



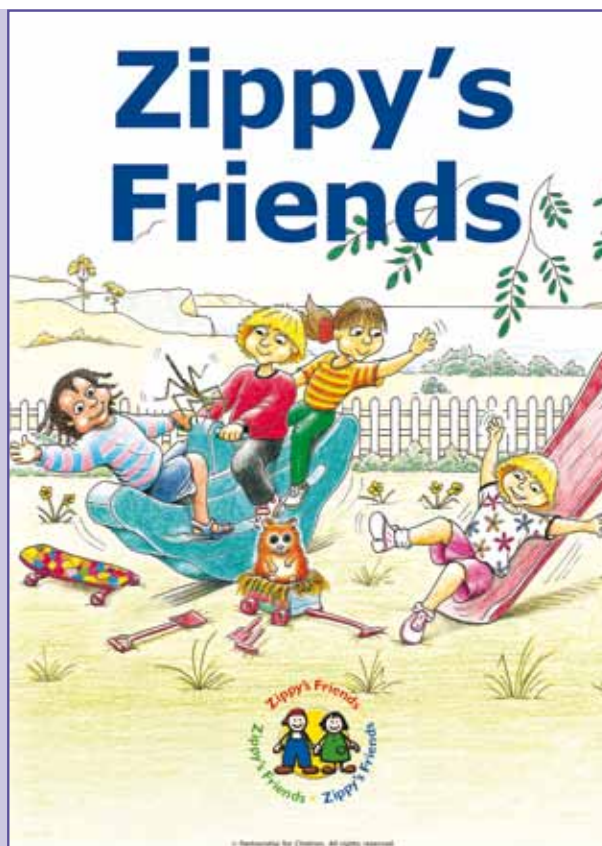
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An evaluation of the *Zippy's Friends* emotional wellbeing programme for primary schools in Ireland

SUMMARY REPORT



Aleisha M. Clarke and Margaret M. Barry.

Health Promotion Research Centre,
National University of Ireland Galway.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Introduction

This report presents the main findings on the evaluation of the Zippy's Friends emotional wellbeing programme in Irish primary schools. The Zippy's Friends programme is designed to promote the emotional wellbeing of children aged five to eight years of age by increasing their repertoire of coping skills and by stimulating varied and flexible ways of coping with problems of day-to-day life. The programme is based around a set of six illustrated stories about a group of children, their families, friends and an imaginary stick insect called Zippy. Comprised of six modules, the programme addresses the following themes: feelings, communication, making and breaking relationships, conflict resolution, dealing with change and loss, and general coping skills. Structured into sessions, the programme is supported by a teacher's manual and an attractive set of teaching materials, which are designed to actively engage the children in a range of child-centered activities. Teachers participate in a structured training programme before implementing the programme in class.

In February 2008, the Zippy's Friends programme was introduced into Irish designated disadvantaged primary schools on a pilot basis to support the implementation of the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum for junior classes. With the support of the Department of Education and Science and the Health Service Executive, the programme was piloted in 30 designated disadvantaged (DEIS) schools in the West of Ireland. The 24 week programme was implemented over two academic years, 12 lessons were implemented between February and June 2008 and the remaining 12 sessions were implemented between October and March 2009. An evaluation of the pilot implementation of the programme was undertaken by the Health Promotion Research Centre at NUI Galway. The evaluation aims to:

- determine if an international evidence-based programme could be adapted and successfully implemented in the local context of disadvantaged primary schools in Ireland
- assess the impact on the pupils' emotional and behavioural wellbeing and coping skills
- examine the process of implementation and the relationship between this process and the programme outcomes.

Methods

The study employs a randomised controlled design with data collection from teachers and pupils before, during and after the implementation of the programme. A total of 730 pupils (mean age = 7 years 3 months; gender = 47.7% female) and 42 teachers from 42 DEIS schools in Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim and Galway were randomly assigned to intervention (N = 523) and control groups (N=207).

The intervention group was further divided into two types – Intervention Type I (N=270) and Intervention Type II (N=253). The teachers in Intervention Type I were asked to implement the programme as faithfully as possible. The teachers in Intervention Type II were requested to use the programme as a resource and they could, therefore, decide which parts of the programme they would implement. The control schools received the standard SPHE class (30 min per week). The evaluation is comprised of a range of quantitative and qualitative methods designed to assess the process of programme implementation and the programme effects on the children and teachers. The teachers completed questionnaires on a weekly basis throughout the implementation of the programme in addition to taking part in focus group review sessions. The children also completed a questionnaire, along with taking part in the Draw and Write Activity and participatory workshops.

