

Enhancing the Aussie Optimism Positive Thinking Skills Program: Short-term Effects on Anxiety and Depression in Youth aged 9-11 Years Old

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Abstract : Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health problems experienced by Australian children and adolescents. Research into youth mental health points to the importance of considering emotional competence, parental influence on the child's emotional development, and the fact that cognitions are still developing in childhood when designing and implementing positive psychology interventions. Additionally, research into such interventions has suggested the inclusion of a coaching component aimed at supporting those implementing the intervention enhances the effects of the intervention itself. In light of these findings and given the burden of anxiety and depression in the longer term, it is necessary to enhance the Aussie Optimism Positive Thinking Skills program and evaluate its efficacy in terms of children's mental health outcomes. It was expected that the enhancement of the emotional and cognitive aspects of the Aussie Optimism Positive Thinking Skills program, the addition of coaching, and the inclusion of a parent manual would lead to significant prevention effects in internalizing problems at post-test, 6- and 18-months after the completion of the intervention. 502 students (9-11 years old) were randomly assigned to the intervention group (n = 347) or control group (n = 155). At each time point (baseline, post-test, 6-month follow-up, and 18-month follow-up), students completed a battery of self-report measures. The ten intervention sessions making up the enhanced Aussie Optimism Positive Thinking Skills program were run weekly. At post-test and 6-month follow-up, the intervention group reported significantly lower depression than the control group, with no group differences at the 18-month follow-up. The intervention group reported significantly lower anxiety than the control group only at the 6-month follow-up, with no group differences in the post-test or at the 18-month follow-up. Results suggest that the enhanced Aussie Optimism Positive Thinking Skills program can reduce depressive and anxious symptoms in the short term and highlight the importance of universally implemented positive psychology interventions.

Keywords : positive psychology, emotional competence, internalizing symptoms, universal implementation

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