Abstract

Issue addressed: Reducing the prejudice towards mental illness in a primary school setting and creating a supportive environment for families where a parent has a mental illness.

Methods: Teacher workshops and classroom sessions for grades 5 and 6 children on mental illness.

Results: Significant increase in teachers’ confidence to support a child whose parent has a mental illness.
Reduced prejudice towards people with schizophrenia among the children.

Conclusion: The primary school setting appears to be an effective environment to promote mental health literacy and reduce the likelihood of negative stereotype formation.

Key words: Promoting understanding, supportive environments

So what?

A program consisting of both health information and consumer and carer experience appeared to be effective in fostering more positive attitudes towards people with a mental illness.
knowledge, changing attitudes and promoting willingness to support a child where a parent has a mental illness.

For students
There were three sessions for grade 5 and 6 students each lasting one hour. The first classroom session covered general health and illness topics. The second session covered the impact and nature of mental illness. The activities and discussions were planned so that children’s thinking about general health issues, such as caring for a sick relative, could be extended to thinking about mental illness. In the last session someone who had experienced a mental illness talked to the students about her life and experiences so that they would appreciate the person behind the illness. Prior to the students’ sessions the classroom package was outlined to the grade five and six teachers. Parents were also invited to hear about the classroom package.

The evaluation for the classroom sessions consisted of the same quiz prior to the first session and at the end of the third class. The students were asked whether they were familiar with the terms mental illness, depression and schizophrenia and asked to define depression and schizophrenia irrespective of whether they were familiar with the terms. The frequency of appropriate, incorrect and derogatory words (these categories having been developed by the project team) was recorded.

Results and discussion

For teachers
The reported results are taken from the 58 out of 102 teachers who completed both the pre and post questionnaire. Teachers self rated their knowledge and confidence according to a Likert scale with five options from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Paired t-tests revealed a significant difference in teachers’ self-ratings prior to and after the workshops. The results presented also refer to the percentage of teachers who agreed or strongly agreed with the items prior to and post the workshops (see Table 1).

In written feedback the teachers commented that they appreciated talking about the issues and hearing about the person’s real-life experiences as a child. They realised that the supportive skills they already used could be applied to children who have a parent with a mental illness. Further, there was a general appreciation about discussing mental illness independent of any specific benefit for the school community.

For students
There were 417 students who completed the pre quiz and 403 who completed the post quiz. More than 80% of the children were accurate in their understanding of depression prior to the project, which from classroom participation observation reflected a familiarity with feeling sad rather than an understanding of mental illness. The results reported here relate to their understanding of schizophrenia.

Prior to the sessions children defined schizophrenia differently depending on whether they had heard the term before (44.4%) or not heard the term (55.6%), \( \chi^2 (2, n=403)=22.33, p<0.01 \). After the sessions there was a demonstrable shift in understanding about schizophrenia, \( \chi^2 (2, n=403)=667.69, p<0.01 \) (see Table 2).

Those students who had heard the word schizophrenia prior to the sessions were more likely to use derogatory terms, such as crazy or dangerous, than students who had not heard the term. Thus many children already have negative views of mental illness and appropriate education and exposure to people with mental illness may foster increased tolerance and understanding.

The students were also asked at the end of the third session to record what they had learnt from the three sessions. Over half of the students commented on shifts in their attitude which is more likely to be permanent than remembering information about mental illness. This was clearly expressed by one of the students:

“I learnt lots of things but I have forgotten most. Mental illness can include lots of things (but) having a mental illness does not mean you are stupid.”

Table 1: Teachers’ self ratings on their knowledge, understanding and confidence about mental illness prior to and post the workshops (n=58).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge or Confidence</th>
<th>Significance test</th>
<th>Percentage who self-rated agree or strongly agree pre workshop</th>
<th>Percentage who self-rated agree or strongly agree post workshop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good understanding of mental illness (MI)</td>
<td>t(57)=6.62, p&lt;0.01</td>
<td>22.41</td>
<td>63.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could describe symptoms of schizophrenia</td>
<td>t(57)=5.77, p&lt;0.01</td>
<td>25.86</td>
<td>60.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could talk about MI to a parent or child</td>
<td>t(57)=8.25, p&lt;0.01</td>
<td>31.03</td>
<td>75.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could support a child whose parent had an MI</td>
<td>t(57)=8.94, p&lt;0.01</td>
<td>25.86</td>
<td>82.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good understanding of how parenting affected by MI</td>
<td>t(52)=6.76, p&lt;0.01</td>
<td>39.62</td>
<td>89.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good understanding of effects on children</td>
<td>t(51)=8.07, p&lt;0.01</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>93.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Differences in attitudes of students who knew the word schizophrenia prior to the sessions and understanding of schizophrenia subsequent to the sessions (in percentage).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency of words used to describe schizophrenia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior to the sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knew schizophrenia</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior to the sessions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not know schizophrenia</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the sessions</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

This project was successful in its two aims of reducing prejudice and addressing the role of schools and teachers in supporting student and families affected by mental illness. This is just one of many required supports for children who have a parent with a mental illness. Further, this project suggests that upper primary level may be an appropriate age at which to conduct mental illness education before negative stereotypes are strongly formed.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Precision Foundation for sponsoring the pilot stage of the project.

References


Authors

Andrew Joyce, Eastern Access Community Health, Victoria
Becca Allchin, Maroondah Hospital Area Mental Health Services, Victoria
Julie Malmborg and Leigh Candy, Eastern Access Community Health, Victoria
Vicki Cowling, Maroondah Hospital Area Mental Health Services, Victoria

Correspondence

Mr Andrew Joyce, Supporting Kids in Primary Schools, A Mental Health Promotion Project, c/o Eastern Access Community Health, 46 Warrandyte Road, Ringwood, Victoria 3134. Tel: (03) 9871 1800; fax: (03) 9870 4688; e-mail: ajoyce@each.com.au

AUTHOR REF: 7