

# Searching for the key to the self : evaluation of the 'I am the key' program for mental health promotion

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## *Summary*

This thesis describes a study on the implementation and effects of the 'I Am The Key' (IATK) Broad Spectrum program to mental health promotion. First, both an extensive literature review and a cross-sectional study stresses the importance of 'self-esteem' as a protective factor and a non-specific risk factor in mental health (chapters 2 and 3). Then the main themes and methods of the IATK program are presented (chapter 4). Subsequently, both short-term and long-term evaluation studies on the program's effects on symptoms of depression and aggression are presented (chapters 5 and 6). Finally, implications of the work reported in this thesis for theory and prevention practice, are discussed (chapter 7).

In the second chapter evidence is presented illustrating that positive self-esteem can lead to good mental health and positive social behavior, and that a broad range of mental disorders and social problems are associated with poor self-esteem. Such mental disorders and social problems include both internalizing problems (e.g. depression, suicidal tendencies, eating disorders and anxiety) and externalizing problems (e.g. violence, substance abuse). This chapter concentrates on self-esteem from a developmental and educational point of view as a potential risk and protective factor in mental and physical health. Focusing on self-esteem is considered an important element of mental health promotion and of a Broad Spectrum Approach (BSA) in prevention. BSA is an approach that targets risk or protective factors that are common to a number of problems in preventive interventions and that results in positive outcomes on multiple mental health indicators.

The third chapter describes the results of a cross-sectional study on internalizing and externalizing problems in normal children. The relationships between self-esteem, self-perceived competence and parenting stress and internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors were investigated in a sample of 709 elementary schoolchildren. Results indicate that self-esteem and self-perceived competence, in particular concerning behavioral conduct and social acceptance, are negatively associated with problem behavior. More specifically, self-esteem, scholastic competence, and social acceptance appeared to be negatively related to

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internalizing problems. Whereas, self-perceived competence in behavioral conduct appeared to be negatively related to externalizing problems. Parenting stress was positively associated with externalizing problem behavior. Gender differences regarding internalizing and externalizing problems were found. Boys had more externalizing problem behavior while girls had more internalizing problem behavior. Scholastic competence interacted with gender, and only served as a predictor for internalizing problems for girls. Further analysis implied that self-esteem could serve as a mediating factor between parenting stress and problem behavior. Furthermore, self-esteem and scholastic competence are apparently mediating factors between gender and internalizing problem behavior. No interaction effects between parenting stress and self-esteem were found in the prediction of problem behavior.

The fourth chapter provides a theoretical underpinning to the 'I am the key' program, a program which aims to foster self-esteem. It addresses the theoretical insights, methods, and strategies underlying 'I Am The key' (IATK). The main theories are Humanistic theory and Gestalt theory. Both of these stress the importance of phenomenological principles and self-actualization. The main focus of the intervention therefore, was on self-esteem and self-concept, using methods such as self-dialogue, creative expression, and group discussion. First, the consequences of poor and positive self-esteem are introduced and self-esteem is addressed as a core element in mental health promotion and in a Broad Spectrum Approach in prevention. Second, this chapter discusses the theories and educational methods of the 'I Am The Key' program. Third, it gives an outline of the curriculum, its main themes, methods, and strategies. Fourth, results of a pilot study are discussed. The pilot results were favorable: the program resulted in a decrease in aggression, depression and social problems; there was also an increase in self-rated physical appearance. Furthermore, the program was found to be suitable within the Dutch school context. There were enthusiastic reactions by the children and the teachers regarding the content and most materials as reflected by questionnaires and observations. According to qualitative data, the atmosphere in the group improved and there were more positive interactions in the class. Moreover social skills (e.g. listening skills and social acceptance) had improved. Case studies indicated an

improvement in psychosocial functioning of children who scored high in problem behavior prior to the program's implementation.

The IATK program was further implemented in 16 schools in the south of the Netherlands, in a nested randomized design. Within every school there were experimental and control classes. The sample included 709 children, 10-12 years old with 372 girls and 337 boys. The fifth and sixth chapters present short-term effect and long-term effect studies of the program. The main question of the short-term efficacy study is whether the IATK counseling program has an effect on mental health (promotion) variables (i.e. global self-esteem and self-evaluated competence in behavioral conduct) and thereby contributes to the prevention of mental and social problems (i.e. delinquency, depression, and aggression) of schoolchildren.

Results of the short-term study show that the program had significant effects in reducing delinquent behavior for participants ranking high in such behavior at pre-test. Moreover, it also showed reduced behavioral conduct for subjects scoring high in this domain at pre-test, and increasing aggressive behavior for those who scored low on this sub-scale at pre-test. The latter was interpreted as an assertiveness indicator. No impact was found on self-esteem or on internalizing problems such as symptoms of depression.

Chapter 6 presents a follow-up study on the impact of the IATK counseling program; it was conducted following a booster session eight months after the intervention. The booster was implemented in the same 16 elementary schools in the south of the Netherlands, in a nested randomized design, with experimental and control classes in every school. The sample included 680 students, 10-12 years old with 351 girls and 329 boys.

Comparisons between the experimental and control group at the follow-up test showed that the program had a significant effect in reducing behavioral conduct for subjects ranking high in behavioral conduct at pre-test. It also showed increasing aggressive behavior for subjects scoring low on this subscale at pre-test. This last, was interpreted as an assertiveness indicator. It also showed a trend toward decreased aggressiveness for subjects ranking high on this scale at pre-test.

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Finally, Chapter 7 integrates the findings of the reported studies and discusses the results and the theoretical implications. Furthermore, the limitations and the practical implications are presented. Future recommendations for BSA preventive interventions are discussed. In particular, attention is paid to self-esteem enhancement and to the prevention of both externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors within the school system.