

## The Efficacy of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Treating Depression in Children

John Kim\*

Department of Psychology, Seoul National University, Seoul, South Korea

### DESCRIPTION

Depression is a prevalent mental health disorder that affects not only adults but also children and adolescents. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), depression is one of the leading causes of disability worldwide. For children, depression can be particularly challenging as it impacts their emotional, academic and social development. One of the most widely used and researched therapeutic approaches for treating childhood depression is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). This article explores the effectiveness of CBT for children with depression, its core principles and how it helps children manage their symptoms.

### Childhood depression

Depression in children often manifests differently than in adults. While adults may primarily experience feelings of sadness or hopelessness, children with depression can exhibit a range of symptoms, including:

- Persistent irritability or mood swings.
- Loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed.
- Changes in appetite or sleep patterns.
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions.
- Physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches without an obvious medical cause.
- Social withdrawal or excessive fears.
- Low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness.

Untreated depression in children can have long-term effects on their mental health and overall well-being. It can interfere with academic performance, strain family relationships and potentially lead to more severe mental health conditions in adulthood, including anxiety and substance abuse.

### Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a form of psychotherapy that is widely used to treat various mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety and other mood disorders. CBT is based on the principle that our thoughts, emotions and behaviours

are interconnected. The therapy aims to help individuals recognize and change negative thought patterns and behaviors that contribute to their emotional distress.

In the context of childhood depression, CBT focuses on helping children:

**Identify and challenge negative thoughts:** Children learn to recognize the Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs) that contribute to their depression, such as thoughts of being worthless or hopeless.

**Develop healthier thinking patterns:** Once negative thoughts are identified, children work with the therapist to replace them with more realistic, balanced thoughts.

**Change unhelpful behaviors:** Depression can lead to withdrawal from activities and social isolation. CBT encourages children to engage in positive activities that improve their mood, such as physical exercise or social interactions.

**Build coping skills:** CBT teaches children how to manage stress, handle difficult emotions and use problem-solving techniques to address life challenges.

CBT is often delivered in a structured format, typically involving weekly sessions with a trained therapist. The therapy may last for several weeks or months, depending on the severity of the child's symptoms and their response to treatment.

### CBT is effective for children with depression

CBT has proven to be one of the most effective and evidence-based treatments for childhood depression. Its effectiveness can be attributed to several factors:

**Age-appropriate techniques:** CBT is tailored to the developmental needs of children. Unlike adults, children may not have the cognitive ability to fully understand abstract concepts or engage in introspective thinking. CBT for children often employs age-appropriate strategies, such as interactive techniques, behavioral interventions and storytelling and metaphors, to help children express themselves, engage in enjoyable activities and understand complex emotional processes.

**Correspondence to:** John Kim, Department of Psychology, Seoul National University, Seoul, South Korea, E-mail: john.kim@snu.kr

**Received:** 23-Aug-2024, Manuscript No. JDA-24-35313; **Editor assigned:** 26-Aug-2024, PreQC No. JDA-24-35313 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 09-Sep-2024, QC No. JDA-24-35313; **Revised:** 16-Sep-2024, Manuscript No. JDA-24-35313 (R); **Published:** 23-Sep-2024, DOI: 10.35248/2167-1044.24.13.544

**Citation:** Kim J (2024). The Efficacy of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Treating Depression in Children. J Dep Anxiety. 13:544.

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**Focus on positive behavioral changes:** CBT encourages children to take an active role in their own recovery. Instead of focusing solely on emotions, CBT helps children identify behaviors that contribute to their depression, such as withdrawal from social situations or lack of engagement in pleasurable activities. Through behavioral activation, children are encouraged to re-engage with activities that they once found enjoyable. Over time, this helps counteract the feelings of hopelessness and helplessness associated with depression.

**Skill development for managing negative thoughts:** One of the hallmarks of CBT is its emphasis on cognitive restructuring. Children with depression often experience negative thought patterns, such as "I'm not good enough," or "No one likes me." These thoughts reinforce feelings of sadness and hopelessness. CBT helps children identify and challenge these thoughts, teaching them how to replace them with more balanced and realistic alternatives. This process builds cognitive resilience, helping children handle future stressors without falling into depressive thinking patterns.

**Parent involvement:** CBT for children often includes a family component, especially when treating younger children. Parent training is an integral part of the process, as parents play a vital role in supporting their child's progress. Parents are taught how

to reinforce the skills their child is learning in therapy, such as encouraging positive behaviors and helping them manage stress at home. This family-based approach creates a supportive environment for the child and helps ensure that the therapeutic gains made in sessions are maintained in daily life.

## CONCLUSION

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a highly effective and well-researched treatment for childhood depression. It provides children with the tools they need to identify and challenge negative thought patterns, re-engage in enjoyable activities and develop healthy coping strategies. By focusing on both cognitive and behavioral changes, CBT helps children gain control over their depression, leading to improved mood, functioning and overall well-being.

The evidence supporting CBT for childhood depression is robust, with studies showing significant symptom reduction and long-term benefits. While challenges exist, particularly around engagement and access to qualified therapists, CBT remains one of the best options available for treating childhood depression. With early intervention and the right support, children can overcome their depression and develop resilience that will benefit them throughout their lives.