



PROGRAM 2: THE SCHOOL YEARS

IMPROVING SCHOOL FUNCTIONING BY REDUCING ANXIETY IN CHILDREN ON THE SPECTRUM

AIM



This study aimed to find out:

- 1. If cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) not only benefits children's anxiety, but also depression, social interactions, and school functioning,*
- 2. If incorporating a teacher component boosts the benefits of the standard program.*

BACKGROUND

- About half of children on the spectrum have an anxiety disorder.
- Children are very likely to experience anxiety at school because school requires social, communication, and flexibility skills that are at the core of autism.
- CBT decreases anxiety, but we do not know if CBT also improves children's school functioning.

WHO TOOK PART?



24 families

of a child on the spectrum and high levels of anxiety with 18 completing treatment.



24 teachers

were invited. Of these, 12 consented to participate, and 6 were randomly assigned to receive a teacher component as well as CBT.

METHODS

- All participants received 10-week group CBT program.
- Half were also given a teacher intervention (1 in-person and 1 follow-up phone session).
- Parents, teachers, and children completed measures of the child's functioning immediately after, and 8 weeks after treatment.

RESULTS

- Parents reported that their children were less anxious, depressed, and socially vulnerable, and that school attendance was better immediately and 8 weeks after treatment.
- Children's ratings of their own anxiety reduced but not as much
- Apart from better attendance, children were not doing better at school or with peers according to parents' reports after treatment.
- Impact of adding the teacher intervention could not be examined because not many teachers participated.

CONCLUSIONS

- CBT is effective in reducing anxiety and depression for children on the spectrum according to parents
- The only benefit to children at school was improved school attendance. Attendance is necessary, but not sufficient to help children on the spectrum at school.

NEXT STEPS

A priority for future research will be to consider how to best help these children address their anxiety at school.

Targeting anxiety-reducing strategies for teachers at schools more generally may be a way forward, and/or designing programs specifically addressing school and class situations.

FIND OUT MORE

You can find a full report of this study via the Autism CRC website:
autismcrc.com.au/reports

You can contact the researchers about this study via the project leader:

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WHO WERE THE RESEARCHERS?



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