

Evidence for the Effectiveness of a National School-Based Mental Health Program in Chile

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Objective

Skills for Life (SFL) is the largest school-based mental health program in the world, screening and providing services to more than 1,000,000 students in Chile over the past decade. This is the first external evaluation of the program.

Method

Of the 8,372 primary schools in Chile in 2010 that received public funding, one-fifth (1,637) elected to participate in SFL. Each year, all first- and third-grade students in these schools are screened with validated teacher- and parent-completed measures of psychosocial functioning (the Teacher Observation of Classroom Adaptation–Re-Revised [TOCA-RR] and the Pediatric Symptom Checklist–Chile [PSC-CL]). Students identified as being at risk on the TOCA-RR in first grade are referred to a standardized 10-session preventive intervention in second grade. This article explores the relationships between workshop participation and changes in TOCA-RR and PSC-CL scores, attendance, and promotion from third to fourth grades.

Results

In all, 16.4% of students were identified as being at-risk on the TOCA-RR. Statistically significant relationships were found between the number of workshop sessions attended and improvements in behavioral and academic outcomes after controlling for nonrandom selection into exposure and loss to follow-up. Effect sizes for the difference between attending most (7–10) versus fewer (0–6) sessions ranged from 0.08 to 0.16 standard deviations.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that a large-scale mental health intervention early in schooling is significantly associated with improved behavioral and academic outcomes. Future research is needed to implement more rigorous experimental evaluation of the program, to examine longer-term effects, and to investigate possible predictors of heterogeneity of treatment response.

Key Words

children's mental health;
school-based interventions;
behavior problems;
academic achievement