



February 2023

Examining the uptake and implementation of the Smooth Sailing mental health service for schools

Funder: Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC), Graf Foundation, and Australian Government Department of Health through The Prevention Hub

CRESP stream: Schools

Research aims

This study aims to examine the uptake and implementation of Smooth Sailing, an online mental health service for secondary schools. The research will identify:

- the barriers to, and facilitators of, effective implementation of Smooth Sailing
- the overall impacts of Smooth Sailing on students and schools.

This study is part of a broader body of work that seeks to improve the adoption, appropriate adaptation, delivery and sustainment of the Smooth Sailing service. The end goal is to produce an effective intervention that can be rolled out to schools across Australia.



Overview

Around 75% of common mental health problems emerge before the age of 25. Supporting young people to develop their mental health literacy can help minimise their risk of experiencing mental ill health. Smooth Sailing is a universal mental health service designed by Black Dog Institute researchers. The service uses a web-based platform to screen users for symptoms of anxiety and depression using validated psychometric scales. The service delivers self-directed, internet-delivered psychoeducation and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (iCBT) modules for students whose screening results show nil to moderate symptoms. Those with severe symptoms receive in-person support from a school counsellor.

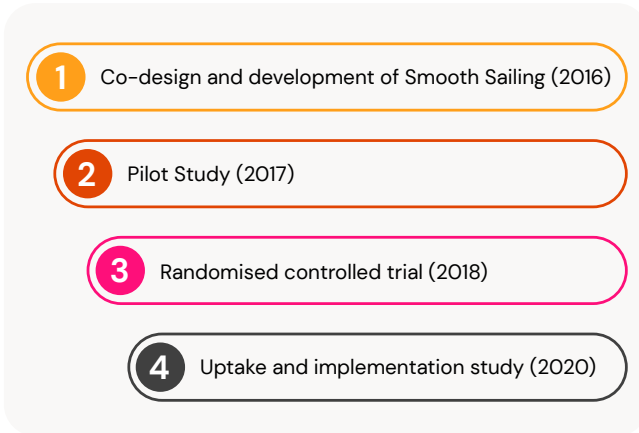
Based on the principles of stepped care, Smooth Sailing aims to:

- help high schools identify adolescents who need mental health support
- improve help-seeking intentions and behaviour in high school students
- reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression in high school students.

The service was first developed in 2016 and has since been the focus of a series of studies designed to investigate its feasibility, effectiveness and uptake.



Project timeline



Research activity

Phase 1: Co-design (2016)

The Smooth Sailing service was co-designed at Black Dog Institute in partnership with:

- 61 young people
- 29 school counsellors
- 18 teachers
- 14 parents
- 11 GPs



The first iteration of the service was positively received by all stakeholder groups:

- Students described it as being helpful, with the majority (92%) reporting that they liked the information and the look and style (89%).
- More than 75% of school counsellors reported that they liked the service, and more than 33% were 'entirely' comfortable about using it.
- Overall, 78% of teachers interviewed supported the service while 76% felt entirely comfortable with the idea of using it.
- Overall, parents of high school students were positive about the proposed service model but were concerned about potential security and confidentiality risks.

- Eighty-two per cent of GPs reported the service to be acceptable and more than half (55%) indicated their willingness to integrate it into their service.

Additionally, 145 school counsellors in NSW completed an online evaluation survey to measure the acceptability of using a web-based service like Smooth Sailing in the school context. Overall, 82% of school counsellors thought that the proposed service would be helpful to students.

Phase 2: Pilot study (2017)

A total of 59 high school students from four secondary schools in NSW participated in a single-arm, pre-post pilot study that aimed to evaluate the feasibility, acceptability, and safety of the Smooth Sailing service. Students reported an overall increased likelihood of, and actual, help-seeking from professional sources and adults. Those who reported more severe symptoms at baseline were found to have reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety.

These findings provided some support for the feasibility, acceptability and safety of the Smooth Sailing service. However, the researchers also identified a range of service improvements – such as modifying consent procedures, ensuring school counsellor availability, improving completion of modules, and removing service barriers related to accessibility – that could significantly improve the quality of the service and its likely effectiveness.

Phase 3: Randomised controlled trial (2018)

In 2018, the research team conducted a large cluster randomised controlled trial of the Smooth Sailing service among 1841 students from 22 secondary schools in NSW. The results validated the clinical effectiveness of the service as a tool for improving help-seeking intentions and reducing anxiety among students with high baseline scores for generalised anxiety symptoms.



