



Psychological school-based interventions for anxiety: a systematic review and meta-analysis

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ABSTRACT

Childhood anxiety is one of the most common emotional problems during the school years, characterized by early onset, high chronicity, and significant consequences for children's academic, social, and emotional functioning. Given the central role that schools play in development, psychological interventions in the school setting have emerged as a promising strategy for the prevention and treatment of anxiety. This systematic review and meta-analysis examined the effectiveness of school-based psychological programs aimed at reducing anxiety in elementary school children (6–12 years). Following the PRISMA guidelines and a protocol registered in PROSPERO, bibliographic searches were conducted in PubMed and Web of Science, supplemented by manual searches. Thirteen articles (comprising 14 independent studies) met the inclusion criteria for the systematic review. Of these, 13 studies (from 12 articles) were included in the meta-analysis due to insufficient data in one study. A random-effects meta-analysis showed a small, but statistically significant, overall effect after treatment ($d = -0.236$) that was maintained during the follow-up period ($d = -0.21$). Moderator analyses revealed that interventions delivered by psychologists produced stronger effects than those implemented by teachers, partially explaining the observed heterogeneity. Overall, the results support the implementation of psychological interventions in school settings to reduce childhood anxiety and underscore the importance of involving trained mental health professionals. Finally, limitations and implications for research and educational practice are addressed.

Childhood anxiety is one of the most prevalent and persistent emotional problems during the school years, with rates ranging from 10% to 20% of the school-age population (Polanczyk et al., 2015; Rapee et al., 2023). In addition to its prevalence, it stands out for its relevance in terms of other epidemiological aspects. In this sense, anxiety disorders are characterized by their early onset, high chronicity, and negative impact on academic performance, social and family relationships, social adaptation, and the child's overall well-being (Chapman et al., 2022; Dvorsky et al., 2021; Lawrence et al., 2019). They are also characterized as one of the earliest types of disorders (Solmi et al., 2022), affecting not only the personal sphere, but also the social and academic spheres (Christina et al., 2021). They are highly comorbid with other pathologies and predict a series of future mental disorders (Magson et al., 2022; Rapee et al., 2023). Therefore, the implementation of evidence-based psychological programs in the school context not only aims to reduce symptoms, but also to promote socio-emotional adjustment and prevent future internalizing disorders (Colomeischi et al., 2022).

Traditionally, children were treated by specialists in their offices. However, psychological interventions within the school context have recently gained greater importance.

School is the formal structure where children spend most of their time, and therefore plays a fundamental role in their development, ranging from relationships with peers and social interactions to academic performance and cognitive progress, emotional control and behavioral expectations, and physical and moral development (Rutter et al., 1979). Furthermore, all these areas are reciprocally affected by mental health (Fazel et al., 2014). Therefore, school offers us unique opportunities to promote mental health from a universal and preventive perspective (Fazel et al., 2014). Thus, interest in psychological interventions in the school context has grown significantly in recent years, as schools are the "natural" place to promote emotional well-being and prevent mental health problems (Fonseca-Pedrero et al., 2023). Therefore, it is not surprising that the World Health Organization (2021) has issued Guidelines on School Health Services emphasizing this

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