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A psychological intervention for children who have a parent with cancer: Impact of internal locus of control and parental stress

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It is estimated that 15,000 young people in Australia have a parent diagnosed with cancer each year (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011). The diagnosis of cancer has a great impact on these young people and their families. Studies have reported that children and adolescents who have a parent with a cancer diagnosis are at a heightened risk of poor psychosocial outcomes (Ellis, Wakefield, Antill, Burns and Patterson, 2017; Maynard, Patterson, McDonald & Stevens, 2013); however, there is a lack of evidence based interventions to assist this particularly vulnerable group. The uncertainty and perceived uncontrollable nature of a cancer diagnosis offers children few opportunities to exert internal or personal control. It is thought that low internal locus of control leads to the development of internalising and emotional problems like stress, anxiety and depression (Compas, Worsham, Ey and Howell, 1996). Whilst positive parent-child relationships have a major role in acting as a buffer against the stressors associated with a cancer diagnosis, if a parent is stressed and unable to cope themselves, children's self-esteem and response to cancer goes unsupported. This can have negative repercussions on schooling, family functioning and interpersonal relationships (Ellis, et al. 2017). The current study, conducted in collaboration with The University of Sydney, Camp Quality and Sydney Child Psychology Centre, aims to determine the psychological and social needs of children between the ages of 8 and 13 who have a parent diagnosed with cancer. A quasi-experimental design will examine the pre and post effects of the intervention on a child's sense of internal control and parental stress. The data will be statistically analysed through a paired sample t-test. The three-day intervention aims to enhance resilience and coping skills of children with a parent who has a cancer diagnosis. A therapist qualified in cognitive-behavioural therapy and mindfulness will conduct the intervention aided by a therapist manual. The intervention is in a group format and the children will be provided with a workbook containing information and activities and they will receive peer support from other children who have a parent with cancer. Parents will attend parent only sessions and receive a parent's manual containing the contents of the children's workbook and they learn ways to better communicate with their child about their diagnosis. It is expected that completing the intervention will increase internal locus of control for children and reduce the levels of parental stress. The study will benefit those participating in the intervention and the information gained will help children who have a parent diagnosed with cancer.

Biography

Dr Fiona Martin is an Educational and Development Psychologist and Clinical Director at the Sydney Child Psychology Centre. Dr Martin is an honorary member of the University of Sydney's Centre of Behavioural Sciences in Medicine. She has many years of clinical and research experience in child and adolescent psychology. Dr Martin has conducted research on early intervention methods for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD); theory of mind and self-understanding in children and adolescents with ASD; anti-libidinal medication for sex offenders with an intellectual disability; Consumers with an intellectual disability; and the efficacy of drawing in children's eye witness testimony. She has extensive experience in the assessment and treatment of a wide range of difficulties including neuro developmental, learning, emotional, behavioural and attentional difficulties.

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Page 30