

Evaluation of the Smiling Mind Meditation & Mindfulness Program

Name: Angelica M. Jurgens

Student ID: 103589188

Swinburne University of Technology

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eLA: Marina Klose

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Smiling Mind is an evidence based 100% non-for-profit Australian mental wellbeing program that focuses on improving the mental wellbeing of children at school and in the home via an app-based meditation program. It has been supported and developed by leading psychologists and educators in an effort to mitigate the growing mental health crisis amongst children (Smiling Mind, 2023).

This program has begun being implemented in schools across the country. The app allows educators to implement a mindfulness curriculum that offers a structured yet adaptable framework for social and emotional learning that can be utilised in the classroom as a full stand-alone programme for primary educators or customised to support current Wellbeing programs (Smiling Mind, 2023). The app provides a series of mindfulness activities that can be completed in the classroom but also taken home. Additionally, there are programs available for all age groups, those being 7-11, 12-15 and 16-22 and adults (this can be used for training staff) (Reach Out, 2023). Each age-specific program lasts for 8 to 10 weeks. The program consists of introductory seminars, daily mindfulness guidelines, 5-to-15-minute mp3 audio sessions, and take-home exercises (Reach Out, 2023).

Overall, mental illness affects 1 in 4 secondary students, 1 in 7 elementary school students, and 75% of all mental illnesses begin before the age of 24. Therefore, Smiling Mind have made it their mission to change these numbers and offer the next generation the help they need (Smiling Mins, 2023).

Mindfulness as a Strategy

For reference, mindfulness is one's awareness of his/her internal states, surroundings, and emotions. The techniques taught enable a person to observe said emotions and/or surroundings without reacting to or judging them (American Psychological Association, 2023). For some time now schools have encouraged healthy eating and exercise in order to improve the physical health of children, however in addition to this there is now mounting evidence to suggest that implementing

mindfulness training in schools can improve the mental health of children; which is another aspect of “health” that has often been neglected in the past (Torjesen, 2015).

Moreover, there is research to suggest that mindfulness can in fact aid a child’s academic ability. In a study of 646 elementary school students, it was determined that mindfulness techniques did benefit children academically and provided them with the tools necessary to cope with stressful situations more so than schools who did not employ these techniques (Sheinman et al., 2018). Studies like this have given programs such as Smiling Mind as strong foundation to build upon.

Smiling Mind’s Contribution to the Mindfulness movement

On the back of such research, Smiling Mind has made it their mission to bring these mindfulness programs into educational settings to improve mental wellbeing. As a result, Smiling Mind claim that their mindfulness activities have been shown to improve self-awareness, mood control, focus, and memory (Smiling Mind, 2023). Improvements in these areas can then result in lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as higher academic performance, social skills, and self-esteem (Smiling Mind, 2023). Moreover, as Smiling Minds is an app-based program it gives schools with fewer resources greater access to resources that will benefit their student cohort. Building on this, Lahtinen et al. (2023) discussed the need for large-scale but low-cost solutions to the mental health crisis taking over our students. App-based mindfulness exercises provide a solution to this. However, it must be noted that the majority of evidence supporting the effectiveness of such programs pertains to older students (Lahtinen et al., 2023). Therefore, the effectiveness of such apps still needs to be investigate amongst younger children.

In order to investigate such assertions, Sexton et al. (2022) conducted a study which explored the feasibility of Early Minds by Smiling Mind, an 8-week app-based program taught by educators and centred on mindfulness. Demand, acceptance, implementation, practicability, adaptation, integration, and limited efficacy testing was evaluated using a well-established methodology. Program use on preschoolers' internalising, externalising, prosocial behaviours, and executive function was examined in limited efficacy testing (Sexton et al., 2022). The study involving 188 primary school

aged children and demonstrated that although the content provided was valuable, helpful and assisted in supporting the emotions and behaviours of children, the program failed in meeting the requirements of practicality and accessibility (Sexton et al., 2022). Educators noted a poor program structure, lack of consistency/replicability in delivery among different educators (caused by inadequate training and knowledge of how to deliver the program), and suitability of the content to engage preschoolers and accommodate their learning styles. Thus, it was determined that the program struggled to be delivered as designed (Sexton et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, similar difficulties in using the program have been noted by Hartley et al. (2022). They noted problems in ensuring children remained engaged and focused during mindfulness activities. However, due to the small sample size of this study, it would not be appropriate to draw any valid conclusions from its findings. Nevertheless, it does add to a growing number of accounts which indicate certain changes should be made to improve the implementation and use of the Smiling Mind program.

Based on these findings it would be beneficial perhaps, for Smiling Mind to enhance online training guides for education providers complete with tutorials on how to implement certain mindfulness techniques in the classroom. Moreover, Smiling Minds would do well to establish a set of foundational activities to be completed before moving on to activities that require a more complex skill set (Sexton et al., 2022). Additionally, it would be beneficial to possibly reword content to make it more age appropriate for primary school children and for children of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Sexton et al., 2022).

However overall, there is very little research that has been conducted on the Smiling Mind program and other mindfulness programs operating in primary school education settings. Furthermore, there are limitations present within the current research. Sexton et al. (2022) acknowledges that of the data collected 88% of that data was supplied by the same educator. Thus, gathering more data from a greater number of educators would most certainly help provide a clearer picture of the program's effectiveness. Additionally, it would be useful to assess and educator's characteristics and mindfulness qualities before conducting future research as covariates in analysis

(Sexton et al., 2022). However, it must be noted that Smiling Minds is still a relatively new program, and more research is already being proposed and conducted by researchers such as Yaari et al. (2019). Perhaps with the findings of new research, certain gaps will be filled, providing the education and psychological community with a greater understanding of what's working and what isn't.

The Future of Smiling Mind

In conclusion, the vision and mission of Smiling Mind is a noble and needed quest. There is a multitude of evidence that suggests that mindfulness does work and can improve the lives of not only adults but children as well. Smiling Mind's choice to use an app-based platform is a great idea. It makes it accessible and provides a low-cost option for improving mental wellbeing. However, as discussed above, although it may seem easy to use, some educators disagree. There are documented issues with its implementation.

Educators have found difficulties with the following: choosing activities that are age appropriate, understanding how to conduct certain activities, trouble helping students to maintain motivation and interest in activities and lack of consistency in the way the program is applied in different schools and by different educators. Therefore, these limitations need to be addressed and solved in order for the Smiling Mind program to successfully accomplish its goal in significantly improving the mental wellbeing of children. However, this is a journey that may not necessarily have an end destination, as the field of psychology is always growing in its knowledge and there are constant adaptations needed in all programs aimed at mental wellbeing. Yet, we can say that the Smiling Mind program is a wonderful and solid stepping stone towards a healthier generation of young people.

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