

# A Systematic Review of DBT Interventions for Adolescents in the School Setting

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## Background

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Adolescents report high levels of stress<sup>1</sup>, and unmitigated stress can lead to mental health challenges.<sup>2</sup> 20% of adolescents in the US have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder.<sup>3</sup>

### Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)

DBT was developed by Linehan and incorporates skills in mindfulness, emotion regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness.<sup>4</sup>

Research supports the efficacy of DBT-based interventions for adolescents across various settings.<sup>5</sup>

There are a variety of DBT adaptations for the school setting, including: DBT STEPS-A,<sup>6</sup> DBT-A,<sup>7</sup> CSB-DBT.<sup>8</sup>

### Purpose

Past research has examined DBT-based interventions for adolescents across various settings; however, there has been no systematic review of all DBT-based interventions for adolescents in the school setting.

To fill this gap, we conducted a systematic literature review.

## Methods

A comprehensive search (June 2024) was conducted across ERIC, EBSCOhost, APA PsychInfo, Academic Search Complete, and Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection.

Search terms included: (DBT OR Dialectical Behavioral Therapy) AND (schools OR secondary school OR middle school OR high school)

### Inclusion criteria were:

- published in English
- DBT implemented in schools
- participants were adolescent students in the school setting

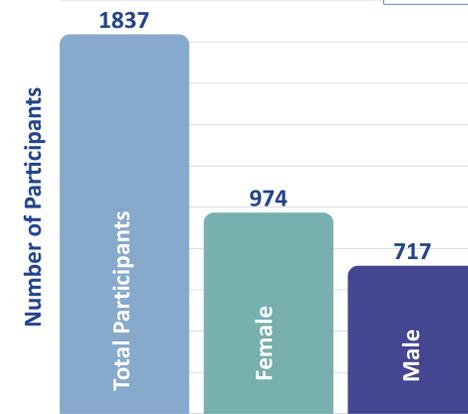


Studies were double-coded by the first author, two trained graduate students, and a faculty mentor.

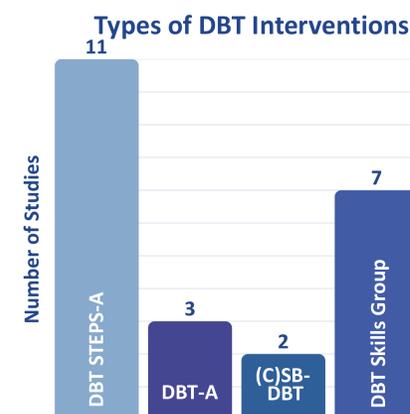
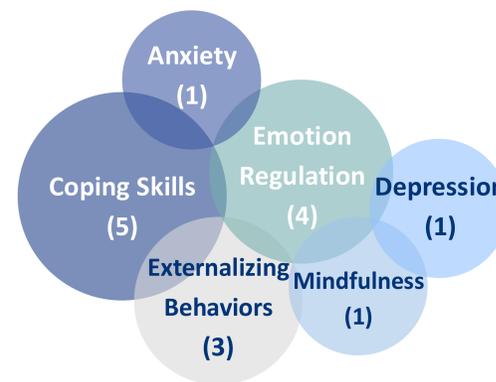
Coding variables included participant, study, and intervention characteristics, along with outcome measures.

Coding inter-rater agreement was 94% - the first author resolved any discrepancies.

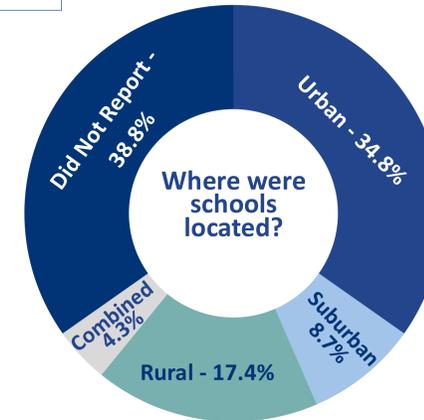
## Results



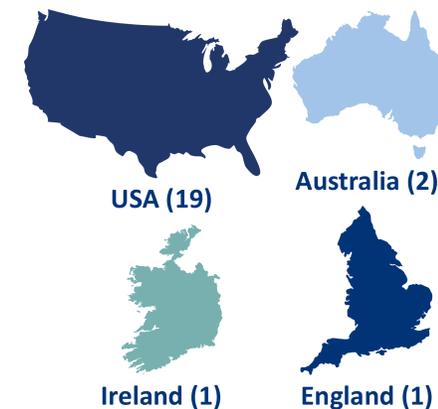
Outcome Improvements Across Studies



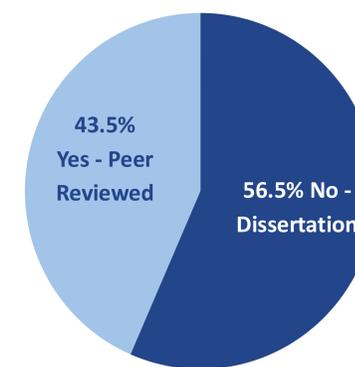
Note: 3 studies did not report sex of participants.



Country of Studies



Was the Study Published?



## Results

For DBT STEPS-A, only one study (Panish, 2022) implemented the entire curriculum, and most studies cited feasibility as the reason they did not incorporate all 30 lessons into their evaluation.

The impact of DBT-based interventions was mixed.

Some studies have shown that DBT increases adaptive coping, emotion regulation, or mindfulness, while other studies have found no significant impacts.

Additionally, one study showed adverse outcomes for participants.

Due to the varied nature of the outcome measures, it is challenging to draw definitive conclusions.

Manualized interventions were less likely to be fully implemented, and many studies cited feasibility as a barrier.

Many of the studies included were not methodologically rigorous, and thus, the outcomes may not be generalizable, and causality may not be strong.

Only 35% of studies had a control group, and 20 of 23 studies were not randomized.

61% of studies had samples of less than 30.

Many studies did not report participant race/ethnicity (48%), socioeconomic status (65%), mental health challenge diagnoses, and disability status (83%).

### Implications

DBT-based interventions may improve adaptive coping, emotion regulation, or mindfulness for adolescents in school settings; however, practitioners should be aware of the potential limitations of the current evidence base. More rigorous evaluations, including those with randomization and fidelity measures, are needed to understand the generalizability and efficacy of DBT in school settings.

## Strengths and Limitations

This is the first comprehensive review of DBT-based interventions for adolescents in the school setting. Some studies may have been missed due to the application of inclusion/exclusion criteria. The overall effect size for DBT-based interventions was not calculated.

## Discussion

### Future Directions

Future studies should provide more detailed demographic information about participants and the intervention setting. To understand the efficacy and magnitude of effect of DBT-based interventions for adolescents in the school setting, future researchers should consider a meta-analytic review study.

## References

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