

# Brief training on CBT for anxiety in children with autism can equalize knowledge and self-efficacy in mental health and non-mental health school providers

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## Overview

### Background:

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are at high risk for developing anxiety (Perihan et al. 2020).

It is challenging for children with ASD to access mental health services.

One substantial limitation to the provision of these services is the availability of trained providers (Elkins et al. 2011).

The capacity to provide these services could be substantially expanded if school providers, particularly non-mental health providers, could be trained to deliver effective interventions.

### Objective:

To examine whether school-based mental health and non-mental health providers demonstrate differences in knowledge and perceived self-efficacy in their ability to deliver anxiety treatment for children with ASD following a brief training.

## Methods

### Participants:

Seventy-seven school-based providers from three large public school districts in the Denver area.

Inclusion criteria: School providers in any discipline (not paraprofessionals), who were currently working with students 8-14 years old with ASD without intellectual disability

Provider disciplines were classified as:

**mental health:** school psychology, counseling, and social work

**non-mental health:** occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, special education, and other

### Training:

Facing Your Fears (FYF) is a group-based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) treatment for managing anxiety in youth ages 8-14 with ASD (Reaven et al. 2011).

12-hour workshop, delivered by FYF treatment developers.

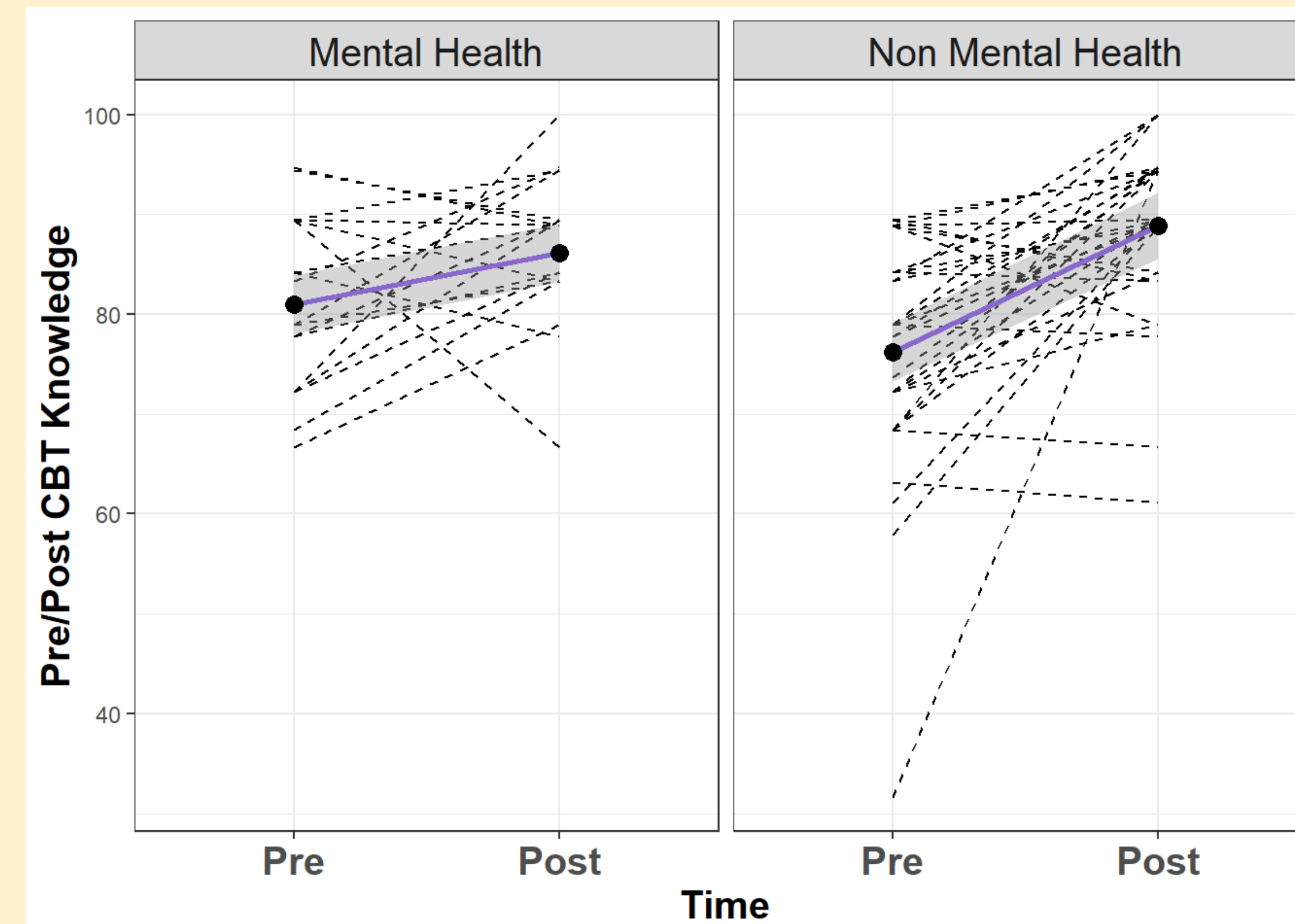
Didactic presentations on the identification of anxiety in students with ASD, a broad overview of CBT for anxiety and an overview of FYF.

Highly interactive, including small group activities, role play and other experiential exercises.

### Design:

Providers completed pre- and post-workshop measures evaluating CBT knowledge, as well as a survey post-workshop assessing self-efficacy (including knowledge and confidence) in their ability to provide the FYF intervention.

## Results: CBT Knowledge



**Pre-workshop:** mental health providers scored significantly higher than non-mental health providers on the measure of CBT knowledge (mental health  $M = 81.0$ , non-mental health  $M = 76.2$ ,  $t = 2.1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), likely reflecting their higher levels of background training.

**Post-workshop:** scores were significantly higher than pre-test scores overall ( $M = 10.3$ ,  $t = -6.3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and there were no longer differences between mental health and non-mental health providers' scores (mental health  $M = 86.1$ , non-mental health  $M = 86.8$ ,  $t = -1.5$ ,  $p = 0.15$ ).

## Results: Self-Efficacy



There were no differences in the providers' post-workshop ratings of self-efficacy by discipline (mental health  $M = 26.5$ , non-mental health  $M = 26.1$ ,  $t = 0.7$ ,  $p = 0.49$ ). Providers on average endorsed "agree" or "strongly agree" on items of confidence and self-efficacy regarding delivery of the FYF program.

## Discussion

### Conclusion:

A brief training workshop may be effective in increasing CBT knowledge

Similarly high self-efficacy was reported by providers from diverse training backgrounds

These results are encouraging and suggest that training non-mental school providers to provide anxiety treatment in collaboration with mental health providers could expand access to mental health treatment for children in school settings.

### Future Directions:

Examine the relationship between provider discipline, CBT knowledge, and attitudes about FYF following treatment implementation.

### Limitations:

Relatively small sample size

Lack of individual provider treatment fidelity data

Lack of psychometrically-validated self-efficacy measure

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