Dissemination of a School-based Mental Health Promotion Program:

The Aussie Optimism Program.
Assoc Prof Clare Roberts, Dr Yolanda Pintabona, Dr Robert Kane, Ms Kristie Rostant
School of Psychology, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Western Australia
and Prof, Donna Cross
Child Health Promotion Research Unit, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia

Introduction
The aim of this project was to investigate the dissemination of a school & family-based mental health promotion program, Aussie Optimism, into a large school district which included three Western Australian (WA) cities. Diffusion theory was used to investigate the manner in which a thin new program was adopted, implemented, and maintained by schools, teachers, and families (Rogers, 2002).

The diffusion process includes 4-stages involving: awareness, adoption, implementation & institutionalization of the innovation in the system (Mayer & Davidson, 2000). This project investigated the effectiveness of two active dissemination strategies based on diffusion theory, teacher training and coaching.

The Aussie Optimism Program
Aussie Optimism is a mental health promotion program designed for late primary school and early secondary school children aged 10 to 13 years. It is ideal for young adolescents who are making their transition to secondary school or are attending middle school. The program targets the prevention of anxiety and depression, and associated risk factors.

Aussie Optimism consists of two 10-session curriculum-based programs including teacher resources, curriculum materials, student workbooks and parent information booklets. Social Life Skills (SLS) focuses on interpersonal skills, social problem solving, conflict resolution & social support. Optimistic Thinking Skills (OTS) focuses on cognitive skills, emotional regulation, and self esteem building to prevent anxiety and depression. The program promotes as strengths-based approach to support students as they move to high school. Parents and Families (P & F) is a self-directed program designed for parents focusing on family risk and protective factors that can be modified as children manage the transition to high school and into adolescence. In addition, schools receive materials to use with parents at parent-teacher meetings or as a part of transition activities.

This program has been associated with lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, reductions in internalising and externalising problems, and enhancement of social skills and family functioning after the transition to high school, in comparison to waitlist control groups, in both targeted and universal samples (Bishop & Roberts, 2005).

Method
Participants
Three WA cities (Fremantle, Rockingham & Mandurah) with a combined population of 139,604 and 91 government primary schools.

Design
Random assignment of schools to 3 groups, 2 dissemination conditions & one control group.

–Intervention & teacher training (n = 30)
–Intervention, teacher training & coaching (n = 30)
–Waitlist control (n = 31)

Procedure
Program training, implementation and evaluation proceeded over two years from 2003 - 2004, with a one-year delay in implementation for the waitlist control group. Teachers were trained in 8-hour workshops for each of the SLS and OTS programs. SLS was delivered in 2003 to 6th graders and OTS plus P & F was implemented with 7th graders & families. Implementation was measured by teacher logbooks, cross checked against student workbooks.

Results
Stage 1: Promoting Awareness & Providing or Seeking Information
The engagement of key stakeholders in the external environment was achieved by presentations to key government agencies, including the Departments of Education and Health - Mental Health and Public Health Divisions, and the independent Institute for Child Health Research. These agencies acted as champions for mental health promotion in schools.

A memorandum of understanding was developed and signed between the Division of Mental Health, Department of Education, and Curtin University’s School of Psychology to develop, fund, implement and evaluate the Aussie Optimism program.

Education District Directors and Student Support Managers from the four metropolitan Education Districts provided external leadership & support. In 2002, one large district, Fremantle - Peel was selected for the trial.

Compatibility with the WA Curriculum Framework outcomes was established for the Health and Physical Education Learning Area and the Curriculum Overarching Aims. Hence, the program could be embedded in regular student curriculum, rather than being seen as an “add on” taught over and above the regular school curriculum.

Stage 2: Persuasion of the Relevance & Applicability to Schools
Presentations to schools highlighted the program’s compatibility with existing school policies, culture, priorities, and curriculum framework. and outcomes. Administrative leadership and support was actively encouraged.

Stage 3: Adoption
67%, 20/30 of the training and condition and 73%, 22/30 of the training & coaching condition adopted the intervention in the first year. 66%, 21/31 control schools were recruited. 96%, 38/42 of dissemination schools maintained adoption in the second year.

Stage 4: Changing Practice to Implement
Teacher Training
In Year 1 (2003), 100%, of the 70 teachers in the training only condition were trained in SLS, while 98%, 65 of the 66 available teachers in the training + coaching condition were trained.

In Year 2 (2004), 97% 73 of 75 training only teachers were trained in OTS, while an additional 13 teachers new to these schools were trained in SLS. In the training + coaching condition 79%, 54 of 64 available teachers were trained in OTS, while 9 new teachers were trained in SLS. 87%, 38 of the 67 control group teachers took up the opportunity to be trained in SLS.

In Year 3 (2005), the first year of maintenance, no teachers were trained in the training only condition, and only 1 teacher was trained in the training + coaching condition. However, 71%, 41 of the available 58 control group teachers received training in OTS. Extensive uptake of training in the previous two years, limited uptake in the two intervention groups.

Implementation
Social Life Skills
88.5% of the classes in schools that received teacher training completed > 80% of the program, 87% of classes in schools that received training + coaching completed >80% of the program.

Optimistic Thinking Skills
69.2% of the training only schools completed > 80%, while 81.2% of the training + coaching schools implemented >80% of this program.

As a result of this training and implementation, 3574 Grade 6 students received SLS in 2003, 4446 Grade 6 & 7 students received either SLS or OTS in 2004, & 2212 students received SLS or OTS in 2005.

Discussion
Dissemination can be achieved when:
• The facilitation process targets both external and school factors.
• There is compatibility of the program with existing school policy, curriculum, culture and priorities.
• High quality teacher training, resources and support are provided.

References

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