

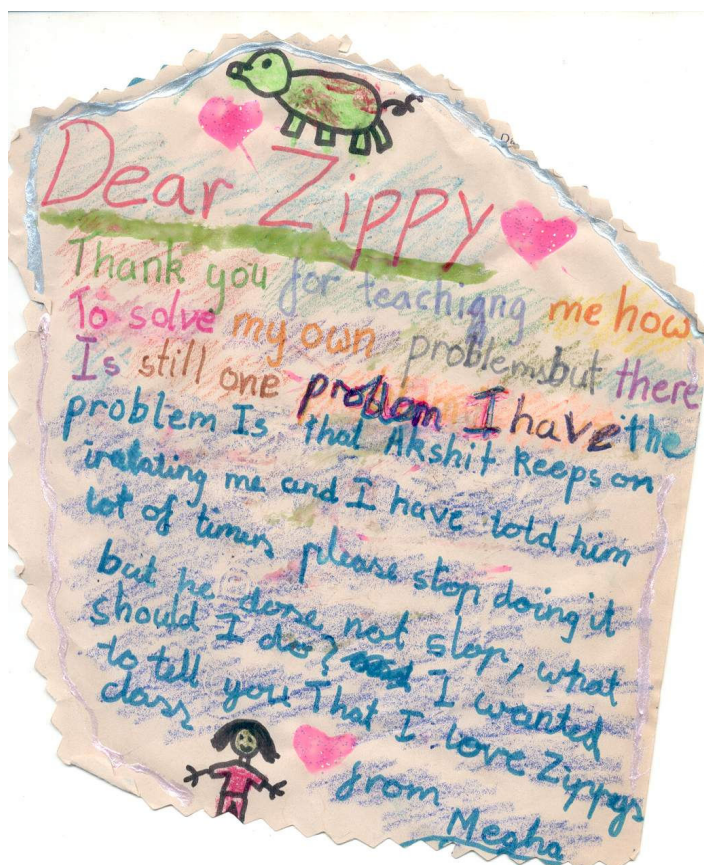
## Zippy's Friends around the world



**Caroline Egar, Programme Manager for *Zippy's Friends*, reflects on the many classes she has seen around the world.**

One of the pleasures of my job is to travel to the various countries where *Zippy's Friends* is running to see classes in action and to talk to teachers and parents. It is striking how similarly young children respond in different cultures, and how well *Zippy's Friends* is suited to a variety of settings.

The first thing that strikes me is that children everywhere love Zippy. Many of them have never heard of stick insects until they meet him, but he soon wins a special place in their affections. When a teacher in Denmark handed out rubbers and pencils, her children were excited because Zippy's picture was printed on them. Some classes keep a real stick insect in a tank, and many teachers make model Zippys. In one classroom in northern England, Zippy sits in the window, watching over the children in the playground. And children in Goa, India, feel so close to Zippy that they even write him letters – some of which end up on my desk and make delightful reading.



Teachers often worry that the children won't talk about the topics in the programme – and are then amazed when they readily contribute, even when the ideas seem quite profound or difficult.

'We completed the session on 'feeling nervous' in the run up to Christmas,' said a teacher in England. 'Afterwards, many of the children told me how nervous they were feeling about appearing in the school Nativity play – they wouldn't have had the vocabulary to do that before.'

A head teacher said that a mother had thanked him profusely for running *Zippy's Friends* in her son's class. He'd never spoken freely about his feelings before, she said, but after the session on 'feeling jealous' he came home and suddenly started telling his mum how he felt. 'It was like the floodgates opening,' she said.

Evaluation studies have shown that children who take part in *Zippy's Friends* do expand their range of coping skills and become more likely to choose positive strategies. When I ask teachers whether they have noticed changes in their children's behaviour, they invariably say the same thing – 'Yes, they've become much better at resolving conflicts.'



In a Danish classroom, a group of seven year-olds told me how they loved the difference of the Zippy sessions, which gave them the chance to discuss issues and role-play. Kirsten, their teacher, made a point of bringing real-life examples, such as playground disputes, into the class discussions. When I asked one boy what he'd learnt from the programme, he said, 'If a boy kicks me, I don't kick him back – I ask him why he did it.'

