



# Process evaluation Training Aggression Control

## Summary TACt Plus

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## Introduction

The Aggression Control Training (TACt) is an individual behavioural intervention that can be imposed on young offenders as a so called learning penalty within a framework of criminal law. TACt was developed by PI Research in 2010 at the request of the Child Care and Protection Board (in Dutch: RvdK) on the basis of experience with a group training for aggression control. A variant was first developed for young offenders of average intelligence, TACt Regulier. TACt Plus is a further adaptation of TACt Regulier, to make the intervention suitable for young offenders with a mild intellectual disability (MID).

In December 2014 TACt Plus was recognised by the then Ministry of Justice Accreditation Committee for Behavioural interventions. This means that the intervention meets all the quality criteria for behavioural interventions drawn up by the Ministry of Justice and Security (in Dutch: JenV). For the reassessment of the intervention by the accreditation committee, a process evaluation is needed.

DSP-groep was commissioned by the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (in Dutch: WODC) of the Ministry of Security and Justice to carry out a process evaluation of TACt Plus between 1 July 2017 and 1 July 2018. The results of this process evaluation are summarised here. In parallel to this process evaluation, a process evaluation of TAC Regulier has been carried out. The results of TACt Regulier and TACt Plus are presented in separate summaries.

## The organisation of TACt Plus

The RvdK owns the intervention and contracts out the intervention every two years (with the possibility of an extension of two years). TACt Plus and TACs Regulier are tendered out separately. Between 2015 and 2018, TACt Plus was carried out by the certified trainers of a consortium Top Groep - a care provider specialising in carrying out training and guidance courses for young people and adults - and William Schrikker Interventions (WSI). On 1 January 2018, WSI withdrew from the consortium. A large number of trainers have switched to Top Groep as self-employed persons. PI Research provides the training and certification of the TACt-trainers. Top Groep (and until 2018 also WSI) has a partnership with PI Research for quality assurance. PI Research carries out the supervision.

If a young person is suspected of a criminal offence and the police have established a medium or high general recidivism risk on the basis of the section of The National Set of Instruments Juvenile Justice System (in Dutch: LIJ) for the police (Preselect Recidivism), then in principle an investigation will always be carried out by the RvdK. Within the framework of the investigation, the RvdK investigator gathers information that is entered in a structured manner in the section of the LIJ that is intended for the RvdK. On the basis of the indicative criteria for the various interventions included in the LIJ system, the LIJ provides suggestions for one or more interventions. In a Multi-Disciplinary Consultation (in Dutch: MDO), the RvdK investigator then assesses whether there are any contra-indications that stand in the way of possible implementation of the suggested interventions, and which intervention best suits the problems of the young offender. The RvdK investigator advises the Public Prosecution Service or the court. They may or may not accept the advice.

The so called learning penalty can be imposed by the public prosecutor or the judge. Young offenders who are sentenced to a learning penalty are then registered with the RvdK. The community service coordinators set out the learning penalties with the Top Groep, which assigns a trainer to the young offender. Until January 2018, the majority of TACt Plus was allocated by Top Groep to WSI trainers. The community service coordinators monitor the criminal proceedings and call the young offenders to account in case of non-compliance with rules and agreements. They are in charge of the case management of the learning penalty and follow the TACt Plus process.

## TACt Plus intervention

TACt Plus is intended for young offenders with an MID who have committed one or more offences, who have deficits in social skills and anger control, who have an antisocial attitude and who make mistakes in their thinking. The intervention aims to reduce the risk of aggressive and antisocial behaviour by training social and problem-solving skills, increasing understanding in social situations and learning cognitive self-control.

TACt Plus consists of two components: Social Skills (in Dutch: SOVA) and Anger Control (in Dutch: BCT). In TACt Plus, the Moral Reasoning component of TACt Regulier has been removed because it is expected that young offenders with an MID will not be able to reach an advanced level of moral reasoning. In the SOVA component of TACt Plus, in addition to training social skills, the understanding of rules and situations is increased on the basis of moral rules. By working together with the young offender to find alternatives that provoke pro-social behaviour, the young person works to strengthen his or her problem-solving skills and increases the chance that he or she will adhere better to the rules.

