

TEACHER DELIVERY OF EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN

WESTMEAD FEELINGS PROGRAM TRIAL IN SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOLS RESEARCH REPORT

BACKGROUND, AIMS AND METHOD

The Westmead Feelings Program is a social-emotional learning program that supports the mental health of autistic children by improving their emotional competence skills. Developed as a mental health program to be delivered by clinicians, the Westmead Feelings Program has been delivered by school psychologists in previous studies. Feasible teacher delivery would expand the accessibility of the program. The current study examined the impact of emotional learning on children's social-emotional skills and assessed the feasibility and acceptability of teacher delivery of the Westmead Feelings Program. Fifteen teachers in eight Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) schools delivered social emotional learning to 77 autistic children, aged 7-13 years old, and their parents.

IMPACT

Emotion skills. The Emotions Development Questionnaire¹ (EDQ) was used to measure children's skills in understanding and managing emotions, problem solving, and perspective taking. Teachers and parents reported statistically significant improvements in children's emotion skills comparing pre-treatment to post-treatment timepoints.

Mental health. Improvements in children's mental health were measured using the Developmental Behavioural Checklist² (DBC). Comparing children's scores pre-treatment to post-treatment reflected positive trends in the improvement of their mental health, however the difference in scores did not reach statistical significance.

Social skills. The Social Skills Improvement Scale³ (SSIS) was used to measure social skills. Parents reported statistically significant improvements in children's total social skills scores, comparing pre-treatment to post-treatment timepoints. The SSIS data reported by parents also showed that children improved their communication and empathy skills however; these positive trends did not reach statistical significance.

The Social Responsiveness Scale⁴ (SRS) was completed by parents as a measure of social impairment. SRS total scores and Social Communication subscale scores significantly improved comparing pre-treatment to post-treatment timepoints. Positive trends were also found for children's scores on the Social Awareness and Social Cognition subscales of the SRS, but analyses did not reach statistical significance.

ACCEPTABILITY AND FEASIBILITY

Child sessions:

- Children engaged well with teaching strategies and content.
- Teachers reported that everything they needed to learn about program delivery was provided in the two-day training and certification workshop.
- Timing and duration of program sessions was feasible within school timetabling.

Parent sessions:

- Parent's availability and teacher's work responsibilities and commitments was a barrier to parent face to face session delivery. Teachers recommended that parent sessions be delivered digitally so parents could access the program more flexibly.

Recommendations for future research and practice:

- Flexibility to extend or adjust the program to be able to meet the individual needs of autistic students and maximise their engagement.
- Teachers reported that the program could be helpful for mainstream autistic students, delivered by mainstream teachers.
- Teachers recommended that the program be delivered to support autistic adolescents.
- The program could support children with additional support needs of a variety of ages.

The current study demonstrated that teacher delivery of the Westmead Feelings Program has significant benefits for the development of social-emotional skills of autistic children. Teacher delivery of the Westmead Feelings Program is feasible and acceptable in special education schools. More work needs to be done to support parents accessing the program. Flexible delivery of digital parent sessions would improve their involvement and engagement in the program.

1 Wong, M., Heriot, S., & Lopes, A. (2009) The Emotions Development Questionnaire, Sydney, Australia: The Children's Hospital at Westmead

2 Einfeld SL and Tonge BJ (1992). Manual for the Developmental Behaviour Checklist. Melbourne and Sydney, Australia: Monash University for Developmental Psychiatry and School of Psychiatry and University of New South Wales.

3 Gresham, F. M., & Elliott, S. N. (2008). Social skills improvement system: Rating scales. Bloomington, MN, USA: Pearson Assessments.

4 Constantino, J. N. (2002). The social responsiveness scale. Los Angeles, CA, USA: Western Psychological Services.