

February 2020 ARH News

ARH Funded Program Helps Dyslexic Children Cope Better

A recent Australian Rotary Health (ARH) funded study has revealed that a new mental health program is effective in reducing the use of unhelpful coping strategies among children with dyslexia.

[Dr Mark Boyes](#) and his team at Curtin University were awarded an ARH Mental Health Research Grant in 2018 to conduct a pilot trial of the 'Clever Kids Program', a mental health program for primary school children who struggle with reading and spelling.

Forty children with dyslexia were recruited to the trial, with twenty participants receiving the Clever Kids program compared to twenty participants who were part of a wait-list control group.

Dr Boyes said after attending Clever Kids, children reported improved coping skills.

"They were much less likely to use unhelpful coping strategies like avoiding problems, not telling people about their problems, and blaming themselves for their problems," Dr Boyes said.

"There were also promising findings for self-esteem, emotional problems, and peer problems. After attending Clever Kids, children reported higher self-esteem and parents said their children had fewer emotional and peer problems."

Dr Boyes noted however that while these findings are promising, these changes were substantially smaller than the changes in coping skills.

"These changes were smaller than the changes in coping skills, and we need to do a bigger study to confirm if Clever Kids improves self-esteem and reduces emotional and peer problems," Dr Boyes said.

Another strength revealed from the trial was that children with dyslexia reported that they liked the program and found it to be helpful.

"They really liked meeting other children who were also struggling with reading and spelling. Children also liked activities involving drawing, movement, and paying attention to their bodies. They did not like activities involving sitting at tables reading and writing as much."

"We believe the program could be improved by having shorter sessions or including more breaks during sessions and reducing the number of activities that involve reading and writing."

Dr Boyes said there is a very clear parent demand for programs addressing and promoting the emotional wellbeing of children with reading difficulties, and the results of this pilot study indicate that a bigger evaluation of the Clever Kids program is feasible.

"We are delighted to have secured funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council to conduct a larger trial of the program".

The Clever Kids pilot study is a world-first to use a rigorous randomised control design to test a program promoting mental health among children with dyslexia.

It is also the first time an evaluation of a mental health promotion program for children with dyslexia has assessed potential mechanisms associated with mental health and emotional and behavioural problems directly.

Results from the study are expected to be released by April 2020 before being submitted to a peer-reviewed journal. Dr Boyes hopes to present these findings at the Society for Research on Learning Disorders Conference, held in Norway on 18-19 June 2020.

The project was conducted with support from the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation (DSF), who developed and run the Clever Kids program.

We thank the Stan Perron Foundation for co-funding this project.

Media contact: Jessica Cooper – (02) 8837 1900 or jessica@arh.org.au

Link to article on ARH website: <https://australianrotaryhealth.org.au/program-helps-dyslexic-children-cope-better/>