

Effectiveness of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Based on "Coping Cat" Program in Treatment of Separation Anxiety Disorder

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was evaluation the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral therapy based on "coping cat" program in treatment of separation anxiety disorder (SAD). The research design was quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest, follow-up with the control group. The statistical population included all students, aged 8-13 (boys and girls) with SAD diagnosis at schools in Songhor city in 2022. By purposeful sampling method, 36 children were selected and assigned equally to experimental and control groups. The experimental group received 16 sessions one-hour of treatment twice per week. Then, post-test was performed and 2 months later, follow-up test was performed. Data were analyzed by mixed analysis of variance with repeated measure. The results showed that experimental group compared with the control group in the post-test stage had a significant decrease in their scores. Also, therapeutic gains had maintained in the follow-up stage.

Keywords: Coping Cat Program, cognitive behavioral therapy, separation anxiety disorder.

Introduction

Separation anxiety disorder (SAD) in childhood is excessive fear or anxiety concerning separation from home or attachment figures. Children with SAD, worry a lot about the well-being or death of attachment figures, particularly when separated from them. They also worry about untoward events to themselves, such as getting lost that separates them from attachment figures (APA, 2013). Academic and social skills learning is a basic need for every child, and because SAD often begins in the preschool and elementary years (Parvandi, 2022), restricts the child's social relationships, has a negative impact on family functioning, and causes problems with school attendance (Méndez, et al., 2022). Early diagnosis and effective treatment can help children cope with the anxiety concerning separation (Boland, et al., 2022). According to cognitive-behavioral theory, SAD is caused by conditioning and dysfunctional cognitions. Therefore, according to etiology, its treatment is cognitive restructuring and changing behavior (Beck, 2020). Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) based on "The *Coping Cat*" Program (Kendall & Hedtke, 2006) is a 16-session manualized treatment for children (aged 8-13), who meet criteria anxiety disorders, such as SAD (Hajmohammadi, 2021). The *Coping Cat* has two sections: the first focuses on psychoeducation, whereas the second

emphasizes exposure to anxiety provoking situations (Schroeder & Smith, 2017). Hajmohammadi, et al. (2021) in their research, concluded that this intervention has a significant effect on reducing anxiety disorders in primary school children. Although most childhood anxiety disorders decrease over time, School refusal related with SAD is a psychiatric emergency (Tobon, 2018). Review of research history showed that so far no research has investigated the effectiveness of CBT based on *The Coping Cat Program* on SAD in children. Therefore, the aim of this study was evaluation the effectiveness of CBT based on the "coping cat" program on separation anxiety disorder. The research hypothesis is as follows: CBT based on "The *Coping Cat*" Program is effective on separation anxiety disorder.

Method

The present study method was quasi-experimental with pretest, posttest design and follow-up with the control group. The statistical population included all students, aged 8-13 (boys and girls) with SAD symptoms. By purposeful sampling method, 36 children were selected and assigned equally to experimental and control groups. After performing the separation anxiety scale (parental version), as pre-test, the experimental group received 16 sessions one-hour of treatment two sessions per week. After the intervention, post-test and 2 months later, follow-up test performed. Data were analyzed by mixed analysis of variance with repeated measure.

Separation Anxiety Assessment Scale (Parent Version): This scale has 34 items that developed by Han, et al (2003) to assess separation anxiety and complete by parents (Talaiejad, 2018). The four main dimensions of this scale are: fear of being alone, fear of abandonment, fear of physical illness and worry about calamitous events. The total score is the sum of the scores of all the items (Méndez, et al., 2022). Mendez, et al. (2022) reported the reliability of this scale through test-retest method 0.72. In this study, the reliability coefficient by Cronbach's alpha method was 0.71, for general score.

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) based on "The Coping Cat" Program (Kendall & Hedtke, 2006): This intervention program is a 16 session program of CBT. The therapist manual and client workbook are used together. "The Coping Cat" Program represents a synthesis of behavioral and cognitive strategies. Understanding social influences (e.g., family, peer) and the teaching of emotional management skills are also addressed.

Results

For evaluation the change in the scores of experimental and control groups, over time (pre-test, post-test and follow-up), the results of wilks' lambda test in multivariate tests are presented in Table 1. The effect of time and time * group interaction are significant for the separation anxiety variable at the level of 0.001.

Therefore, the results indicate that the scores, over time as well as the interaction of time * group are significant.

Table 1. Multivariate Tests

Variable	Test	Effect	Value	F	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Separation Anxiety	Wilks'	time	.34	32.16	33.00	.001	.66
	Lambda	time * group	.57	12.48	33.00	.001	.43

The results of the Benferoni test for comparing the means are given in Table 2. The difference between the means in the experimental group in pre-test, post-test and follow-up stages is significant (p <0.005). Therefore, the research hypothesis that was CBT based on "The *Coping Cat*" Program is effective on separation anxiety disorder is confirmed.

Table 2. Pairwise comparisons in Benferoni test

Variable	Time	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Separation Anxiety	Pre-test post test	13.41	1.12	.001
	Pre-test follow up	14.27	1.06	.001
	post-test follow-up	0.86	0.29	.001

Discussion and Conclusion

The results showed that Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) based on "Coping Cat" Program has a significant effect on decrease separation anxiety in children. Also, therapeutic gains, had maintained in the follow-up stage. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) based on "Coping Cat" Program, causes that children do not worry about the well-being or death of attachment figures, particularly when separated from them. They also do not worry about untoward events to themselves, such as getting lost that separates them from attachment figure. Finally, they do not refuse to go to school and stay in the classroom, which separates him from his mother, so he can learn academic skills without worry. Only children with separation anxiety disorder diagnosis as a sample group, no gender segregation, purposeful sampling and short-term follow-up, were the limitations of this research. It is suggested to use the "coping cat" program for treatment of separation anxiety in children.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.



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