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Cognitive Behavioural Therapy May Help Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders With Anxiety

What is this research about?

Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) have problems with anxiety. Past research suggests that cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) may help lessen anxiety in children with ASD. This type of therapy teaches children ways of thinking and behaving that help them cope with, face, and reduce their anxieties (e.g., how to recognize what they are feeling, ways to think about their problems differently). CBT is the most scientifically supported talk therapy treatment for anxiety in children. However, because children with ASD have problems with social skills, communication and behaviour, the effectiveness of traditional CBT can be limited. This research is one of the first studies to assess how effective CBT can be when adapted specifically for children with ASD.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers randomly assigned 40 children with high functioning ASD and anxiety (7–11 years old) to be in a CBT group or a 3-month waitlist. For children receiving CBT, an individual therapist worked with each parent and child for 16 weekly sessions. The therapists taught children coping skills, friendship skills and skills to increase their independence. The therapists taught parents ways to help their children at home. They also consulted with teachers about the ways they could

What you need to know:

Children with ASD often have problems with anxiety. The results from this study suggest that a modified CBT program may help lessen anxiety symptoms in high-functioning children with ASD.

help at school. Parents had to be very involved in the treatment. Parents and children in both groups completed questionnaires and were interviewed before and after the treatment/waitlist.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that children receiving CBT showed less anxiety symptoms after the 16 week program when compared to children on the waitlist, according to clinician and parent reports. Children who received CBT continued to show improvement 3 months after the treatment ended. There was no difference in how the children reported their own anxiety; however this may be a result of the questionnaires the researchers used, which may not have been sensitive enough to detect change.

How can you use this research?

This research shows that it is possible for anxiety

to be treated in children with ASD using CBT. Parents and teachers play important roles in children's lives and this study suggests that it may be useful to actively involve them in CBT treatment. Researchers can use these results to conduct future studies about how treatment programs can be adapted to suit the mental health needs of children with ASD and their families.

About the Researcher

Dr. Jeffrey Wood and colleagues are researchers from the University of California, Los Angeles. This summary is based on their study "Cognitive behavioral therapy for anxiety in children with autism spectrum disorders: a randomized, controlled trial".

Citation

Wood, J. J., Drahota, A., Sze, K., Har, K., Chiu, A., & Langer, D. A. (2009). Cognitive behavioral therapy for anxiety in children with autism spectrum disorders: A randomized, controlled trial. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 50(3), 224-234.

Keywords

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Anxiety, Cognitive behaviour therapy, Children

This research summary was written by Ami Tinti for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries

About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

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