

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

An Independent Evaluation of Zippy's Friends for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs:

Final Report for the Judith Trust

Full Title: A mental health promotion programme to improve emotional, social and coping skills in children and young people in special schools: A feasibility study

Project Advisory Group: Lead: Dr. Annette Lawson OBE,
The Judith Trust
Email: Judith.Trust@lineone.net

Chief Investigator: Dr. Biza Stenfert Kroese,
School of Psychology,
University of Birmingham
Email: B.Stenfert-Kroese@bham.ac.uk
Tel: 0121 414 4915

Principal Investigator: Dr. Gemma Unwin,
School of Psychology,
University of Birmingham
Email: G.L.Unwin@bham.ac.uk
Tel: 0121 414 7225

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Executive Summary

Background information

Research shows that a child's emotional, social and psychological wellbeing influences their future health, education and social prospects. Research has also demonstrated that positive, well-developed coping skills and high emotional literacy lead to improved self-esteem, reduced stress and reduced incidence of serious emotional problems in later life. Children with special educational needs (SEN) are at a disadvantage as they tend to have lower levels of emotional literacy and may have limited opportunities or capacity to develop coping skills. Emotional literacy and coping skills have been the target of programmes such as the UK Government's *Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)*. However, SEAL has not been adapted for children with SEN.

Zippy's Friends is a school-based mental health promotion programme, coordinated by Partnership for Children. The aim of *Zippy's Friends* is to teach social, emotional, problem-solving and coping skills to help children develop strategies to deal with difficult social situations and help them feel better about such situations whilst avoiding harm to others and themselves. For this purpose *Zippy's Friends* focusses on the development of emotional literacy and takes a positive, solution-focussed approach to emphasise positive emotions, strengths and sources of support. It comprises six modules delivered in weekly sessions that cover a range of topics: emotions, communication, friendships, and dealing with change and loss. Teachers are provided with training and a resource pack that includes session plans, stories, activities and supportive materials. Each session begins with the teacher reading part of a story, which sets the context of the session. The story is followed by two activities through which children explore a topic in more detail.

The mainstream programme is used internationally and has been widely evaluated. *Zippy's Friends for Pupils with SEN* is an adapted version of the mainstream programme, recently developed by Partnership for Children. Teachers use a Special Needs Supplement alongside the mainstream pack. Although the mainstream version was developed for children aged five to seven years, the SEN programme was designed for a wider age range to include those in primary and secondary education.

The study

This 18-month study evaluated the effectiveness, acceptability and feasibility of *Zippy's Friends* for Pupils with SEN. The study focussed on the first three modules of the programme, implemented over the course of an academic year (2014-2015). Fifty-three children and young people attending eight SEN schools based in Birmingham, Northamptonshire, Greater London and Surrey were recruited. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected using standardised assessment scales, purposed-designed questionnaires, interview schedules, and emotion recognition tasks to assess typical and maximal behaviour of the children and to collect feedback on the programme. Data were collected from children, parents/guardians/care givers, and teachers before and after the intervention.

Main aims of the study

- To evaluate the effectiveness of *Zippy's Friends* as an intervention for improving social skills, coping skills and emotional literacy in children and young people who attend SEN schools.
- To assess the feasibility of the research methods, including provision of the intervention, recruitment and assessment procedures.

- To explore the experience and acceptability of the intervention to children and young people, parents/guardians and teachers.
- To ensure that issues of diversity (gender, ethnicity, age and ability) are considered in data collection, analysis and discussion.

