

Practitioners' experiences of the Non-violent Resistance (NVR) approach to violent and self-destructive behaviours in children

A summary report on a research project to explore practitioners' experiences and perceptions of implementing NVR with parents and carers of children presenting with aggressive, destructive and controlling behaviours

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Background Information

This study, which was commenced in 2012, was conducted by Trisha McMahon in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the PhD in Clinical Psychology programme at the University of Limerick, Ireland.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Limerick Research Ethics Committee and the Health Service Executive Research Ethics Committee.

The Research Project

The aim of the research project was to explore the experiences of professionals in using Nonviolent Resistance (NVR) as an intervention for families in which children are presenting with violent, aggressive and/or self-destructive behaviour.

The methodology used was a small-scale qualitative research project, involving interviews with six NVR practitioners based in four countries. While the sample is small, it offers an insight into the different contexts, cultures, and environments in which NVR is being employed. The majority of the participants had formal therapeutic training, and all had extensive experience in working with families where children presented with behavioural difficulties.

Key needs are identified as follows:

In Ireland, disruptive behaviour problems are the most common reason that a child will be referred for psychological assessment and intervention. Despite the extensive research that has been conducted in this area and the numerous treatment approaches that are available, the prognosis for children and adolescents who have been diagnosed with disruptive behaviour disorders is remarkably poor. The concept of Non-violent Resistance as a therapeutic intervention to treating these children and their families was described by Haim Omer (2001), who developed the programme in conjunction with colleagues at Tel Aviv University and the Schneider Children's Medical Center of Israel. The approach is committed to using non-violent means to fight violent and subversive behaviour, and focuses on the importance of de-escalation and decreasing parental helplessness and isolation in combating aggressive behaviour.

The expansion of the NVR programme throughout Europe, including its introduction to the United Kingdom and Ireland, intensifies the need for formal evaluations to support its use as an effective and efficient intervention for disruptive behaviour problems in children and adolescents. This study aimed to contribute to a greater understanding of the processes involved in NVR, through exploring practitioners' experiences of implementing the programme.

Themes emerging from the research

Information was gathered via semi-structured interviews of one to one-and-a-half hours' duration, which were conducted both in person and via Skype. Following the coding of the interview data, themes were categorised into two broad headings: (i) Context and implementation; and (ii) Qualitative experiences of using NVR.

Context and Implementation

To address the exploratory nature of this study, practical aspects of practitioners' experiences of first encountering NVR, the context in which the intervention was used, and the structure in which it was implemented were considered. Under this heading, three main themes were identified, incorporating twelve sub-themes. These are illustrated in the figures below.

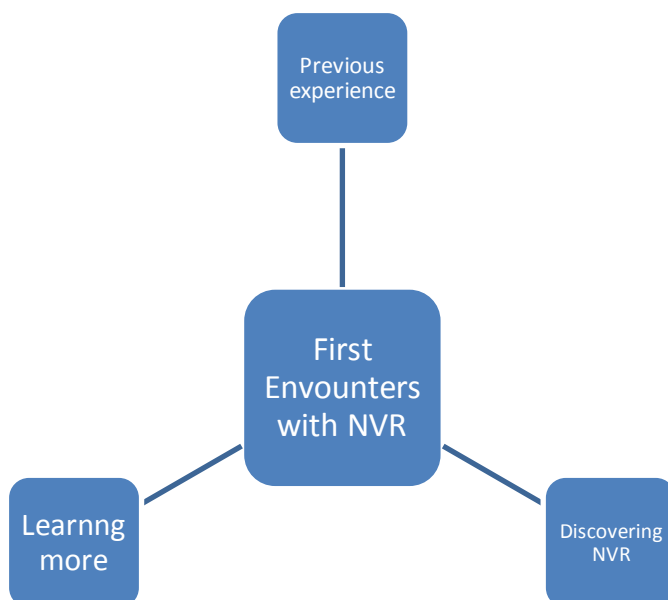


Figure 1. First Encounters with NVR

This theme describes practitioners' experiences of first hearing about NVR, including the context in which they were working at the time and the process through which practitioners developed their understanding of the concepts of NVR.