The SOVA and BCT modules from TACt Regulier are adapted for young offenders with an MID. Each skill is trained in two meetings: an introductory meeting and a generalisation meeting. There is thus more repetition of skills than in TACt Regulier. The anger control chain is simplified to four steps and taking a time-out (from the situation) is added.

Both modules consist of eight meetings of an hour and a half. Two meetings are held each week. At each meeting, the young offenders are given homework assignments. It is the intention that between the meetings they practice the skills they have learned in everyday situations.

## Purpose of the process evaluation

The purpose of this study is to determine whether TACt Plus is being implemented with programme integrity. The intervention is performed with integrity when:

- ③ the target group as realised meets the criteria for the intended target group;
- ③ the intervention is carried out as described in the manuals approved by the Accreditation Committee for Behavioural Interventions; and
- ③ the professionals and organisations involved in the implementation of the intervention meet the requirements of the manual.

In addition, the process evaluation identifies bottlenecks and facilitating factors in the implementation, and it has been investigated whether the conditions for carrying out a study to investigate change are being met.

## Research Methods

Various research methods have been used to answer the research questions and various sources have been consulted. An assessment framework was drawn up based on a documents analysis of the intervention manuals. In order to gain insight into the inflow, through-flow and out-flow and the characteristics of the target group as realised, extracts were requested from the RvdK's registers from the period from 1 April 2015 to 1 January 2018. In addition, a dossier study was carried out of 100 records at the RvdK<sup>1</sup>. In order to gain insight into the indication process, a RvdK researcher or behavioural scientist was interviewed (8 respondents), five public prosecutors and two judges in eight of the ten regions.

In order to map out the implementation of the intervention, the registrations of the Top Groep of completed training courses between 01 January 2016 and 01 April 2018 were analysed. This concerns the training of trainers of both Top Groep and WSI. In addition, file research was carried out on 50 dossiers at Top Groep. Ten community service coordinators were interviewed. At the start of the study, an interview was held with the Quality Control Manager at PI Research and the management of WSI and a group interview was held with trainers (5 respondents). The video recordings of four training meetings were analysed. It was not possible to attend a training session and to interview young offenders. At the time of the fieldwork, there were no young offenders who wished to participate in the research and/or young offenders whose trainers considered it appropriate to approach them for the research. In order to provide the trainers with feedback, a questionnaire with statements was sent out among all trainers who were actively involved in TACt in May 2018 as trainers. Twelve trainers (60% response) completed the questionnaire. Additional information was collected from four trainers by telephone. The assessment reports of ten trainers (within the framework of licence assessment) have been analysed. Finally, a feedback interview took place with the head of quality control at PI Research and the management of Top Groep.

## Programme Integrity Assessment

In order to assess the programme integrity, core elements for the implementation of TACt Plus have been formulated and rationalised on the basis of the manuals. In the manuals themselves, the core elements are not named as such. In consultation with the Quality Assurance Managers, seven core elements have been identified which are given the most weight (see Table 1). For the assessment of the criteria for the target group and context and the implementation of the core elements, we have based our findings on Durlak and Dupré (2008). They conclude that positive results can be expected when there is a minimum programme

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<sup>1</sup> A random sample of 50 dossiers of young offenders who had TACt Regulier imposed, and 50 cases who had TACt Plus imposed has been selected. In the dossier study into the characteristics of the target group, the dossiers have been combined because the inclusion criteria and contra-indications are the same, with the exception of the MID criterion.

integrity of 60%. However, in a recent meta-analysis by Goense et al. (2016)<sup>2</sup> on the impact of interventions for young offenders on antisocial behaviour, it appears that only interventions with a high level of programme integrity have a positive effect.

As there was no validated and reliable system in place to assess the programme integrity of TACt Plus, and as there were problems with objectively establishing programme integrity based on different sources, robust statements on the degree of programme integrity of TACt Plus are not possible. On the basis of the quantitative and qualitative data, we assessed per criterion whether the criterion applies to less than 60% of the training/trainers (= insufficient), to 60 to 80% of the training/trainers (= room for improvement) or to more than 80% of the training/trainers (= good). If there is insufficient information to make an assessment, we have assessed the criterion as unknown. The assessment framework describes how the assessment is based on quantitative and qualitative data. One limitation of the research is that the assessment is largely based on self-reporting rather than objective materials.

