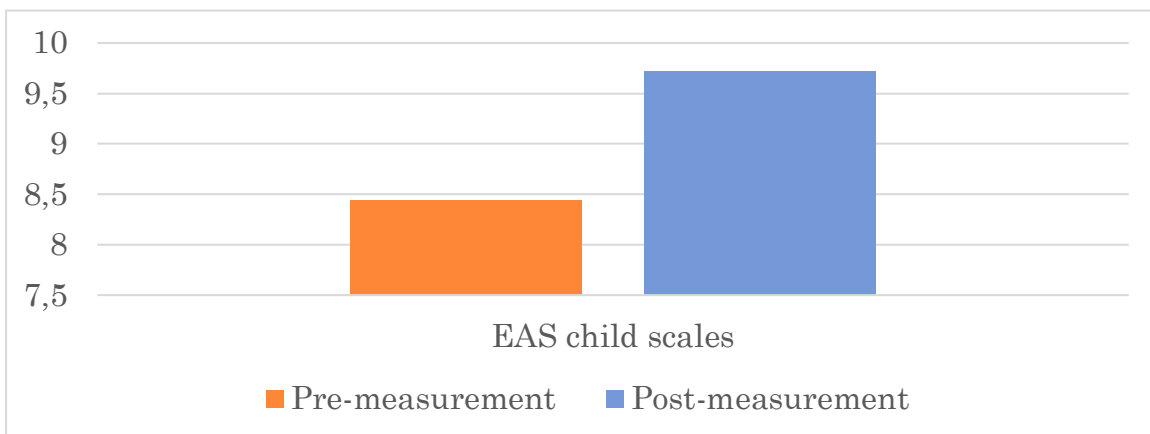


Figure 6. Average scores for interaction from the point of view of the child during the parent-child interaction prior to and following completion of The Essential 5 Basic Course

Final conclusion and recommendations

The Essential 5 Basic Course very quickly leads to a significant improvement in parent-child interactions, parenting qualities of the parents, more positive experiences in parenting and fewer health problems among parents.

Despite the relatively small group of participants, the effects of The Essential 5 Basic Course are clearly visible, both in interaction and in perceived parenting stress. In group comparisons, the effects often increase, proportionally to group size. By not only assessing the group averages but specifically also examining the individual pairs, it can be concluded that all families who participated in this study, in which the parents followed The Essential 5 Basic Course, benefit from the effects of the course for parents. In the case of group averages, it is possible that people do or do not benefit from the course. In other words, comparing individual pairs with themselves over time, leads to more information about the 'individual effectiveness' of the course. On this basis, the effects of the course for parents both at group level and at individual level proved very considerable.

The questionnaires identified a clear effect in terms of reduced parenting stress. This is a direct effect of understanding autism and how it impairs the child's daily functioning. This knowledge enables parents to give their child more time, to provide the child with clear information and to become irritable less quickly when things do not go how they want. This also makes parents more open to the things that do go well, for the child, which in turn leads to more positive parenting experiences. Thanks to the parent's improved understanding, the child achieves greater peace. Stress is reduced because the parent understands the child better, and the parent can respond more quickly when it sees that the child needs something (additional information or sometimes specifically less information). Thanks to the positive experiences, the parent grows in terms of confidence in their own parenting qualities, which leads to less stress for the parents.

The study reveals that The Essential 5 Basic Course results in improved quality of parent-child interaction, more positive parenting experiences among parents and fewer health problems.

Reduced parenting stress in turn leads to an improved ability to recognise the signals from the child, thereby further reducing the level of stress for the child. The peace this creates for the family leads to fewer health problems for parents and less problem behaviour in the child.

Studies show that many parents of children with autism experience so many health problems from parenting stress that it leads to a loss of social participation. Reduced stress can eventually lead to better social participation by parents.

Because a questionnaire-based study engenders a risk of 'social desirability' in completing the questionnaires, in this study, the decision was taken to also conduct behaviour observations. Social desirability is more difficult to maintain in behaviour, in addition to which the study involves interactions. If a parent were to 'pretend to be better' than is actually the case in their daily life, this would be reflected in the interaction, because the child would respond differently.

The choice was made to observe behaviour in relation to the parents' sensitivity to the child's autism. To make this possible, use was made of the reliable EAS scale. According to this scale, the quality of the interaction can be coded, both from the perspective of the parent and the perspective of the child. The EAS was coded by coders who were unaware of which the home visits they were coding (the pre-measurement or the post-measurement), in order to avoid 'social desirability' among the researchers.

The behaviour observations revealed a clear improvement in the quality of the interaction after completing the course for parents. As expected, the change in behaviour of the children lagged somewhat behind the changes in the behaviour of the parents. Studies show that children only show changes in behaviour if their parents show a stable change in behaviour, over a longer period of time. The course for parents was a brief intervention, which means that the post-measurement was carried out soon after the parents had followed the course, and had only recently started employing the lessons learned, in the family.

Offering The Essential 5 Basic Course preventively could lead to lower (health care) costs and improved social participation by the family.

A considerable improvement was observed in the quality of interaction from the point of view of parents. The improvement in the quality of interaction from the point of view of the child was less pronounced, because the child was given little time to adapt to the changes in parental behaviour. Nonetheless, even in this short period, some improvement was observed. This means that if the parents continue to put the lessons learned into practice, the quality in interaction from the point of view of the child will also improve considerably.

It may therefore be concluded that The Essential 5 Basic Course has a clear positive effect on families with a child with autism. The effects are visible both in a reduction of the perceived parenting stress among parents and the growing quality of interactions between parent and child.

Offering The Essential 5 Basic Course preventively to families with a child with autism could result in reduced stress among parents, fewer behavioural problems in the child and eventually better social participation for the entire family.

This academic study into the effectiveness of The Essential 5 Basic Course was carried out by Dr F. Naber of the Erasmus University and on behalf of/commissioned by *The Essential 5*.

Comments and/or questions relating to this study can be emailed to Dr F. Naber (f.b.a.naber@umcutrecht.nl).