

USING A CHILDREN'S BOOK TO CHANGE CHILDREN'S KNOWLEDGE OF
AND ATTITUDES ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

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Purpose: The purpose of this was to test the effectiveness of a school-based intervention in educating children and promoting positive attitudes about mental illness in third and fourth grade children. The literature suggested that the stigma about mental health needed to be eradicated beginning in childhood. It has been noted that stigma prevents many from seeking needed psychiatric treatment. **Method:** The design was quasi-experimental, using a pre-test and two post-tests. For the intervention classes, a nurse read a book about mental illness to the children and used behavioral rehearsals to reinforce the contents of the book over three sessions. An alternate intervention, involving the same activities using a book about Diabetes, was provided to a second group. A third group of children received no intervention until data collection was completed. The instruments consisted of two scales: an Attitude scale and a Knowledge scale. Ninety-nine children from three schools completed all of the measures. Repeated Measures MANOVAs were used to analyze the data. **Findings:** The findings showed significant positive change in the intervention group compared to the alternate intervention and control groups on knowledge scores and the appropriate trends approaching significance in Attitude Scores. For both Knowledge and Attitude, the changes were still evident 3 months after the intervention was completed. **Discussion:** The findings demonstrate that the changes in both Knowledge and Attitude persisted beyond the immediate intervention period. The findings are similar to those found in studies with adolescents, using a similar design. Since the children's Attitude scores only approached statistical significance, we wonder if children's attitudes are more difficult to change, take longer to change, or the Attitude scale may not have been sensitive to change that did occur. Since the results of this study are positive, it would be important to replicate the study using more children and also using more schools in different parts of the country. Other replication studies might focus on a single racial group or having a more racially balanced sample. While a single study should not be used as the basis for major changes in practice, the findings of this study are promising. Psychologists, nurses, social workers and counselors in school systems could use this intervention with students. Schools do need to assess where in the curriculum mental health is taught and to recognize the value of early intervention in teaching mental health to children. One outcome of such changes in the school curriculum would be a decrease in stigma for mental illness over time.