The final assessment is that there is room for improvement in the programme integrity of TACt Plus. There are too many parts where there is a lack of clarity about the programme integrity and objective sources are missing. The implementation of four core elements was assessed, on the basis of the sources consulted, as good. The other core elements are considered to be subject to improvement. The implementation of none of the core elements has been assessed as insufficient. The assessment of the core elements is summarised in Table 1. The uncertainties and ambiguities have been identified in the process evaluation, which provides a nuanced picture of the implementation of TACt Plus.

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<sup>2</sup> Goense, P.B., Ansink, M., Stams, G-J., Boendermaker, L. & Hoeve, M. (2016). Making “what works” work: A meta-analytic study of the effect of treatment integrity on the outcome of evidence based-interventions for young offenders with antisocial behaviour. *Aggression and Violation*, 31, 106-115. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.08.003>,

**Table 1 Assessment of programme integrity (target group, core elements, context)**

Criterion	
Target group	The target group as realised meets the criteria for the intended target group
Core elements	Custom duration and phasing (8 SOVA and 8 BCT)
	The trainer will deploy adapted communication taking into account the MID (responsiveness)
	Social skills are practiced (SOVA)
	The anger control chain is practiced (BCT)
	The time-out component is being practiced (BCT)
	Homework is given, completed and discussed
	Parents are involved in the prescribed manner
Context (implementers and organisation)	The trainers meet the requirements for training, certification
	Supervisors and trainers meet the requirements for training, certification and supervision
	The programme integrity is monitored in accordance with the manual
	The cooperation with the chain partners is going well

Good	Room for improvement	Insufficient	Unknown
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**Does the target group as realised meet the criteria for the intended target group?**

Between 1 April 2015 and 1 January 2018, 197 young offenders were imposed a TACt Plus intervention. On 1 January 2018, 12 of these 197 young offenders are still in training and 6 did not commence the training. Of the 179 young offenders who started the training, 84% fully completed the training while 16% dropped out before completing.

In the dossier study at the RvdK, a minority of the target group as realised meets all the criteria of the intended target group that are formulated in the manual: approximately 45%. This means that most of them do *not* meet one or some of the criteria in the manual. At least 84% of the young offenders meet one criteria or more. 80% of the young offenders suffer from deficits in anger control and social skills. For the Quality Control Managers of PI Research, these are the most important criteria for TACt. 20% of the participants do not meet these two criteria either. TACt is intended for young offenders with a high or medium risk of recidivism. Recidivism risk is low for 16% of the participants. In addition, contra-indications apply. It is not possible to determine on the basis of the dossier study whether the contra-indications in the file (35%) stand in the way of the training and whether this has been discussed in the MSY.

TACt Plus is intended for young offenders with an MID. During the research period, the RvdK did not (yet) use a screening instrument to determine whether an MID was present. In the dossier study, the criteria for MID were looked up in accordance with the manual, and it appeared that 70% of the participants have an MID.

Based on the registration data and the dossier research, it is not possible to get a clear picture of all the criteria. In addition to the question of having an MID, willingness to cooperate is not recorded by default either, and no instrument is used to objectively measure the motivation of young offenders. On the basis of the dossier study, it is also difficult to determine whether the contra-indications stand in the way of the training or not. Finally, there is a lack of clarity about the weight to be given to the different inclusion criteria. This has not been mentioned in the manual, but in practice more weight is given to deficiencies in anger control and social skills.

### **Are the core elements of the intervention carried out as intended?**

Based on the sources consulted (mainly self-reporting), out of the seven core elements, four are assessed as good: the majority of the trainings carried out consists of eight meetings on social skills and eight meetings on anger control. In all training courses, social skills are practiced and the anger control chain and specifically the time-out are practiced.

The implementation of the other three core elements could be improved. On the basis of the sources consulted, it is unclear to what extent trainers use adapted communication to meet the needs of young offenders with an MID. This is not recorded. According to the respondents, too little attention is paid in the manual and during the training to how to choose the means of communication that suit the young offender. The SOVA component of TACt Plus has a fixed curriculum, but the trainers deliver customised work by adapting to the skills level and experiences of the young offenders. The trainers choose the skills and moral rules that suit the situation of the young offenders. However, they do not use the information from the questionnaires for this purpose. We assess the implementation of the responsiveness as having room for improvement.

