



EVERYONE MATTERS in a school community

Liz Wrigley, SKIPS Coordinator

Supporting Kids in Primary Schools (SKIPS) is a unique program that deals directly and honestly with the issue of mental illness in families and how primary schools support the children in those families.

In Australia one in four adults will suffer mental illness at some time. Many have children at primary school. While the needs of parents with mental illness are recognised by mental health, health and welfare, health promotion, education and protective services, service guidelines often don't take into account for the needs of their children.

The SKIPS program attempts to step across the boundaries between mental health, community health, education and health promotion to address the needs of these children. It brings together strands from a number of different fields including mental health, health promotion and education.

Working with teachers in primary settings

Implementing SKIPS with teachers resulted in significant shifts in teachers' confidence and understanding. In written feedback teachers have commented that they appreciate talking about the issues and hearing about real-life experiences from people who have experienced mental illness as children.

Teachers realised that the supportive skills they (and their schools) already use

in many situations involving children and their families could be applied to children who have a parent with a mental illness.

Typical comments from teachers following the workshops include:

I have more confidence in dealing with children in that situation

I understand how children cope and how I might be able to assist at school

I know that mental illness is something we need to talk about

I can apply supportive skills I already have to children who have a parent with a mental illness

Sue Cahill, Student Wellbeing Leader at St Charles Borromeo Primary School, Templestowe, observed the SKIPS program in her school in 2003. Since then she has trained as a SKIPS presenter and run the program at her school every second year as part of the Healthy Minds/Healthy Bodies and Empathy units of the curriculum. She says the advantage of the program is that it exposes children gently to the topic of mental illness. Sue commented:

SKIPS bridges a gap in the curriculum. It adds something to the kit-bag of tools that teachers use. It is not intrusive, but real life. The program's use of consumers is incredibly powerful as it helps to

demystify mental illness for the students. It's evident that many children live with someone in their life with mental illness and SKIPS helps them understand and make sense of this. On every occasion SKIPS is run there are one or two disclosures from students and families, enabling better understanding and support.

Julie Kugler, Assistant Principal of Badger Creek Primary School, says SKIPS is incredibly useful for both the interpersonal and personal development of students. She finds the program aligns beautifully with the progression points in the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, making teachers' jobs easier.

Working with primary students

The results are just as powerful for students. They remain constant over 12 years, regardless of school location (semi-rural, outer and inner suburban), socio-economic status, or system (government, independent or Catholic).

Students are asked about their understanding of depression and schizophrenia. Tabled below are the results from one of the pre/post quiz questions given to all children who participate in SKIPS.

Table 1: Differences in attitudes of students who knew the word schizophrenia prior to the sessions and understanding of schizophrenia subsequent to the sessions

	Frequency of words used to describe schizophrenia (percentage)		
	Appropriate	Incorrect	Derogatory
Pre-SKIPS			
Knew schizophrenia	41.8	11.9	46.3
Did not know schizophrenia	52.9	15.1	32.0
Post-SKIPS			
All students	91.0	3.2	5.8

Analysis of these results by Dr Andrew Joyce (Lecturer, Department of Occupational Therapy, Monash University) shows that students who had heard the word *schizophrenia* before SKIPS were more likely to use derogatory terms, like *crazy* or *dangerous*, than students who had not heard the term. Their negative views probably reflect widely-held community (mis)perceptions of mental illness.

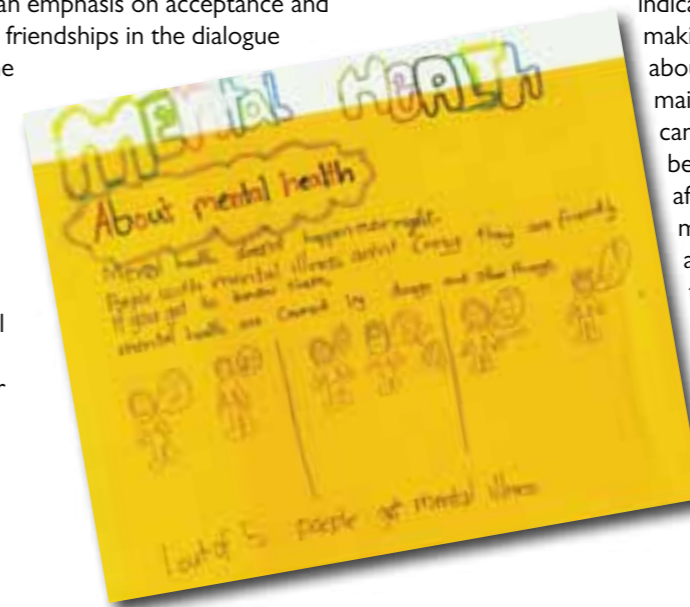
Students were also asked at the end of the three sessions to record what they had learned from the program. While most remembered some general or specific information, over half commented on shifts in their attitude to mental illness, which is more likely to endure than information retention. This was clearly expressed by one of the students:

I learnt lots of things but I have forgotten most. Mental illness can include lots of things (but) having a mental illness does not mean you are stupid

Age-appropriate education and exposure to people with mental illness fosters increased tolerance and understanding.

After doing SKIPS students from Gladesville Primary School were asked to create a poster promoting Mental Health Week 2010. This poster was produced by one of the Grade 5/6 students who participated in SKIPS.

There is an emphasis on acceptance and maintaining friendships in the dialogue between the characters in the poster, suggesting the stigma usually associated with mental illness is reduced for this young person.



Whole school community

Schools have told us that SKIPS not only affects the staff and the grade 5 and 6 classrooms, it makes an impact on the whole school community and can affect child-parent relationships, child-child relationships, staff-child relationships and staff-parent relationships.

Feedback from schools indicates that SKIPS has enabled parents to have a conversation with their children they didn't think possible. It has given parents the confidence to disclose their own mental health issues to the school for the first time. And occasionally children relate SKIPS to their own world, disclosing that they know someone close to them with a mental illness.

Some schools noticed an impact on student interactions, with a noticeable reduction in playground infractions due to a more caring atmosphere created by grade 5 and 6 students.

Julie Kugler of Badger Creek Primary School believes that staff meet the needs of their customers—parents and students—better, because of SKIPS;

(they) have a better understanding, a deeper understanding of issues. It gives staff a link between how they treat people and getting the best out of their class. Teachers become more flexible.

These are exciting outcomes for SKIPS as it

indicates that by making discussion about mental illness mainstream, there can be tangible benefits to those affected by mental illness and the rest of the community. As Julie says *'SKIPS is a great reminder of how people should be treated.'*

The program

EACH and Eastern Health developed SKIPS in 1999. Over 12 years it has delivered consistent outcomes around:

- increasing understanding of mental illness
- reducing stigma, and
- increasing the confidence of primary school teachers and staff to support children and their families.

The program consists of two workshops for the whole school staff and three classroom sessions for grades 5 and 6 students. The program is usually presented by two presenters. It features two guest speakers: a person who talks to teachers about their experience growing up with a parent with mental illness, and a person who speaks to students about living with a mental illness.

SKIPS has had an evaluation strategy from its inception and has been modified three times as a result of what has been discovered. Every time SKIPS is run information is gathered about the impact of the program on students and teachers. Results have been consistent and impressive over the 12 years.

Liz Wrigley is the SKIPS Coordinator. The program was developed with Eastern Health and Eastern Access Community Health (EACH). Liz can be contacted at skips@each.com.au

TLN became aware of this program from the Kids Matter website, www.kidsmatterprimary.edu.au/programs-guide, where a wide range of programs across many geographic locations can be found. SKIPS has its own website for further information on this specific program www.each.com.au.