

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH PROGRAM

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Preventing and Treating Anxiety Disorders in Children and Youth

A RESEARCH SUMMARY FROM THE Children's Mental Health Policy Research Program

Our Research Reviews

In 2003, the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) made a long-term commitment to improving the mental health of children and youth in the province. The resulting five-year *Child and Youth Mental Health Plan* for BC takes a coordinated approach to strengthening prevention and treatment services, monitoring outcomes for children's mental health and enhancing public accountability for programs and services.

Our program supports MCFD's *Plan* by reviewing the best available research evidence on effective strategies for preventing and treating a variety of children's mental health problems, and by making recommendations to inform the development of related policies and services. Our full report on *Preventing & Treating Anxiety Disorders in Children* is available at: www.childmentalhealth.ubc.ca

If You Have Concerns About Your Child or Youth

The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) provides a wide range of direct clinical services and targeted community supports for children and youth at-risk or dealing with mental health problems, and for their families.

For more information, please contact your local MCFD office (listed in the Blue or Government Pages of the phone book) or visit: http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health/help.htm

To learn more about BC's *Child & Youth Mental Health Plan*, please visit: www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health

Understanding Anxiety Disorders in Children and Youth

It can be quite normal and expected for young people to feel nervous, scared or anxious at various times and in various situations. Anxiety becomes a "disorder" when those fears and worries become so extreme that they cause children and youth significant distress and interfere with daily activities such as going to school or taking part in family and community events. Many young people with anxiety disorders have other mental health issues that add to their difficulties, such as depression.

There is no one "test" to determine if a child or youth has an anxiety disorder. Instead, diagnoses are made through assessments and reports from parents, teachers, health professionals and young people themselves.

Where possible, it is important to deal with the underlying social or biological issues that may cause

mental disorders to develop. Family disadvantage, genetic makeup or exposure to severe long-term stresses may all affect a child's development over time and contribute to mental health problems. We know that children of anxious parents are more likely to experience anxiety, and that most young people diagnosed with anxiety are girls.

On the other hand, many factors can protect children from risk. These positive factors generally include having good adult supports, strong learning and social abilities, a sense of competence, and positive beliefs about the larger world.

While we do not fully know what causes mental health problems to develop in some children and not others, we do know there are effective strategies for both preventing and treating them.

Preventing and Treating Anxiety Disorders in Children and Youth

Review Results

Anxiety disorders are serious mental health problems affecting about 64,000 children and youth in BC.

Research evidence indicates these disorders can be both prevented and treated.

In most cases, CBT is the most effective approach for preventing and treating anxiety disorders.

Using medications to treat anxiety disorders should be limited to severe situations and should always include careful monitoring.

It is crucial that children and youth with established mental health symptoms get the care they need. But research shows that this is not always the case. Large studies in Canada and elsewhere have demonstrated that only about one in four young people with mental health problems (or 25%) currently receive specialized treatment services.

To reduce the overall number of children and youth who suffer from mental health problems, we must both treat children with existing problems and develop programs to prevent the problems from occurring.

Our research looked at original studies published between 1991 and 2003 on preventing or treating anxiety disorders in young people (ages 0-18). In total, 10 prevention and 74 treatment articles were retrieved. Of these, 7 articles on prevention and 26 articles on treatment met our inclusion criteria, providing information on five prevention and 11 treatment programs. All programs demonstrated significant reductions in anxiety-related symptoms and behaviours.

Effective Prevention

The most effective prevention programs for anxiety disorders are provided in school settings, using cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) approaches. These approaches help children and youth to modify their thinking patterns and are best used with groups. CBT approaches are effective when provided to all children, or specifically to children at risk. Involving parents helps young people to apply what they have learned.

Effective Treatment

CBT also works well for treating established anxiety disorders, in both individuals and groups. For example, gradually exposing a young person to a feared stimulus while teaching relaxation and providing support can greatly reduce symptoms and distress. Involving parents is crucial so they can support the young person to apply the training.

Certain anti-anxiety medications may help in severe situations, but should only be used with careful monitoring given the potential for side effects.

Recommendations from the Research

- Make prevention programs part of the spectrum of mental health strategies available to children in BC
- Support CBT, in both group and individual settings, as “the standard of care” for treating most types of anxiety disorders in children
- Limit the use of anti-anxiety medications to severe situations where monitoring can be ensured
- Ensure all new prevention and treatment programs are consistent with the research evidence or are evaluated to ensure they improve outcomes for children and youth

About Us

The Children's Mental Health Policy Research Program is located within the Department of Psychiatry at UBC. We provide research, education and policy consultation services to build a broad public health strategy to improve the mental health and well-being of children and youth in British Columbia and Canada.

A Public Health Approach to Improving Mental Health for Children and Youth

