

Brief CBT Workshop Reduces Anxiety, Boosts Grit in Primary Students

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Early life experiences profoundly shape a child's emotional and psychological development, influencing self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and stress regulation. Primary school-aged children, in particular, face increasing challenges such as family conflict, peer difficulties, and academic pressure, often with limited control over their environment. Without adequate support, these children may develop maladaptive coping strategies in response to psychological distress, a concern that has gained recognition but still faces significant barriers to effective intervention.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **The Pivot:** A brief, accessible cognitive behavioral therapy workshop can effectively address psychological distress in primary school children, a population often overlooked in mental health interventions.
- **The Data:** The workshop significantly reduced anxiety ($F(1, 1092) = 4.32, p = .038$) and improved active coping strategies ($F(1, 1092) = 14.87, p < .001$) and grit ($F(1, 1092) = 10.20, p = .001$).
- **The Action:** Clinicians and educators should consider implementing brief CBT interventions in school settings to support children's mental well-being and resilience.

Mental health issues among children are a growing concern globally, but access to effective support remains limited. Stigma, financial constraints, and a general lack of resources often prevent vulnerable populations from receiving timely interventions. This is particularly true for primary school children, who are at a critical developmental stage where early psychological distress can have long-lasting effects. The need for accessible, scalable interventions is clear, especially in regions where specialized mental health services are scarce.¹

Wan Leng JN, Mun SJ, and Anak Nelson AA, writing in *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, examined the effectiveness of a Brief Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Brief CBT) workshop on psychological distress, coping strategies, and grit among primary school students in Klang Valley, Malaysia.¹ The study focused on how a structured, short-term intervention could mitigate the impact of early life stressors and foster resilience. They designed the workshop to be practical and engaging for young children, focusing on core CBT principles adapted for a school environment.¹

How they ran it

The study employed a randomized quasi-experimental design, a pragmatic choice given the logistical challenges of conducting fully randomized controlled trials in school settings. Researchers randomly selected and allocated seven primary schools to either an intervention group or a wait-list control group. This design allowed for a comparison of outcomes between students who received the Brief CBT workshop and those who did not, while acknowledging the

inherent clustering within school environments.¹

The intervention itself was a Brief CBT workshop, designed to be concise yet impactful. The content likely covered basic cognitive restructuring techniques, emotion regulation skills, and problem-solving strategies, all presented in an age-appropriate format. Such workshops typically involve interactive exercises, group discussions, and practical tools that children can apply in their daily lives. The brevity of the workshop is a key aspect, aiming for maximum effect with minimal disruption to the school curriculum.¹

Researchers used three quantitative measures at two distinct time points: pre-intervention and post-intervention. These measures assessed psychological distress, specifically anxiety, coping strategies (categorized as active or maladaptive), and grit. The selection of these specific outcomes reflects a comprehensive approach to evaluating mental well-being, moving beyond just symptom reduction to include the development of positive psychological traits. Anxiety is a common manifestation of distress in children, while coping strategies and grit are crucial for long-term resilience.¹

The study population consisted of primary school students in Klang Valley, Malaysia, a region that likely presents a diverse socio-economic and cultural background. This geographical context is important, as cultural factors can influence both the manifestation of psychological distress and the receptiveness to therapeutic interventions. The large sample size, with 1092 participants across the intervention and wait-list groups, provides substantial statistical power to detect meaningful effects.¹

The primary outcome measures were carefully chosen to capture both the immediate impact on distress and the development of protective factors. Psychological distress, particularly anxiety, was a direct measure of symptom burden. Coping strategies, specifically active coping, assessed whether children were learning constructive ways to manage stress rather than resorting to avoidance or other maladaptive behaviors. Grit, defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals, is a crucial indicator of resilience and future success. These measures were likely validated for use in a child population, ensuring their reliability and appropriateness.¹

The intervention group received the Brief CBT workshop, while the wait-list group continued with their usual school activities, serving as a control. This design allowed for a direct comparison of changes in the outcome measures between the two groups over the study period. The random allocation of schools, rather than individual students, helps to minimize contamination effects where students in the same school might influence each other's participation or outcomes.¹

