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Formulating evidence-based practice questions

Speech and language therapists tend to be naturally curious and enquiring. How often do we close the door behind a client and have a list of ‘why does…? What is…?’ questions in our head? We have a history of conducting research to find answers. However, evidence-based practice (EBP) questions are not the same as research questions. The former direct us to research literature to find the answers, the latter to our network of collaborators and the research and development department.

There are two levels of question: background questions that require us to look up facts and fill in gaps in our knowledge, eg by consulting a text book, and foreground ones that help inform our decision making. Foreground questions often arise out of conversations with our clients who want to know what can be done to help them. What is the best assessment method? What is the most effective intervention? How long will it take? Who will deliver it? Is a new intervention better than the existing one? Take a moment to think about one of your clients and write down a question that you still need the answer to.

The first step in the EBP process is to focus our efforts in the right direction with the help of a well formulated question. The most common format used in EBP is the ‘PICO’ question:

P – defines the population or problem, eg preschool children with developmental expressive language delay.
I – defines the intervention or action, eg parent delivered.
C – gives a comparison, eg therapist delivered.
O – describes the clinical outcome, eg increased spontaneous use of appropriate sentence structure.

Look at your question and underline the parts that match with the PICO format. If you do not have all four sections spend some time to re-word it. You can ask questions about any area of your practice, not just intervention (see examples in table one). Next month we will use the PICO question to form the basis of an internet search for evidence.

We are interested in hearing about your EBP activity for a future special feature. Please email: h.b.stringer@ncl.ac.uk with ‘Bulletin EBP’ in the subject field and tell us what it is, who is involved and how it impacts on your practice.

Table one: example questions

| Assessment: how to properly gather and interpret findings, eg in a preschool child is test X or an observation schedule the best method to assess their understanding of spoken language? |
| Intervention: how to select interventions that do more good than harm and are worth the efforts and cost of using them, eg for adults with motor speech disorders is intervention X more effective than intervention Y in increasing intelligibility? |
| Prevention/health promotion: how to reduce the chance of recurrence and/or improve health, eg for teachers is intervention B or advice on vocal hygiene more effective in reducing recurrence of hoarseness? |
| Self-improvement: how to keep up to date, improve your skills and run a better more efficient team, eg what is the most effective way of keeping informed of developments in my field and sharing that knowledge with colleagues – Twitter or a journal club? |
| The individuals experience/subjects perception: how to understand the perceptions of the individual/group, eg why do some parents who attend the ‘Encouraging Language Development Group’ follow the advice we give them? |

For web links and references for suggested reading visit: www.rcslt.org/members/research/intro

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