

MindMatters Plus: INFO SHEET NO.6

CHOOSING PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES TO MATCH STUDENT NEEDS

Use: Building a Whole School Approach

Audience: Executive Team and Student Support Services Teachers

Intent: Early Intervention

Schools are potentially able to offer prevention and intervention programs that address mental health problems from a developmental ecological perspective (Barnes, 1998), thus enabling the promotion of wellbeing for the majority while preventing escalation of difficulties for those students already experiencing problems.

MindMatters (Wyn et al., 2000) is a mental health promotion program aimed at promoting the mental health and wellbeing of all young people in school. It is also a universal program emphasising the central role of teacher professional development. However, this program also recognises the need for specific, selected interventions to address the needs of students who require additional support.

MindMatters Plus demonstration has provided an opportunity to explore the use of prevention and early intervention initiatives within a whole school approach.

These initiatives can be classified as universal, selective and indicated programs (Munoz, Mrazek, & Haggerty, 1996). Universal programs are offered to all students, while selective programs work with students considered at risk of developing a disorder and indicated programs target students who have mild symptoms of a disorder.

An index of these programs and resources can be accessed at www.agca.com.au, click on programs and resources index.

Benefits of Universal programs:

- avoid the need for any identification of participants
- avoid any stigma attached to the selection of students
- have the potential to be embedded in the regular curriculum
- slot into class times
- more familiar to teach in class groups for timetabling

Drawbacks of Universal programs:

- needs to fit into class time and the curriculum
- time required to plan and integrate the material in the universal program
- many programs designed for smaller groups than usual classroom size
- needs collaborative buy in from all teachers and delivered in an effective teaching and learning style
- teacher professional development is required
- cost of commercial programs
- program may not have been designed for diverse learning groups

Relevant learning MindMatters Plus initiative:

“It is beneficial to build sequenced learning from year to year to deepen mental health literacy.”

Benefits of Targeted (selected and indicated) programs:

- schools are used to providing specialist small group programs
- can target individuals who are the most in need, thus utilising scarce resources effectively
- ability to individualise more in a small group
- programs training is provided for internal school facilitator or conducted by an external facilitator

Drawback of Targeted programs:

- difficulties of selection of students
- possible stigmatisation
- cost of commercial programs
- students missing classes
- challenge of keeping general school staff informed about the content of targeted program and progress of students within it.



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Case Study

Coombabah SHS is located on the Queensland Gold Coast and has an approximate enrolment of 1100 students. In participating as a MindMatters Plus school, it was decided it would be best to focus on Year 9, the second year of high school in Queensland. This was to have time for students to settle in to high school and their needs be identified as well as gradually providing for all students over a 4 year period. It was felt that any mental health prevention and early intervention programs must be in response to the needs of the students. Thus students were not selected to fit programs, rather programs were selected to fit the needs of students. Based on this philosophy, it was imperative that the first step at Coombabah State High School was to identify student needs. (For a comprehensive understanding of the identification process adopted, refer to the accompanying DVD 'Who Knows' and manual.)

It was seen as a priority to provide both prevention programs offered in a universal mode (to all students) and targeted programs for those students displaying some symptoms (indicated) and those students whose life events may place them at risk of developing symptoms (selected). Once the students were identified, the programs were chosen and thus the programs offered each year were different.

The first task was to plan for the targeted interventions. In the first year of implementation, the identification process indicated that the students with support needs required assistance in the area of :

- grief and loss
- anxiety and
- depression

For this reason Seasons for Growth, Worrybusters, and the Adolescents Coping with Emotions (ACE) programs were selected respectively as the most appropriate. In the second year, the identification process resulted in Seasons for Growth and ACE being offered together with a program promoting self esteem for girls which was accessed from a community agency. Forward planning for teacher training in delivering the programs and ordering the resources was commenced after deciding which programs were suitable.

The next task was to decide on the prevention program to be delivered in universal mode. For timetabling and resourcing purposes, it was decided to schedule the universal program in the health curriculum. The Resourceful Adolescent Program (RAP) was selected as the most appropriate resource to use at the Year 9 level.

The basis for choosing RAP as the universal program intervention included:

- suitability for the Yr 9 age group
- the program is evidence based
- it is an Australian program
- the program combines Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Interpersonal Psychology (IP) principles and skills
- it is an activity based pedagogy
- the fact that it was developed by a psychologist and a teacher

Once it was decided to establish RAP as the universal component in the curriculum, planning for teacher training and resource preparation was undertaken.

The targeted programs were offered to students in Terms 1 and 2, before the universal RAP program in Term 3. The purpose of offering the targeted programs prior to the universal intervention was first to allow the more vulnerable students to deal with their issues in a supportive small group environment before exposing them to a universal program with the whole class. It was believed that this would be more beneficial than addressing their issues at a more superficial level in the universal program and then "remediating" them afterwards. In fact, it worked really well, with those students, who participated in the targeted groups showing a lot of confidence in the whole class program and often leading the discussion. The repetition of skill development in RAP was a form of reinforcement for these students as many of the CBT skills were similar in all programs. The training of teachers and preparation of resources were made possible by MindMatters Plus funding. To ensure sustainability of the programs, the school will provide on going funding.

References

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