“...What was very interesting to me was the focus on ‘what can you do yourself as a parent’, and not the focus on ‘I want to change the behaviour of my child’. I think that was one of the main things which made me very interested. Because lots of parents who are in the coercive cycles where, they try to change the behaviour of their child and it doesn't work, and they keep trying and the more they try, the more the child's behaviour becomes very difficult. So that really made me want to learn more”

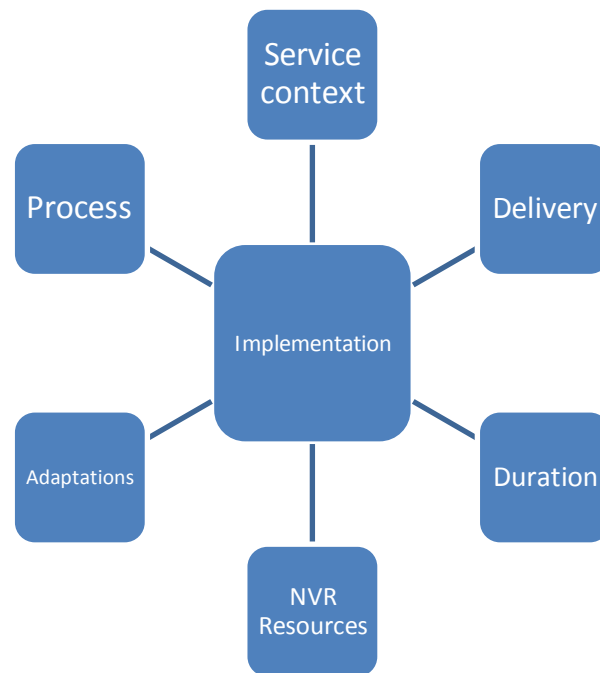


Figure 2 - Implementation: Using NVR in professional settings

This theme relates to the practical and environmental aspects of implementing NVR, and explores the professional settings in which NVR is used, in addition to the format, structure, and duration of the intervention, and the resources which were used by the practitioner.

“...For me, I like structure, but not too rigid. You just have to go with the flow, with what the families are asking for, so there are some parts of the programme that I opt out of. And I agree with my colleagues in terms of any adaptations, and we do the core pieces, and then we kind of put some variations in it of our own, or from other programmes. It is flexible, working with NVR is really flexible so you can go with what works and what doesn't work so well... But you almost have to run with it a couple of times to know what's not so strong, and what you need to leave and draw on something else.”

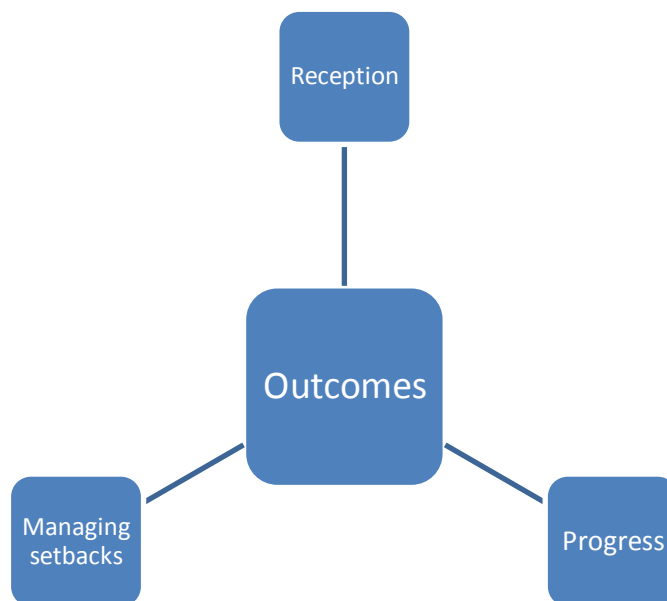


Figure 3 – Outcomes for families following NVR

This theme refers to clinical outcomes for children and families, including the rate and nature of progress, and the management of any setbacks which occurred during therapy.

“...the timing was really important. The parents were in complete crisis at this point, that’s probably what brought dad in, and got them to start working together... If they had not, you know, the [police] were involved, he’d stopped going to school, and really, this was their last chance. And they were both really very anxious about that, so there was enough motivation there from what was happening in the family life, you know?”

Qualitative Experiences of Using NVR

The following section describes the qualitative aspects of practitioners’ experiences of using NVR, including their perceptions of its philosophical values, the theoretical and structural framework of the approach, professional and reflective practice issues, and practitioners’ recommendations for programme development. Under this heading, three main themes were identified, incorporating eleven sub-themes, which are illustrated in the figures below.

