PREVENTING INTERNALISING PROBLEMS ACROSS A WHOLE SCHOOL DISTRICT: DISSEMINATION OF THE AUSSIE OPTIMISM PROGRAM

01 | INTRODUCTION
The aim of this project is to investigate the dissemination of an innovative mental health promotion program, Aussie Optimism, into primary schools in Western Australia. Diffusion is the manner in which a new product, policy or program is taken up & used by individuals, communities or organizations (Rogers, 1995). Dissemination refers to active efforts to influence the diffusion process (Mayer & Davidson, 2003).

02 | THE AUSSIE OPTIMISM PROGRAM
Aussie Optimism is a mental health promotion program designed for primary school and early secondary school children aged 10-13 years. It is ideal for young adolescents who are making their transition to secondary school or are attending middle school. The program specifically targets the prevention of anxiety and depression.

Aussie Optimism consists of two classroom-based programs containing teacher resources, curriculum materials, student workbooks and parent booklets. Social Life Skills focuses on interpersonal skills, social problem solving, conflict resolution & social support. Optimistic Thinking Skills focuses on thinking skills and self-esteem building to regulate anxiety and depression. It also seeks students to identify their strengths as they move into high school or middle school. Parents and Families is a self-directed program designed for parents to help their children manage the transition to high school and to develop healthy parent-child relationships. 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, and reductions in the prevalence of clinical levels of internalising problems after the transition to high school, in comparison to waitlist control groups, in both targeted and universal samples (Bishop & Roberts, 2005).

03 | METHOD
Participants
Three Western Australian cities (Fremantle, Rockingham & Mandurah) with a population of 139,604 and 91 government primary schools.

Design
Random assignment of schools to three groups:
1. Intervention and teacher training (30)
2. Intervention, teacher training and coaching (30)
3. Waitlist control (31)

Procedure
Program training and implementation was offered over two years, with a one-year delay for the waitlist control. The Social Life Skills (SLS) program was delivered in Year 6 and the Optimistic Thinking Skills (OTS) program to Parents and Families in Year 7.

Stage 1: Promoting Awareness and Providing or Seeking Information
Stage 1 involved engagement of key stakeholders in the external environment. Presentations were made to key agencies relating to funding or implementation. In addition, consultation was held with staff from the Public Health Division of the Health Department and the independent Institute for Child Health Research. These avenues provided credible champions for the cause of mental health promotion in children.

Presentations and meetings with these groups lead to a memorandum of understanding between the Office of Mental Health, the Department of Education and Curtin University to develop, implement and evaluate a dissemination trial of the Aussie Optimism program.

Stage 2: Persuasion of the Reliance and Applicability to Schools
Presentations to schools highlighted the program's compatibility with existing school policy, culture, priorities and the curriculum framework. Administrative leadership and support was actively encouraged.

Stage 3: Adoption
63 of the 91 (69%) government schools available adopted the program in the first year. 58 (59%) of these schools maintained adoption in the second year.

RESULTS

04 | RESULTS (CONTINUED)

Stage 4: Changing Practice to Implement
TEACHER TRAINING
In Year 1 (2003), 100% of teachers in the training only condition were trained in SLS, while 96% of the available teachers in the training + coaching condition were trained. In Year 2 (2004), 97% of 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% of available teachers were trained in OTS, while 9 new teachers were trained in SLS. 87% of the eligible control group teachers took up the opportunity to be trained in SLS.

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

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

As a result of this training and implementation, almost 6000 Year 6 and 7 students received Aussie Optimism programs over the three years of the research project.

05 | DISCUSSION
Dissemination can be achieved when:
1. The facilitation process targets both external and within school factors; and
2. There is compatibility of the program with existing school policy, curriculum, culture and priorities.

06 | REFERENCES