SFU

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

ENGAGING THE WORLD

Preventing anxiety for children

The occasional distressing worry is a normal part of growing up. And for most children, anxiety does not interfere with their well-being and development. Adults can help prevent children from developing problematic anxiety by ensuring that children experience warmth and autonomy. They can also provide stable environments that foster children's social competence.

Yet even following such efforts, some young people may be at risk of developing problematic anxiety. In fact, anxiety disorders are the most common mental health concern for children. So it is also important to have effective prevention programs on offer. In a recent systematic review, we identified two such programs: *Coping and Promoting Strength* and *Dutch Anxiety Prevention*. Both used cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), which helped children challenge unrealistic worries with more accurate thinking and allowed them to overcome anxiety-provoking situations by learning how to face them. Most importantly, both programs prevented children from developing anxiety disorders.

Implications for practice and policy

- **CBT is still the best approach for preventing childhood anxiety.** Besides the two successful CBT programs mentioned above, our previous reviews have also identified a number of strong CBT programs, with the *FRIENDS* program standing out as particularly effective and feasible.
- **Practitioners can deliver programs in relatively brief formats.** *Coping and Promoting Strength* and *Dutch Anxiety Prevention* were both delivered in just eight to 11 sessions.
- **Preventing childhood anxiety can be cost-effective.** The cost of delivering *Dutch Anxiety Prevention* was equivalent to the cost of providing no intervention. This is because the program reduced avoidable expenses such as medication and emergency room visits — with the important added benefit of preventing anxiety disorders early in the lifespan.
- **CBT practitioner training is likely to yield wide-ranging payoffs.** As well as preventing anxiety, CBT is effective for preventing depression and for treating anxiety, depression, substance use and conduct disorders in children. And because CBT is not trademarked, training can be reasonably priced, making it is a wise investment.

We know how to prevent anxiety, and BC has made significant strides in achieving this goal. In particular, the *FRIENDS* program has been delivered in BC schools for more than a decade now. *Coping and Promoting Strength* and *Dutch Anxiety Prevention* add to the choices that could be made available for children and families.

In BC and beyond, the aim is to ensure that all children in need can have access to effective anxiety prevention programs. Over time, expanded prevention efforts will also ensure that more young people are reached — before anxiety disorders develop, and well before these disorders become needlessly entrenched.

Please view our full issue to learn more about using CBT to prevent childhood anxiety as well as other ways to promote children's emotional well-being. 👋