



Teacher-delivery of the Westmead Feelings Program: Emotion-based learning for children with Autism in primary schools

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The Westmead Feelings Program: Emotion-based learning for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (WFP) is a social emotional learning (SEL) intervention for students with Autism and comorbid Intellectual Disability (ASD/ID), their parents and teachers and includes a facilitator training and certification program. WFP comprises of three modules which teaches students skills of understanding emotions, emotional problem solving and perspective taking, and emotions management. Evidence-based strategies such as video modelling, social scripts, and role plays are used to teach students with ASD/ID emotional competence skills. Parents and teachers are taught how they can promote the maintenance and generalisation of WFP skills over time and across settings. Described in the research literature as Emotion-based Social Skills Training, WFP was developed by the Children's Hospital at Westmead (CHW) and has been demonstrated in a controlled trial to develop emotional competence and reduce symptoms of mental illness in children with ASD/ID when delivered in schools by school counsellors (Ratcliffe, Wong et al., 2014). Despite the promising research findings derived from WFP studies, an important challenge is how to translate research findings into practice in order to promote the implementation of this evidence-based SEL intervention in schools so that it is sustainable, scalable, and widely disseminated, in order to benefit students with ASD/ID. The aim of the current study focuses on research translation by examining whether WFP delivered by special educators in schools is an acceptable and feasible way of providing SEL to students with ASD/ID. The study also examines whether there are benefits to student SEL when they receive WFP. Participants were four special education teachers and their 26 students with ASD/ID. Teachers and students were from one public school and one independent school in NSW. Teachers received WFP Facilitator Training and then delivered WFP to students. Interviews were conducted with teachers to assess the impact of WFP Facilitator Training on their professional learning, acceptability and feasibility of WFP being delivered in classrooms, the impact of WFP on classroom culture, and the benefits of WFP to students. All teachers reported benefits to their skills and competence in delivering SEL interventions following WFP Facilitator Training and positive changes in students and within their classrooms following WFP delivery. The results of the current project replicated previous studies and found that school-based WFP is an acceptable and feasible means of delivering theory-driven, evidence-based, SEL and effective mental illness prevention and health promotion treatment to children with ASD/ID.