The core elements related to network and generalisation (homework, parental involvement, contact with community service coordinators and involvement of other social workers) are also considered to be in need of improvement. These core elements are not implemented unambiguously and reasons for deviating from the programme integrity are not properly recorded. It is not clear whether the homework was not done or whether the form was not completed. It is not clear why parents are not involved and whether parental involvement consists only of the presence of parents at the prescribed meetings or whether parents also support the young offenders with their homework and practicing their skills. The purpose of parental involvement is to support the generalisation of the skills learned.

### **Do trainers and organisation meet the requirements?**

The trainers and the organisations meet the requirements of the manual. The quality is supervised and monitored in accordance with the manual on most points. However, when their renewal of the licence is assessed, trainers can choose whether they are assessed for TACt Plus or TACt Regulier. It is unclear whether only the licence for TACt Plus or the licence for both TACt Plus and TACt Regulier is then extended. Nor does TACt Plus look at the requirement for trainers to carry out at least one TACt Regulier per year. Since WSI left the consortium, the group supervision of TACt Plus and TACt Regulier is combined. The point of attention is whether the specific implementation of TACt Plus is sufficiently addressed. The supervisory model has also been adapted to better meet trainers' needs. This is still in accordance with the manual.



However, according to the researchers, this model does not lead to an objective assessment of the programme integrity. Trainers can choose which meetings they record and submit for review. In addition, the assessment of the video recordings is not done with a validated objective instrument.

### What is needed to improve programme integrity?

As stated above, it is advisable to pursue a high programme integrity because only in the event of high programme integrity can the intended effects be expected. In order to promote programme integrity, it is necessary to address some of the implementation bottlenecks. Firstly, it is important that the target group meets all the criteria. This requires clarity on the weighting of the inclusion criteria. It is now unclear whether the criteria on skill deficits in anger control outweigh other criteria and whether young offenders should meet all the criteria. The manual must be clear in this respect. Next, it is necessary that the young offenders who are imposed a learning penalty meet the criteria. Young offenders who have an MID should be referred to TACt Plus. Secondly, the use of appropriate means of communication is a point of attention. More attention can be paid to this in the manual, training and supervision. Thirdly, it is important that the core elements of the intervention are clearly defined and that they are registered. This applies in particular to the core elements of network and generalisation. Fourthly, it is necessary to record any deviations from core elements and it is important to record the reasons for such deviations, so that it can be determined whether they are justified. Finally, it is advisable to use an objective criterion when monitoring programme integrity.

### Is a study to investigate change feasible?

At the start and end of the TACt learning penalty, questionnaires are sent to young offenders and parents. Most of the young offenders - and the parents involved - fill in these questionnaires. A bottleneck, however, is that not all programme objectives are covered by the questionnaires and that, according to the researchers, the questionnaires are not always in line with the programme objective. Shortcomings in the skills of anger control are not measured, and instead of the change in moral reasoning, errors of thought are measured. It is necessary to use validated instruments to measure the three programme objectives. When the programme integrity is good, a study to investigate change can be carried out. Based on the current inflow and possible drop-out rates, it is expected that it will take at least a year before sufficient data are collected to make reliable statements about the change.

## Discussion

Based on the results of the process evaluation of TACt Regulier and TACt Plus, bottlenecks and contextual factors are discussed that can hinder high programme integrity, as well as the consequences of not applying the intervention with programme integrity. We will discuss the following points.

- ① The way in which young offenders are indicated for TACt in the juvenile criminal justice chain has consequences for imposing this on young offenders who meet the criteria. Unclearness in the manuals contributes to this.

- ③ The penal framework within which the learning penalty is imposed and the consequences of this for the implementation of TACt with programme integrity.
- ③ The distinguishing feature of TACt in relation to other interventions and what it means when components are not implemented with programme integrity.
- ③ The distinction between TACt Regulier and TACt Plus and the consequences of not realising the right target group.
- ③ The consequences of the absence of an objective criterion for monitoring programme integrity.
- ③ The consequences of the lack of objective instruments for measuring change on the programme objectives.

On the basis of the discussion, opportunities for further research and further development are identified.

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