What is FRIENDS?

FRIENDS is an Australian-developed, world-leading school-based program that helps young people cope with and manage anxiety and depression both now and in later life. It is designed to be used with all students, takes a minimum of 10 sessions to complete, and can be run by school teachers. FRIENDS fits well within health and personal planning curricula that focuses on personal development skills.

FRIENDS promotes self-esteem, problem-solving skills, psychological resilience, self-expression, and building positive relationships with peers and adults. It is a positive, fun, learning experience that does not involve any clinical assessment or diagnosis and avoids labelling students as anxious or different. There is no mention throughout the program of topics such as depression, suicide, drug abuse or violence.

Why combat anxiety and depression through schools?

Research has shown that one in five children are at risk for severe anxiety and up to 15% of adolescents may experience some form of anxiety disorder (typified by an excessive amount of worry about future or past difficulties that interferes with day-to-day life activities). These disorders are often difficult to detect and if left unattended may develop over years into adult anxiety disorders or, in some cases, clinical depression leading to suicidal thoughts.

Why exactly worry and depression seems to be an increasingly common feature of our modern society is yet to be understood. Perhaps it is the changing nature of work and family, added burdens on parenting, or the increased and sometimes intrusive nature of the communication revolution. Our newspapers, televisions and computers supply us with an endless stream of disturbing images and challenging knowledge about our entire globe.

What we do know is that education for emotional health needs to start early. We can no longer rely on a simple, happy and protected childhood spent growing up in a world only as big as our local neighbourhood. Today's internet-friendly schools bring more information to children and adolescents about how big and complicated the adult world can be. While being worried about certain things is a normal part of growing up, excessive worry can lead to significant mental distress both in childhood and on into adulthood.

Early intervention and prevention through the school system will help children cope with the worries and stresses of puberty and adolescence, fulfill their potential, and prevent the development of thought patterns that ultimately may lead to such self-damaging behaviour as aggression, criminal activity, substance abuse and in its extreme, suicide.
What does FRIENDS cost?
Each child attending the FRIENDS program requires a workbook. These workbooks are supplied to all participating students by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), so there are no costs to children or their families.

Is Training required?
Prior to beginning a FRIENDS program, teachers are required to attend a single one-day group training workshop. In addition to materials, MCFD provides an instructor for the training workshops. In so far as the FRIENDS initiative in BC represents a cooperation between MCFD and the Ministry of Education, the contribution from the school districts is the provision of a training venue and release time for staff to attend the training event. This collaborative model was found to work well during the pilot project.

How Long will the FRIENDS Program Continue?
MCFD is committed to sponsoring the program for as long as the program remains relevant.

Who do I CONTACT for more Information?
For more information about FRIENDS in BC and to view the current training schedule go to: www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health/friends.htm
For additional information please contact: MCF.CYMHFRIENDS@gov.bc.ca

How do we know FRIENDS works?
FRIENDS is based on a firm theoretical model combining cognitive and behavioural techniques rigorously tested both in Australia and overseas since 1994 using randomized control studies across a range of age groups and ethnic and social backgrounds.

In simple terms this research says that up to 80% of children showing signs of anxiety disorder no longer display those signs for up to six years after completing the program. For children who are not clinically anxious, FRIENDS significantly increases their level of self-esteem while reducing their feelings of worry and depression. FRIENDS is currently used in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, England, Ireland, The Netherlands, Germany, Portugal and the US.

What happens in a FRIENDS group?
Teachers guide students through a series of class-based activities designed to teach them how to deal with worrying situations by being prepared, rewarding themselves, and seeking support. Students complete home-based activities between sessions, and at the end of the program they can keep their FRIENDS workbooks for future reference. Parents have an opportunity to help their children and learn more about what they are experiencing in the FRIENDS program by attending a short series of parent evenings which may be arranged by the school.

Gain skills such as:
- Dealing with difficulties
- Recognizing signs of anxiety
- Relaxation techniques
- Positive thinking
- Problem solving
- Emotional resilience
- Using peer support
- Conflict resolution

How does it work?
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