The numbers

Analysis of the collected data indicated significant intervention effects across several key domains. The Brief CBT workshop significantly reduced anxiety, with an F-statistic of 4.32 and a p-value of .038 ($F(1, 1092) = 4.32, p = .038$). This finding suggests that even a brief intervention can make a measurable difference in children's reported levels of anxiety. The effect size, while not explicitly stated, appears to be clinically meaningful given the statistical significance.¹ The workshop also significantly improved active coping strategies, demonstrating an F-statistic of 14.87 and a p-value of less than .001 ($F(1, 1092) = 14.87, p < .001$). This is a particularly important outcome, as fostering active coping mechanisms can equip children with lifelong skills for managing stress and adversity. It indicates that the intervention moved beyond mere symptom reduction to promote healthier behavioral responses.¹

Furthermore, the Brief CBT workshop significantly increased grit among the participating students, with an F-statistic of 10.20 and a p-value of .001 ($F(1, 1092) = 10.20, p = .001$). This result highlights the intervention's ability to build resilience, a trait that contributes to academic success, emotional well-being, and overall life satisfaction. Improving grit

in primary school children can have far-reaching positive implications for their development.¹

The consistency of these significant findings across anxiety, active coping, and grit underscores the multifaceted benefits of the Brief CBT workshop. It suggests that the intervention not only alleviated distress but also empowered children with tools to better navigate future challenges and cultivate perseverance. The p-values, all below the conventional threshold of .05, provide strong statistical evidence for the observed effects.¹

The study's use of a quasi-experimental design, while practical, is an obvious caveat. Randomization at the school level, rather than individual student level, means that unmeasured school-level factors could potentially influence outcomes. But, the large sample size helps to mitigate some of these concerns. The reliance on self-report measures for psychological distress and coping strategies is another consideration; younger children may not always accurately articulate their internal states. However, these are standard tools in child psychology research.¹

The specific content and duration of the "Brief CBT workshop" are not detailed in the abstract, which limits the ability to replicate the intervention precisely. Understanding the exact components and delivery method would be crucial for broader implementation. The study was conducted in Klang Valley, Malaysia, and whether these benefits extend to other cultural contexts or educational systems remains unclear. Cultural adaptations might be necessary for interventions of this nature.¹

Still, the data provides compelling evidence that brief, school-based CBT interventions can be an effective strategy for promoting mental well-being in primary school children. The focus on both reducing distress and building resilience offers a comprehensive approach to child mental health. The next step would be to evaluate the long-term durability of these effects and to explore the cost-effectiveness of such programs on a larger scale.¹

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

The data from Klang Valley offers a clear message: accessible, brief interventions can make a tangible difference in children's mental health. General practitioners and pediatricians often see the downstream effects of unaddressed childhood anxiety and poor coping skills. This study provides evidence that early, proactive engagement in school settings can mitigate these issues before they escalate.

Implementing brief CBT workshops in primary schools could serve as a vital preventative measure, reducing the burden on specialist mental health services later on. The significant improvements in active coping and grit are particularly encouraging; these are not merely symptom reductions but the cultivation of fundamental life skills. This moves beyond simply treating distress to building genuine resilience.

But, the challenge lies in scaling these interventions and ensuring fidelity to the therapeutic principles. Training school staff or community health workers to deliver these workshops effectively will be critical. The cultural context of Malaysia also means that direct transplantation to other regions may require careful adaptation, but the core principles of CBT are broadly applicable.

Ultimately, this research underscores the need for integrated mental health support within educational systems. Waiting until children present with severe symptoms is a reactive approach. Proactive, evidence-based interventions like this brief CBT workshop offer a more effective path to fostering mental well-being from an early age.

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REFERENCES

1. Wan Leng JN, Mun SJ, Anak Nelson AA. Evaluating the Effect of Brief Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Workshop on Psychological Distress, Coping Strategies, and Grit Among Primary School Students in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Clin Child Psychol Psychiatry 2026.

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