

Is your child hyperactive, or depressed to the verge of suicide? Now, there's a series of storybooks to help parents and kids face up to and deal with the problem

By **ELISABETH GWEE**

IN HER seven years as a psychologist with the Institute Of Mental Health's Child Guidance Clinic, Ms Carolyn Kee has come across little girls who hear voices in their heads, hyperactive boys and children with such low esteem they feel like killing themselves.

Most come to her clinic filled with trepidation, not knowing what the doctor is going to do to them, or whether friends at school will make fun of them if they ever find out they are seeing a psychologist.

Parents are usually as apprehensive since there is a stigma attached to having a child who is mentally ill.

Now, Ms Kee and 16 colleagues from the clinic have decided to put their counselling experiences into a series of children's storybooks.

The 17 titles, targeted at eight- to 12 year-olds, deal with common mental illnesses affecting children in Singapore. These include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The aim is to help children and parents understand better what they are suffering from, how they can cope and, most important of all, realise that they are not alone in facing these problems.

The books are sponsored

jointly by the IMH and the Health Promotion Board.

Ms Kee, 29, says: "Stories are a good non-threatening way of dealing with problems with children, who are not as forthcoming as adults. If you tell them directly that they have ADHD, they will surely deny it. But if it's presented to them in a story, they don't have to admit it outright, but they will tell you that yes, there are similarities."

She came up with the idea of a book series for children as most books on mental health are for adults.

She says that mental illnesses among children are on the rise. There was a four-fold increase in the number of children visiting psychiatric clinics, from 5,600 to 20,000, between 1990 and 1998.

Common problems include ADHD, depression and autism. The increase has been attributed to

parents being better informed about seeking treatment for their children, stress from school and the increasing number of families breaking up because of divorce.

The book series will be launched this Saturday at a public forum on managing family stress at the Sheraton Towers hotel. Each book costs \$5 and will be on sale at the Child Guidance Clinic at the Health Promotion Board Building at 3 Second Hospital Avenue in the Singapore General Hospital grounds. It is available only in English.

Up next:

A second series of books is already being planned, with themes like dieting, phobias and exam stress. A catalogue mail order system will be introduced so that schools and voluntary organisations can order the books.



The books are sponsored jointly by the Institute of Mental Health as well as the Health Promotion Board.

Other books in the series deal with problems that chil-

dren encounter in daily life, like being bullied, sibling rivalry and dealing with the death of a loved one.

Each book ends with a message for parents and care

givers, giving advice, suggestions and tips on how to help children with specific problems.

The authors are staff members of the Child Guidance Clinic, and include psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and a senior staff nurse. The illustrations were done by design and publishing company Lancer Communications, with the exception of the book *Quiet As A Mouse*. That was done by a former patient of the clinic.

The book series took two months to complete, from October to December last year. A second series of books is already being planned, with themes like dieting, phobias and exam stress. A catalogue mail order system will be introduced so that schools and voluntary organisations can order the books.

Psychologist Joyce Leong, 27, has written a book for the next series, called *Bobby's Day Out*, about decision-making. She found writing it a refreshing change from her usual work.

"As therapists, we're always worrying about helping our patients and propping people up," she says. "This project was a way of propping ourselves up, because it made

us feel good. Hopefully, it helps us to be better therapists, too."

Part-time lecturer Clare Ong, 41, has an 11-year-old son who suffers from ADHD. She feels that the book series is a good idea, which is overdue.

"I wish these books were available when my son was diagnosed two years ago," she says. "At the time, my husband and I felt so alone because we didn't know it was a common problem. At least now, after reading the book *Pay Attention Alex*, about a boy with ADHD problems, my son knows that he's not the only one with this problem."

◆ *The book series will be launched at the talk **Managing Family Stress In Singapore; Learning From International Experience** on Saturday, 9 am to noon, at the ballroom of Sheraton Towers Singapore at Scotts Road. Tickets at \$10 per person, inclusive of a tea buffet. For enquiries, call 6389-2833 or 6389-2830, or email mhe@imh.com.sg. The books will also be on sale at the Child Guidance Clinic at the Health Promotion Board Building, 3, Second Hospital Avenue, #03-01.*

Common mental illnesses affecting children

◆ ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)

CHILDREN with this problem have short attention spans, concentration problems and are forgetful and careless. They are also hyperactive. They tend to have low self-esteem, disciplinary problems and social difficulties. A genetic problem, it affects boys more than girls. It can be treated with medication and behavioural management.

◆ OBSSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER

CHILDREN with this problem are plagued with intrusive thoughts and

images which they remove by performing certain rituals. For example, a child might have an intense fear of dirty things, so he will keep washing his hands. These repetitive acts prevent them from functioning properly on a social level, and they also sometimes avoid going out and meeting people. It can be treated with medication and also through counselling, where they will be taught methods to cope with their anxiety.

◆ DEPRESSION

CLINICAL depression occurs when a child is faced with a lot of stress and emotional difficulties, from doing badly at school to divorce and abuse. Symptoms among depressed children

are more physical. For example, they might not want to go to school, or have recurring stomach-aches. It can be treated with counselling, and in severe cases, with medication.

◆ ANXIETY

A MORE common problem than depression. Children with this problem are introverted, fearful and worry about what people think about them. They experience performance, social and separation anxiety. It is linked to exam stress too. Their personality has a large part to play, but anxious parents can also contribute to the problem. Counselling can help teach them ways to handle their sources of anxiety.