The following measures were employed:

Programme effects

- Children’s Emotional Literacy
 - Emotional Literacy Checklist
- Children’s Coping Skills
 - Schoolagers’ Coping Strategy Inventory
 - Draw and Write Technique
 - Children’s Participatory Workshops
- Children’s Emotional and Behavioural Wellbeing
 - Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

Programme implementation

- Programme Fidelity
- Teachers’ Weekly Reports on Programme Implementation
- Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses of the Programme
 - Children’s Participatory Workshop
 - Teachers’ Review Questionnaire and Focus Group Interviews
- The School Context – Ethos Questionnaire
- The School Context – Social Personal and Health Education Questionnaire

Key Findings on Adapting the Programme to Primary Schools in Ireland

- There were no difficulties experienced in adapting the programme to the Irish school setting. The Zippy’s Friends programme fitted well in the context of SPHE for primary schools and supported the delivery of a number of strand units of the curriculum. The findings from the evaluation suggest that the programme was well received by teachers and pupils and that little or no adaptation was required. Throughout the implementation of the programme the commitment of the teachers and the support of the local health promotion staff were found to be critical to the successful implementation of the programme.

Key Findings on Programme Effects

- **Children’s emotional literacy:** The evaluation results indicate that the Zippy’s Friends programme had an overall significant positive effect on the children’s emotional literacy skills, with significant improvements in the children’s self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills when compared with the control group. The results from the teachers’ end of programme evaluation further support these positive findings with the majority of teachers (over 90%) observing improvements in the children’s social skills, verbal communication skills, their ability to manage their feelings and their relationships with each other. The findings from the children’s participatory workshops also show that the children in the intervention group had a more elaborate and wider range of vocabulary for articulating their feelings after completing the programme. They were more likely than the control group to explain the reasons why people felt a certain way and to suggest what they could do to make the situation better. The qualitative findings from the children’s participatory workshop also indicate that there was a significant improvement in the intervention group’s emotional literacy when compared with the control group.
- **Children’s coping skills:** In relation to the impact of the programme on the children’s coping skills, few significant changes emerged from the Schoolagers’ Coping Strategy Inventory apart from the finding that the children in the intervention group were more likely to rate stress-coping strategies such as trying to relax and stay calm as being more effective following completion of the programme. The results from the Draw and Write Activity indicate that there was an increase in the use of problem focused coping strategies among the intervention group and that the coping strategies used were aimed at directly addressing the problem. There was no significant change in the type of coping strategies used by the control group at post-intervention. Results from the participatory workshops also indicate that the children who completed the Zippy’s Friends programme expressed a wider repertoire of coping strategies when compared with the control group.
- **Children’s emotional and behavioural functioning:** The results from the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* show that both the intervention and control groups’ total difficulties scores decreased over time, however, no significant programme effect was found. Examination of the subscale scores did reveal that post-intervention there was a significant decrease in the hyperactivity levels of the children in the intervention group when compared with the control group.
- **Effects on the teachers and their relationships with the children:** Following completion of the programme the teachers reported that the programme had a positive effect on themselves in terms of raising their awareness about the children’s emotional wellbeing, providing them with strategies to help the children deal with difficult situations, and enhancing their relationship with the children.
- **Effects on the school and the wider community:** The majority of the teachers indicated that there was a lack of ‘whole school’ awareness about the programme and as a result, the broader effects of the programme throughout the school were not found. Several teachers commented on the need for whole school training, i.e. the training of all staff, so that the strategies that are used

in Zippy's Friends could be reinforced with all children in classrooms through cross-curricular activities and also in the schoolyard. Teachers also recognised the need for greater parental involvement in the programme so that what is taught in class could be reinforced in the home environment and in the local community setting.

