AUSSIE OPTIMISM DISSEMINATION PROJECT

Curtin University’s School of Psychology, the Department of Education (WA) and the Mental Health Division of the Department of Health (WA) are conducting a research project aimed at investigating the dissemination of a life skills program for Year 6 and 7 students to assist them in their transition to high school. A total of 63 schools across the Fremantle/Peel Education District are participating in this project.

What is the Aim of the Aussie Optimism Program?

The Aussie Optimism program is a school-based mental health promotion program that provides students with strategies that build their resilience and coping skills, and assist them in making a successful transition to high school. It is linked to the WA Curriculum Framework and Students at Educational Risk Policy and has been designed to meet the student outcome statements for the Health and Physical Education curriculum area.

The program includes two components comprised of 60-minute modules taught by classroom teachers and a self-directed family-based program that can be incorporated into the usual High School Transition program. The Aussie Optimism: Social Life Skills program involves teaching children social skills and how to solve social problems. The Aussie Optimism: Optimistic Thinking Skills program teaches children optimistic ways of thinking and coping. The Aussie Optimism: Program for Parents and Families helps parents and families with issues relevant to being a parent of a teenager. As part of the Dissemination Project, Year 6 students in participating intervention schools received the Social Life Skills program in 2003 and in the following year the Optimistic Thinking Skills and Parents and Families programs as Year 7 students. Control schools received the program one year later, beginning in 2004.

Is there Research Support for the Aussie Optimism Program?

The program has been evaluated over the past six years with more than 5000 children and 400 teachers from over 100 metropolitan and rural schools. The program has resulted in reductions in depression and enhanced self-esteem in students making their transition to high school, and reductions in anxiety up to three years after the program. Parents have noted reductions in their children’s anxiety, depression and behaviour problems at home, while teachers have reported improvements in social skills, problem solving and self management skills at school.

Students, parents and teachers have rated the program as informative, enjoyable, and as providing useful skills to deal with the stresses and strains of the teenage years.
**What does the Dissemination Project Involve?**

In participating schools, students enrolled in Year 6 in 2003 and their parents completed questionnaires that relate to children's strengths and difficulties. Students in intervention schools also received the *Aussie Optimism* program as part of their regular health education class with their usual class teacher. Parents and children were asked to complete questionnaires before and after the program (Year 6 and 7), and as a follow-up in Year 8. Children of parents who did not consent for their child to participate in the research project still had access to the *Aussie Optimism* program as part of their regular health education lessons.

**What do the Questionnaires Ask?**

The child questionnaires ask about children's social and emotional well-being (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Goodman, 2002), and health behaviours such as physical activity, smoking, alcohol and other drug use. The questionnaires take children 30 minutes to complete and are completed in the classroom during class time.

Children whose questionnaire responses indicate that they may be experiencing depression or anxiety problems will also complete a computerised interview with a researcher (Diagnostic Interview for Children and Adolescents, DICA-IV). Where the interview indicates that a child is experiencing internalising problems, the child’s parent is contacted to discuss the problem and appropriate management strategies.

All information provided by students is completely confidential. The only time information will be disclosed is where a child is identified as experiencing problems, with this information provided to parents only. Schools receive a report following each data collection outlining the results of their participating students as a group. This project has been approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee.

**Referral of Distressed Students**

Where deemed appropriate, children identified as experiencing problems are referred to mental health services. This only occurs following discussion of the questionnaire and interview results with parents and parental permission to make the referral. Referrals are made by Yolanda Pintabona, Research Co-ordinator, and include a report summarising the results of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and DICA-IV.

**If you would like more information...**

If you have any questions about the research project, the *Aussie Optimism* program or the questionnaires, please contact Yolanda Pintabona (Research Coordinator) on 9266-3292 or Clare Roberts (Chief Researcher) on 9226-7992 at Curtin University of Technology’s School of Psychology.