

research snapshot

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CBT May Help Children Cope with Anxiety at School and in Social Settings

What is this research about?

Childhood anxiety is one of the most common childhood disorders. Anxiety, however, does not usually occur in isolation. Anxious children often have a hard time in social settings and the classroom. They are more likely to be shy, withdrawn, and teased by peers. These children also have trouble concentrating, and perform more poorly in school. Currently, the most effective treatment method for childhood anxiety is Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT). In this type of therapy, children learn to challenge their anxious thoughts with more realistic ones. Several large-scale research projects have been done that demonstrate the effectiveness of CBT at reducing anxiety in children. Currently, it is the most effective treatment available. However, previous studies of CBT have measured its effectiveness by looking only at changes in anxiety. Since anxious children often have difficulty among peers and at school, studies of CBT should also examine how CBT impacts children in these areas.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers at York University wanted to find out whether or not CBT can help anxious children when they are in social settings and the classroom. This research was conducted at Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre in Scarborough, Ontario, where group CBT for childhood anxiety is offered several times throughout the year. The groups are run by

What you need to know:

CBT, when delivered in groups, may help anxious children function better in social settings and the classroom, but the changes may be too small to be captured by questionnaires.

trained therapists and typically include 5 to 7 children. The groups meet once a week over a 12 week period; during this time 4 information sessions for parents are held. Over a 4-year period, children and parents who were a part of these groups were invited to participate in the research. Children, parents, and classroom teachers all completed questionnaires before the groups began. When the groups ended, the same questionnaires were filled out, and children and parents were also interviewed about the experience.

What did the researchers find?

The results were mixed. According to the questionnaires completed by both children and parents, there was a significant decrease in childhood anxiety. This suggests that CBT, when delivered in groups, can reduce anxiety. However, it did not seem to have an impact on anxious children in social settings and the classroom. And yet when parents and children were interviewed after the completion of the group, the majority stated that there had been improvements. Many children and parents were able

to provide examples of how the children were now able to better handle situations both with peers and at school. In short, the questionnaire data suggested that group CBT did not help the children even though the interviews suggested that there was in fact an improvement.

How can you use this research?

The mixed results from this study suggest that CBT, when delivered in groups, may help children to cope with anxiety in social settings and the classroom – but the effects of CBT may be too small for the questionnaire to capture. A more specific focus on how to help children deal with anxiety-provoking situations may be needed to help children learn to better make use of the skills they are taught. Many of the children stated that talking about using the coping skills at school, during the group, would have been helpful. Role-playing may also be an effective way to let children practice their skills when dealing with peers. Ultimately, though, much more research on this area is needed. When looking at the effectiveness of treatment for childhood anxiety, researchers should consider how anxious children do in school and other, more general contexts. These results can help to inform future research studies on this topic.

About the Researchers

Jennifer Summers is a graduate student in Clinical-Developmental Psychology at York University. Yvonne Bohr is Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at York University. This research was carried out with the help of the staff at Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre and, in particular, Joan Williams.

summersj@yorku.ca

bohry@yorku.ca

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kmbunit@yorku.ca

www.researchimpact.ca

