

research snapshot

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The Effectiveness of Community-Based CBT for Childhood Anxiety

What is this research about?

Childhood anxiety is one of the most common childhood disorders. Currently, the most effective treatment method is Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This therapy teaches children to challenge their anxious thoughts with more realistic ones. Several large scale research projects have demonstrated the effectiveness of CBT at reducing anxiety among children. CBT is currently the most empirically supported intervention available. However, most of the research on CBT has been done in large laboratory-based studies. In these studies, children were randomly put into treatment groups and outside variables were controlled to the greatest extent possible. Most families first seek treatment at community mental health centres, not university-based labs. Yet, there is little literature to support the effectiveness of CBT when it is run in the community, under natural and less controlled conditions.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers wanted to find out whether the positive effects of CBT found in lab-based studies would also be found in community based treatment. They wanted to do this under the conditions in which CBT treatment is usually provided. This research was conducted at Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre in Scarborough, Ontario. This centre offers group CBT for childhood anxiety several times throughout the year. The groups are run

What you need to know:

Community mental health centres are often the first place that children and parents seek treatment and thus it is critical that these centres be offering the most effective treatment to their clients. The results of this study suggest that CBT, as run under typical conditions in the community, is indeed an effective way to treat childhood anxiety.

by trained therapists and typically include 5 to 7 children. The groups meet once a week over a 12 week period. During this time 4 parent information sessions are held. Over a 4 year period, children and parents who were part of these groups were invited to participate in the research. Both completed questionnaires before the group began. When the group ended children and parents filled out the same questionnaires again and were also interviewed about their experience.

What did the researchers find?

The questionnaire data was first analyzed using the children's own reports of anxiety. A significant decrease in symptoms was found. Next, parents' ratings of their children's anxiety were examined. Again, a significant decrease in anxiety was noted. Thus, the qualitative data suggests that community-based CBT is effective at reducing childhood anxiety.

These results were supported by the interview data. The data showed that most of the children and parents reporting that the group had positive effects on anxiety. Many children and parents provided examples of situations where they have been able to use the skills taught in the group to better cope with an anxiety-producing situation. While these results are very positive and suggest that the effectiveness of CBT is maintained when offered in the community, the findings were not as large as those found in lab-based studies. This is likely because lab-based studies ensure children meet diagnosable levels of anxiety before they begin treatment. As this is not typically done before groups offered in the community, it was not done in this study. While all children in this study showed symptoms of anxiety, their symptoms may not have been severe enough to call for a diagnosis. Thus, because children did not begin the group with levels of anxiety as high as children in lab-based studies, the changes seen afterwards were not as big.

How can you use this research?

The results from this study are very positive. In recent years, the many lab-based research studies have suggested that CBT is an effective means of reducing childhood anxiety when done in these very controlled settings. The current study is promising because it suggests the effectiveness of this treatment method is maintained when it is offered in the community. There were several that were not controlled in this setting, all which are typically controlled in lab-based settings. Some of these were:

- children's levels of anxiety before the group
- comorbid diagnoses
- cognitive difficulties
- family status

However, the positive effects of the treatment

remained. The results suggest to leaders in clinical settings who are interested in providing evidence-based treatment that community-based group CBT is an effective treatment for childhood anxiety.

About the Researcher

This research was conducted by Jennifer Summers M.A., graduate student in Clinical-Developmental Psychology, and Dr. Yvonne Bohr Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at York University. This research was carried out with the help of the staff at Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre, in particular Joan Williams. The researchers can be reached by email at summersj@yorku.ca and bohry@yorku.ca.

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kmbunit@yorku.ca

www.researchimpact.ca