Key Findings on Programme Implementation

- **Programme Fidelity:** The process evaluation findings indicate that the programme was implemented with a high degree of programme fidelity and that little or no adaptation was actually required. Both Intervention Type I (full implementation) and Intervention Type II teachers (partial implementation) fully implemented over 86% of the programme. The teachers' ratings of their enthusiasm for the programme, its content appropriateness, the pupils' enjoyment and understanding of the sessions, and achievement of aims, were consistently positive and highlight the level of teacher satisfaction with the programme. The structured user-friendly nature of the Zippy's Friends programme, the suitability of the content for the children, and the variety of engaging activities that were used throughout the programme, were all cited as reasons why the teachers enjoyed implementing the programme and did so with a high degree of programme adherence. Evidence of high quality programme implementation was also apparent in the teachers' and children's comments about the factors that facilitated programme implementation. The majority of teachers commented on the importance of the children sitting in a circle. Teachers also emphasised the importance of teacher preparation before implementing the lessons and the need to implement the programme consistently every week. In addition, several teachers spoke about integrating the strategies taught in Zippy's Friends in other areas of teaching and also about sharing their personal experiences with the children during the lessons. The level of teacher preparation and use of personal resources to enhance the lessons indicate the teachers' commitment to high quality programme delivery.
- **Feedback from Teachers on Programme Implementation:** The teachers made a number of recommendations to improve the implementation of Zippy's Friends. One of the most frequently reported recommendations was the need for a whole school approach. The majority of teachers commented on the need for all teachers in a school to receive training in the programme and the need for an additional Zippy's Friends programme for the senior cycle of primary schools. Most of the teachers recognised the need for parents to be informed about the strategies being taught in Zippy's Friends and also the need for some type of home exercise book, that both parent and child completed, which would reinforce what was being taught each week.
- **Factors Influencing Implementation:** The most frequently reported barrier to implementing the Zippy's Friends programme was lack of time. Teachers referred to the problem of finding the time to implement the lesson during the day when all the children were present. Several teachers also spoke about the issue of curriculum overload in teaching. The overall busyness of the classroom has implications for teaching a programme such as Zippy's Friends in terms of getting commitment from all teachers, finding the space, time and resources to support its implementation within an already over stretched timetable. Teachers suggested that the strategies used in Zippy's Friends (e.g. effective communication skills, listening skills, problem solving skills and coping skills) could be taught as part of the overall classroom ethos. Therefore, it is recommended

that a mental health promoting ethos that would support cross-curricular social and emotional learning would be adopted in the classes and also throughout the school so that strategies taught in a programme such as Zippy's Friends would be reinforced throughout the curriculum and school day and not just during the 'Zippy class'. A number of teachers also recommended that the programme should be implemented over one academic year, as opposed to being split over two academic years as in the present study, in order that the children would receive all six modules.

- **The School Ethos:** Overall, the results from the Ethos Questionnaire indicate that both intervention and control schools provide a positive and supportive school environment for the children and that all teachers within the schools work towards providing for the children's needs. Teachers in both the intervention and control schools recognised the importance and value of teaching social and emotional learning in primary schools, particularly for children living in disadvantaged communities. While most teachers reported that parents are interested and supportive of the school and its governance, fewer teachers reported active involvement of a broad range of parents in school life. The results from the Ethos questionnaire clearly illustrate the need for greater collaboration between schools, parents and key stakeholders within the local community.
- **Impact on the Teaching of SPHE:** The results from the SPHE questionnaire show clearly that the teachers who taught the Zippy's Friends programme reported implementing more of the SPHE curriculum than the teachers in the control group. In relation to certain SPHE strand units such as: 'Relating to Others', 'Self' Identity', 'Myself and my Family', there were significant differences in level of implementation between intervention and control groups. These results indicate that the intervention teachers implemented substantially more of the SPHE curriculum than the control group. At the end of programme review sessions some teachers suggested that the Zippy's Friends provided them with a framework and a structure within which to teach parts of the SPHE curriculum.