Further, the research showed that:

- there was a greater reduction in the number of students who “needed support for their mental health but were not seeking help” in the intervention condition compared to the school-as-usual (control) condition
- nearly one in five students required follow-up for their anxiety, depression or suicidality and many were unknown to school counselling services. This is consistent with the pilot study and confirms that Smooth Sailing may capture students with unmet mental health needs
- participants found the service easy to use and understand; however, consistent with the pilot study, low motivation, time, forgetfulness and lack of perceived need were barriers to use.

This research highlighted the need for refinements to Smooth Sailing to improve its effectiveness on other mental health outcomes and to increase student uptake and engagement. Aligning the service with the New South Wales educational curriculum and allocating supervised class time for module completions may assist in overcoming barriers to access; further, the use of incentives may also help to increase students’ motivation to engage. These findings will be used to guide the process of service refinement and future evaluations.

Reduced
number of students who needed support but were not seeking help

1 in 5
required follow-up for their anxiety, depression or suicidality

Barriers
low motivation, time, forgetfulness and lack of perceived need

Phase 4: Uptake and implementation study (2020)

In 2020, the research team conducted a cluster randomised trial involving:

1295
secondary students

20
schools

regional and urban
NSW & SA

This trial examined the effectiveness of two student-level implementation strategies (class time allocation and financial incentives) to improve adolescent students’ uptake and engagement with Smooth Sailing.

Schools were assigned to one of the following three conditions for 12 weeks:

- Standard Smooth Sailing service
- Standard service with additional class time
- Standard service with financial incentives

The study showed that neither implementation strategy significantly increased the mean number of Smooth Sailing modules that students accessed. However, substantial variations between schools in the rate at which students accessed modules suggest that schools themselves play an important role in influencing students’ engagement with the service. The researchers concluded that future implementation efforts should target school partnerships to increase Smooth Sailing uptake.



Impact

Smooth Sailing has the potential to connect increasing numbers of young people to evidence-based mental health support during a formative period in their lives. By supporting them to recognise the signs of mental ill health and understand how and where to seek help, Smooth Sailing equips them with crucial skills that can enhance their emotional wellbeing.

Research team



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Publication list

Phase 1: Co-design

O'Dea, B., Leach, C., Achilles, M., King, C., Subotic-Kerry, M., & O'Moore, K. (2018). Parental attitudes towards an online, schools based, mental health service: Implications for service design and delivery. *Advances in Mental Health*, 1-15, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/18387357.2018.1514269>

Subotic-Kerry, M., King, C., O'Moore, K., Achilles, M., & O'Dea, B. (2018). General Practitioners attitudes towards an online school-based mental health service: Implications for the design and delivery of youth e-mental health. *JMIR Human Factors*;5(1):e12. <https://humanfactors.jmir.org/2018/1/e12/>

O'Dea, B., King, C., Subotic-Kerry, M., O'Moore, K., & Christensen, H. (2017). School Counsellor perspectives on the factors influencing uptake of an online stepped care mental health service for schools: A cross-sectional online survey. *JMIR Mental Health*;4(4):e55. <https://mental.jmir.org/2017/4/e55/>

Phase 2: Pilot

O'Dea, B., King, C., Subotic-Kerry, M., Achilles, M., Cockayne, N., & Christensen, H. (2019). Smooth Sailing: A pilot study of an online, school-based, mental health service for depression and anxiety. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 10, 574. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00574>

O'Dea, B., King, C., Achilles, M. R., Calear, A., & Subotic-Kerry, M. (2021). Delivering a digital mental health service in Australian secondary schools: Understanding school counsellors' and parents' experiences. *Health Services Insights*, 14, 11786329211017689. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11786329211017689>

Phase 3: Randomised controlled trial

O'Dea, B., King, C., Subotic-Kerry, M., Anderson, M., Achilles, M. R., Parker, B., Mackinnon, A., Anderson, J., Cockayne, N., & Christensen, H. (2019). Evaluating a Web-based mental health service for secondary school students in Australia: Protocol for a cluster randomized controlled trial, *JMIR Research Protocol*; 8, pp. e12892, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2196/12892>

O'Dea, B., Subotic-Kerry, M., King, C., MacKinnon, A., Achilles, M. R., Anderson, M., Parker, B., Werner-Seidler, A., Torok, M., Cockayne, N., Baker, S., & Christensen, H (2021). A cluster randomised controlled trial of a web-based youth mental health service in Australian schools. *The Lancet Regional Health – Western Pacific*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanwpc.2021.100178>

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The Centre of Research Excellence in Suicide Prevention (CRISP) is a collaborative program led by Black Dog Institute that aims to reduce the suicide rate in Australia.