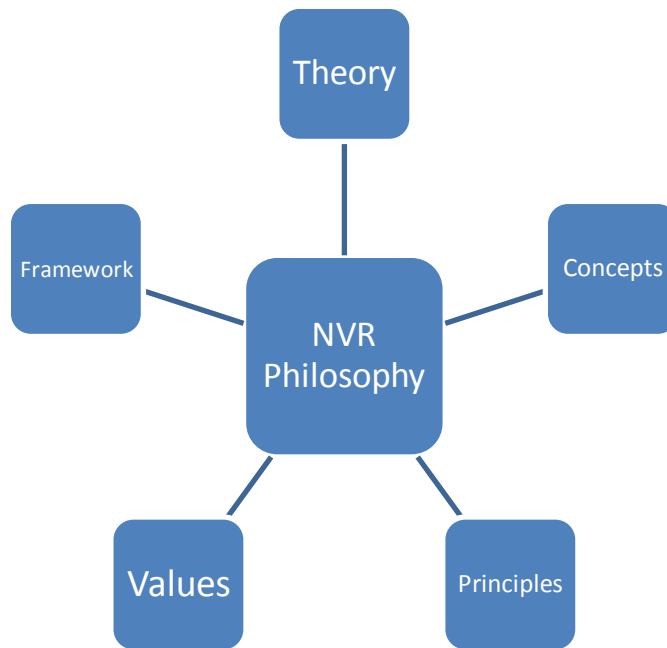


Figure 4 – Theoretical concepts and structural framework of NVR

This theme explored practitioners' views on the philosophy, values, and framework of the NVR approach. Key strengths identified were the structure and relatively brief duration of the approach. It was perceived to be non-judgemental and respectful towards parents, and the concepts and principles of the intervention were straightforward for parents to follow.

“It is much more kind of, we are on equal terms now, we need to be able to negotiate and talk about this and include each other's views. So, that emphasis is with the parents, that 'we will remain your parents no matter how difficult things get'. And rather than trying to control the child, it is more about asserting influence really. I think that is lovely and I don't know any other model that has been this specific in, you know, clarifying that difference and putting it into practice, into a working model.”



Figure 5 – Professional issues relating to the use of NVR

In the theme described as ‘Professional issues’, factors including professional development, skills, supervision and reflective practice were considered.

“ I think that, similar to the experience of other colleagues that I have met, that it does create very profound changes within oneself. I think you can’t be congruent and credible, if you don’t embody the principles of non-violence in certain ways. You know, so I had moments, particularly when my children were younger, and I was standing at the top of the stairs hollering, you know? Thinking, hold on, what do I say with my clients?”

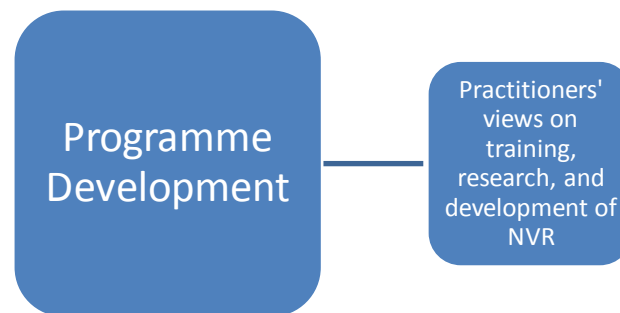


Figure 6 – Programme Development

A final theme was generated to identify practitioners' views on training, programme development, and research pertaining to NVR. A high proportion of the participants were engaged in their own research and evaluations of the intervention, and a number also delivered training in the approach.

“What I would have liked to have done, which would have been very valuable I think for, for the field and for the service, would be to have built in research into it. We didn't set it up as a research project, we just set it up as a response to client need, the two weren't exclusive. So next time, I would incorporate that evaluation component to the intervention”

Conclusion and Recommendations

- The NVR practitioners interviewed for this project were very positive in relation to the effectiveness and usability of the programme. It was considered to fit well with experience and knowledge of previous interventions – while also addressing acknowledged limitations within traditional approaches, including treatment outcomes and completion rates for families with older children and those presenting with higher levels of aggression.
- A significant attribute of the model was apparent in its reformulation of the nature of aggressive and challenging behaviour in children and adolescents. The emphasis on strengthening familial relationships and developing the potential for positive parental influence was considered to offer a refreshing

and progressive alternative to behaviour modification strategies that are typical in traditional interventions. In relation to therapeutic outcomes, participants observed that NVR directly addressed the sense of shame, powerless, and helplessness that was commonly experienced by parents, and facilitated parental empowerment and self-efficacy through its focus on generating alternative solutions in responding to challenging behaviour.

- The relevance of cultural factors in the implementation of NVR was raised spontaneously by all participants, and was highlighted by some as a potential contributory factor to therapeutic resistance and associated setbacks that were encountered during the treatment process. This was a particularly interesting finding in light of the different countries and environments represented by this study's participants, and suggests that these therapeutic challenges actually transcend cultural boundaries rather than occurring uniquely within them.
- The philosophy of support inherent to NVR was reflected by the value that participants placed on peer supervision and the mutual support of fellow NVR practitioners at a local and international level. It is also noted that several participants were engaged in research, supervision, and training, which is considered to add significant advantage to the on-going development and expansion of the approach.
- Owing to its small sample size, the generalisability of these research findings is limited, nonetheless the study is considered to offer an insight into both the practical contexts in which NVR is used, and into the qualitative experiences of professionals implementing the programme. In conjunction with results from quantitative studies, greater understanding of the processes underlying the effectiveness of NVR would be further enhanced by exploring the experiences of families, children, and their support networks who have participated in the intervention