Conclusions

- The findings from this pilot implementation of the Zippy's Friends programme indicate that the programme was successfully implemented in DEIS primary schools in Ireland and led to a number of significant positive effects for the pupils and teachers. Consistent with the findings from previous studies the programme significantly improved the emotional literacy and coping skills of the children, reduced their hyperactivity levels and lead to improved relationships in the classroom. The programme complements the teaching of the existing SPHE curriculum and leads to a greater awareness among teachers of the importance of social and emotional learning in the curriculum. The planned twelve month follow-up of the programme effects, including the assessment of the programme impact on the children's academic performance, will clearly strengthen the conclusions that can be drawn regarding the longer term impact of this programme. However, at this stage, it is clear that the encouraging evaluation results support the broader roll out and sustainability of the programme within the primary school setting.
- Results from the process evaluation revealed that the programme was well received by both children and teachers and was implemented with a high degree of programme fidelity. The teachers

commented on the activity-based learning which took place throughout the programme and the manner in which the children were able to draw upon their own experiences and identify with the key themes of the programme. It is evident from this study that this type of structured ‘child-centered, activity-based’ learning is an important factor in the success of a programme and is a necessary ingredient for the sustainability of emotional wellbeing programmes in schools. The call from the teachers for another Zippy’s Friends programme at the senior end of primary school suggests the need to adapt the methodologies and strategies that have been used and proven to be effective in Zippy’s Friends and apply them to the senior classes in primary schools. The Zippy’s Friends programme is recognised by the teachers in this study as being a valuable resource in the delivery of the SPHE curriculum. The recognition by teachers of the need for parental involvement and whole school training in the programme further supports the need for a more holistic approach to implementing social and emotional learning in primary schools.

- Supportive organisational and system-level policies and practices are needed in order to ensure the sustainable integration of the programme as a resource for enhancing the school curriculum. Scaling up the programme at a national level will require the support and collaboration of the national education and health agencies in the coordination of teacher training, ongoing support and quality assurance to ensure effective implementation at the local level.
- The positive evaluation findings clearly indicate the benefits of the Zippy’s Friends programme for the children and teachers in DEIS schools who participated in this study. These findings are in keeping with a broader base of international evidence on the benefits of emotional wellbeing programmes for children’s emotional and social functioning and improved academic performance. Schools have an important function in nurturing children’s social and emotional development as well as their academic and cognitive development. The integration of social and emotional learning into the school curriculum supports schools in achieving their educational mission. The increasing recognition that enhancing children’s social and emotional competencies also improves their ability to learn and achieve academically supports the value of programmes such as Zippy’s Friends and their incorporation into the school setting.

Sample of drawings from children in the intervention group, post-intervention

Theme: Conflict
Fight with someone



I was sad because I was pulled by the hair.

Picture 1



To make my self better I called my mum.

Picture 2

Theme: Conflict
Being reprimanded



I was sad when I was grounded.
I was sad when I fell.

Picture 1



I took deep breaths and said sorry to my mum.