The sessions that have surprised teachers the most have been those where the children discuss death. Some are fearful of doing this – and then surprised that the children are quite happy discussing a topic that has become taboo for many adults. I saw a class showing each other the drawings they'd made the week before during a visit to the local graveyard. Touchingly, many of them had noticed children's graves. They were encouraged to share their experiences of loss. 'When I was little I had three dogs,' said one. 'One got run over.' 'My grandfather died while we were eating a meal with him. I was afraid,' said another. 'And how can we help ourselves to feel better?' asked the teacher. 'Cry,' 'Talk to your mum,' 'Remember nice things about the person,' came the responses.

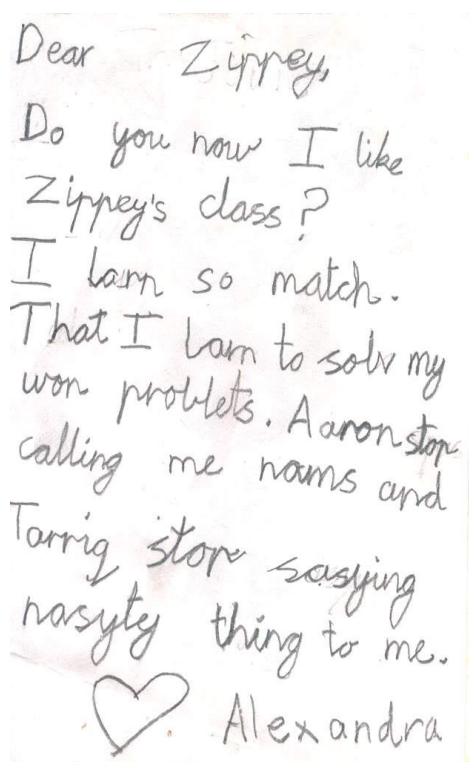
This led on to how we can comfort a friend in distress, and one little boy related how he'd had a fight with his mum. 'She told me to leave home,' he said. 'What can we do to help him?' asked the teacher. 'Talk to him, and tell him to talk to his mum,' 'Say he's sorry,' 'Make up with her,' suggested his friends.

The last session of *Zippy's Friends* is a celebration of what the children have learnt. They come to the front one by one, tell the class of one thing that they've learnt from the programme, and receive a crown and a certificate.



In the picturesque Lithuanian town of Trakai, I joined the celebration at a kindergarten that doubled as a foster home. 'I've learnt to sit and listen to others,' said one child. 'How to make friends,' said another. 'We've learnt not to shout at each other or pinch each other,' said a girl. Laima, the teacher, perched her home-made Zippy on her shoulder and told the children, 'Zippy's very happy that you care for each other and solve problems.' She asked a girl if her friend had changed. 'Yes,' she said. 'She listens more and doesn't fight so much.'

Zippy's influence can even spread to life at home. One mother in Lithuania came up to me after the final session, full of praise for the programme. 'Zippy has transformed our family life!' she said. 'I couldn't believe it when I found he was just a stick insect! Our youngest child comes home and tells his brothers at the evening meal how they should talk one at a time, and listen properly to each other.' Just the other day, I heard of a family in England which now has 'Zippy time' after the evening meal, when each member of the family shares their thoughts and feelings. 'The most amazing thing,' said the mother, 'is that even my husband joins in!'



Dear Zippy,  
Do you now I like  
Zippy's class?  
I learn so much.  
That I learn to solve my  
won problems. Aaron stop  
calling me names and  
Tarrig stop saying  
nasyty thing to me.  
♥ Alexandra

The funny thing is that Zippy the stick insect actually plays quite a small part in the stories in *Zippy's Friends* – but the children really take to him, and he becomes the focus of all that they're learning in the programme. A stick insect seems an unlikely symbol of increased abilities to express yourself, make friends, and learn how to tackle your problems, but there's no doubt that that's what children are learning – thousands of children in different cultures across the world. Our aim is to find more partners to run *Zippy's Friends* with us, so that many more children can acquire the skills that they'll need to cope with life's difficulties as they grow up.