Reviewer's report:

Title: School based intervention to reduce anxiety in children: study protocol for a randomised controlled trial (PACES)

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Reviewer: Rinka M.P. Van Zundert

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The article describes a study protocol for a randomised controlled trial on the efficacy of the school-based intervention for reducing anxiety in children (FRIENDS).

The issue of emotional disorders in childhood is important and is well outlined in the introduction. Prior studies have shown effects of the program in Australia but not in the UK (as of yet) so the study has innovative relevance.

Overall, the manuscript is clear and contains the (minimally) required information to understand and to replicate the trial. The writing is generally clear and to the point and of sufficient quality. Please check for some remaining spelling errors (e.g. “though” instead of “through” on p 7).

I have a few questions/suggestions for clarification / Discretionary Revisions

1. Under “aim of the study” the aims are divided into one relating to secondary prevention and one to universal prevention. Does this mean different populations in the schools are addressed? (e.g., examine the effect of FRIENDS among children with elevated symptoms only for the first aim, and providing the program to ALL kids (in the experimental condition) for the second aim?). I do not think so given my further reading but I can imagine this creates confusion for other readers.

2. Under “ethical approval & consent”: What is meant by “signed assessment”? (In the sentence “Finally, children.... a baseline assessment.”).

3. Also, I would explicitly note that passive parental consent was used (if I understood that right, of course).

4. Please note briefly what happened (and why) to the 4 schools that did initially express interest to participate but were not randomised to one of the three conditions (the text jumps from 45 to 41 schools).

5. How many participants are we talking about? How large is your sample in terms of (eligible) participants? (I now see it is provided under Power Calculation and would also mention it earlier on).

6. Please repeat the full words of PSHE on page 7
7. More of a general comment: I wonder if the study is powered enough to detect differences between the school led condition and health led condition. Given that the health led condition is staffed by professionals that are not mental health specialists and both groups receive the same amount of training, I doubt whether there will be a substantial difference in effect size between those two conditions. Even though the sample is large (1130-1360 pupils) it might not be large enough to detect such a small difference (and this is not being addressed in the power calculation section).

Will the study design adequately test the hypothesis? YES.
Are sufficient details provided to allow replication of the work or comparison with related analyses: if not, what is missing? YES, with the exception of the power analysis not providing details on if there is sufficient power to detect differences between the two experimental conditions (and it is also not mentioned where the estimated effect size is derived from).
Is the planned statistical analysis appropriate? YES.
Is the writing acceptable? YES.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

NO to all the above.