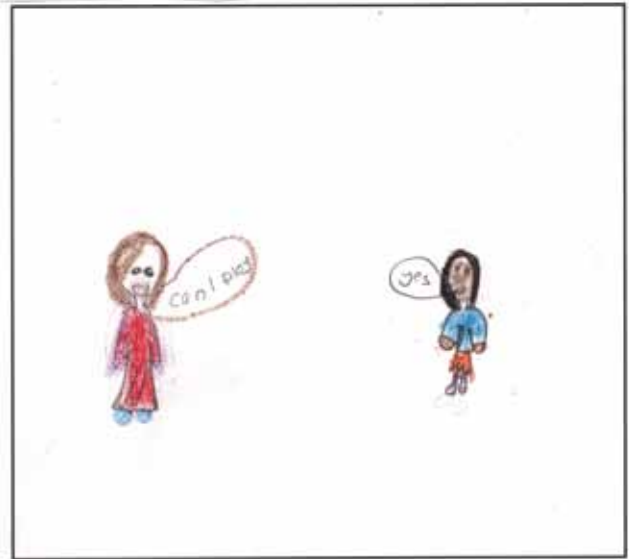
Picture 2

Theme: Rejection
Feeling Alone



I was sad because I was lonely and my brother called me a loner

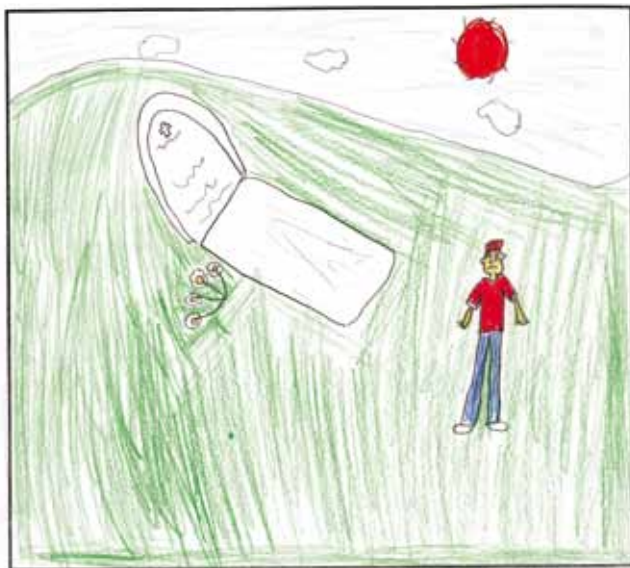
Picture 1



I coped by doing this: Asking if

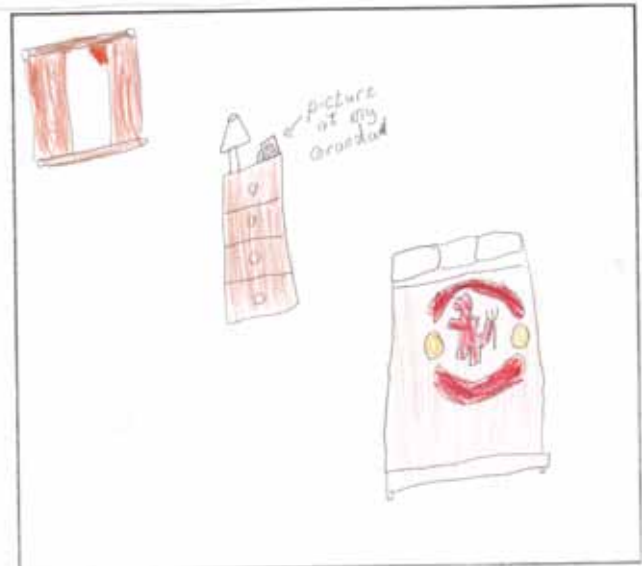
Picture 2

Theme: Loss
Death



I felt sad, when my Grandad died.

Picture 1



I put a picture of my Grandad in my bedroom.

Picture 2

Children's Comments about the Zippy's Friends Programme

What they liked:



"I liked when we had to share our feelings"

"Talking about my problems"

"I liked talking about helping each other"

"Talking and sitting in the circle"

"Liked how to fix your problems, finding solutions, it helped"

"Helping each other"

"Forgiving friends when they do something to you"

What the children said they learned:

"Let people play with you"

"Don't leave anyone out"

"Tell teacher or talk to an adult if you are being bullied."

"Always talk to someone if someone dies"

"If somebody makes you cry tell a grown up"

"If someone makes you sad you have to tell them when you're feeling sad"

"Like your friends for who they are"

"I learned that being friends is much easier than being mean"

"Learned not to lose my temper"

"Don't bully anyone"

"You can transform your feelings, if you're feeling sad you can transform it to feeling happy"



Teacher's Comments about the Zippy's Friends Programme



"An emotional wellbeing programme is badly needed in today's Ireland. Zippy's Friends is a well set out, structured programme which is both teacher and child friendly. I thoroughly enjoyed teaching it"

"It is an excellent programme and should be introduced to all teachers. Both pupils and myself gained a lot from this programme"

"It builds their self confidence and improves relationships with peers. It equips them with tools to overcome difficult situations, therefore has a positive influence on their academic achievement"

"Pupils are more confident to request help and let me know if work is difficult so this obviously leads to better understanding"

"The quieter children are more confident when we are doing oral discussions and activities in the class. They aren't afraid to speak out. It has helped their listening skills especially towards one another and not just the teacher".

"I have noticed an improvement in oral language – expression, opinions, feelings, discussing topics in other curriculum areas"

"Encouraged children to focus on their work and to control their emotions, in my class in particular we would experience a lot of tantrums so Zippy encourages them to stop and relax"

"They look out for each other that bit more since the programme began, like if anything happened they'll make sure the other child is alright or they'll make sure that somebody else is told, like the teacher on yard or myself."

"I had a child with selective mutism who had her hand up the most asking the questions and talking in a very informal setting."

"I think the bond I have with my class this year, the relationship, Zippy's Friends has helped with this closeness. I think there is a sharing there"

"I feel very lucky to have been part of Zippy and the whole area of improving the mental health of children"