Key findings

- The Zippy's Friends for SEN programme is both **feasible and acceptable** to children with SENs, their teachers and their parents.
- Before and after Zippy comparisons (teachers' ratings) indicated that the children's social skills, emotional literacy, and emotional recognition improved. Significant improvements were observed in **communication, cooperation, assertion, responsibility and self-awareness**.
- The children demonstrated **improvements in key areas of emotional literacy** (three of the five domains identified by Salovey and Mayer, 1990: **self-awareness, ability to manage emotions, and relationship skills**).
- **Self-motivation and empathy did not improve**.
- None of the **demographic variables** (gender, ethnicity, age and ability) were related to change from baseline to end-point.
- The children and young people demonstrated **improved emotion recognition skills**. Specifically, they demonstrated improved emotion naming when presented with symbols.
- **Teachers provided positive feedback** about the programme and the support and training they had received.
- Teachers noted that the **programme had to be tailored to individual needs** and for some pupils elements of the programme had to be further simplified.
- Teachers reported that the children **struggled to understand the concepts of jealousy and nervousness**.
- Teachers found the programme **unsuitable for some pupils** (children with severe communication and cognitive deficits and those with severe autistic features and peer relationship and engagement problems).
- **Teachers reported anecdotally improvements** in the children's use of verbal language, ability to identify and communicate emotions, self-expression, asking for help and trying out alternative coping strategies. However, the teachers were cautious about attributing all these positive effects to Zippy.
- **The quantitative parent measures did not demonstrate any changes**. These measures indicate that improvements shown by the children at school do not appear to have generalised to the home environment.
- However, **the parents interviewed provided positive feedback**. They recognised the importance of teaching emotional literacy to children with SEN and they felt that the programme was engaging and appropriate.
- These **parents provided anecdotes of a number of behavioural improvements** in their children, including improved communication skills and mood.
- **The children interviewed were positive and enthusiastic about the programme. They could recall features of the programme** (including some of the 'rules' they were taught) and had enjoyed learning about Zippy and Zippy's friends.

Practice recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that the adapted version of the *Zippy's Friends* mental health promotion programme can have beneficial effects for children with SEN particularly in the areas of

self awareness, ability to regulate emotions and relationship skills. The evaluation also identified a number of further modifications that need to be considered in order to improve efficacy and make the programme suitable for a wider range of children attending SEN schools.

- The SEN classes took longer to complete the three modules (average of 16 sessions instead of 12). Schools should factor this in when scheduling the programme to **allow sessions to be split over multiple lessons** and to allocate additional time to more complex topics.
- One class terminated the programme early as the teacher felt it was unsuitable for her largely non-verbal pupils. The programme may therefore require **further adaptations to improve its suitability for children with limited verbal skills**.
- There is also a need to develop specific **adaptations for pupils on the autistic spectrum** and use materials that are less reliant on abstract concepts and hypothetical situations.
- As it stands, **the programme appears to be most suited to those with P Levels 6 and above**.
- Teaching on **nervousness and jealousy and how to cope with these emotions was least successful and requires further modification**.
- It should be clarified in the SEN supplement package that learning components need to be practised and consolidated before the children may fully understand and retain some of the concepts. **Teachers should be reassured that the programme revisits the materials and provides opportunities for repetition and practice**.
- Positive changes in behaviour were not identified from the parent measures (although parents did provide some anecdotal evidence). Furthermore, the parents interviewed reported little or no knowledge of the programme. Schools may **consider active involvement of parents in the programme** to improve consistency and generalisation from school to home environments.

Recommendations for future research

- Further research involving larger samples and with a longer duration is required to **establish efficacy of the whole programme** (this study evaluated the first half of the programme only).
- **Children with significant hearing or visual impairments** were excluded from the current study. Further research should explore whether the programme is suitable for these pupils.
- Further research should include a post-intervention follow-up period to **investigate whether positive outcomes are maintained after the programme**.
- Future research should involve parents more actively to **improve response rate for the parent measures and interviews**.
- There is currently a lack of literature to assist with the selection of outcome measures for use with children with SEN. Future research may consider **using the Social Skills Improvement Rating Scale (SSiS) as a primary outcome measure** as the SSiS demonstrated face validity and was sensitive to change over time in this study.
- The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) did not demonstrate any significant changes over time. Other researchers have also commented on the apparent lack of sensitivity of this measure and we **do not recommend the SDQ for future research**.
- The programme aims to support children in **developing their own coping strategies rather than prescribing specific coping strategies**. Further research should investigate how teachers implement this element of the programme, establish whether it is effective and whether, according to behavioural outcome measures, such an approach is superior to a prescriptive 'rulebook' approach for children with SEN.