

Enhancing children's well-being using Malaysian-adapted version Super Skills for life (M-SSL) among primary school children in Malaysia

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Abstract

With the increasing prevalence of mental health issues among children, there is a growing need to implement school-based preventive programs for emotional well-being in Malaysia. Super Skills for Life (SSL) is a transdiagnostic preventive program designed based on the cognitive-behavioral therapy concept to address emotional problems among children. This study examined the effectiveness of the M-SSL program in reducing depressive and anxiety symptoms as well as other psychological issues such as social competency, worries, cognitive and emotional regulation in a sample of Malaysian children between the ages of 10 and 12. A quasi-experimental preintervention and postintervention research design was conducted. A total of 165 primary school children ($M = 10.9$, $SD = 0.72$) were recruited with 88 of them randomly assigned to the intervention group. All of them were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of demographic data, the Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale Revised, Spencer Children's Anxiety Scale, Strength and Difficulties Questionnaires, Social Skills Questionnaires and Cognitive Emotional Regulation Questionnaires. Children in the

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M-SSL group significantly reported lower levels of depressive scores during follow-up assessment compared to the children in the control group. They also showed significant improvement in their depressive subscale scores, social worries scores, and the way they perceived an event as compared to the control group. These findings provide initial support for the effects of M-SSL, suggesting that it is a valuable resource for the prevention of depressive symptoms and for improving social worries among children.

KEYWORDS

depression, Malaysian-adapted Super Skill for Life (SSL), primary school children, social worries

Practitioner Points

- Super Skills for Life (SSL) is a useful school-based preventive program for emotional well-being that can be incorporated into the school curriculum.
- Integration of age-appropriate activities, games, exercises, and workbooks into the SSL program encourages children to better express and manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours.
- The SSL program also provides students with constructive feedback and guidance to practice their social skills and improve their social interactions with peers.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Emotional problems such as anxiety and depression pose a significant public health concern among children and adolescents. A study by Tang et al. (2021) showed that 24.9% of children experience anxiety disorders and 19.7% depressive disorders. Merikangas et al. (2010) found that 15% of children and adolescents suffer from comorbid anxiety and depressive disorders. These findings underscore the urgent need for effective interventions and targeted support systems to address the emotional challenges faced by children and adolescents. In Malaysia, it was reported the prevalence of mental health problems among children and adolescents aged 5–15 increased by 49.2% between the years 1996 and 2011. To be more specific, the prevalence rates of mental health problems increased by 33.5% among children 10–12 years old (Ahmad et al., 2015). These problems cause significant distress and impairment in major life domains, including educational underachievement (Essau et al., 2014). If these emotional issues that emerge early in life are not addressed, they tend to have negative courses and may serve as a predisposing factor for various mental disorders in adulthood (Essau et al., 2014; Kessler, 1994). Thus, it is crucial to promptly intervene and foster resilience among young individuals in Malaysia. However, there is currently limited research and/or systematic intervention programs available regarding the mental health of children and adolescents in Malaysia.

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is served as a first-line nonpharmacological treatment for anxiety disorder and depression in Malaysia (Khayom et al., 2019; Mukhtar & Oei, 2011), with 50%–70% of children and adolescents with