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Strong results support expansion in Ireland

A major new evaluation of Zippy's Friends in Ireland says that it significantly improves children's emotional literacy and coping skills, and recommends extending the programme to primary schools across the country.

Zippy's Friends was launched in Ireland in February 2008, and the renowned Health Promotion Research Centre at the National University of Ireland, Galway, has been evaluating the programme's implementation and impact.

The study, involving 730 children from 42 disadvantaged schools in the West of Ireland, is large and thorough. It is also the first randomized control trial of Zippy's Friends, with schools assigned randomly to either run the programme or act as a control group.

The study, which has just been published, concludes that there were no difficulties in adapting the programme to the Irish setting, and says that teachers were 'consistently positive' about it.

'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,' it says.

The authors, Aleisha Clarke and Prof Margaret Barry, are experts on health promotion, and they note that there is now substantial evidence that school-based emotional wellbeing programmes have a positive effective on children's behavioural and emotional functioning.



Biddy O'Neill, Health Promotion Manager - National Programmes, Health Service Executive (HSE); Aleisha Clarke and Prof Margaret Barry, Health Promotion Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway; Chris Bale, Director, Partnership for Children; Anne Sheridan, Mental Health Promotion Officer, HSE; and Anne McAteer, Zippy's Friends Co-ordinator, HSE.

There is also a growing recognition that enhancing children's social and emotional skills facilitates their ability to learn and achieve academically.

The authors point out that other studies have shown that younger children benefit more from mental health promotion programmes than older ones.

'Given this evidence,' they say, 'it makes sense to pay more deliberate attention to the preschool and early school years and to take a long-term developmental approach.'

The findings of the authors' own study are clear and unequivocal.

'The findings from this pilot implementation of Zippy's Friends

indicate that the programme was successfully implemented in designated deprived schools in Ireland and led to a number of

significant positive effects for the pupils and teachers,' they say. 'Consistent with the findings from previous studies, the programme significantly improved the

'Zippy's Friends is an hour of closeness with the children.' – Teacher

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MISSION

To help children and young people, throughout the world, develop skills which will enhance their present and future emotional wellbeing.

'I have a boy in my class and he is a very angry boy, and he said at the end of the programme "I used to be very different, I used to hit people, but now I know I shouldn't." – Teacher

emotional literacy and coping skills of the children, reduced their hyperactivity levels and led to improved relationships in the classroom.'

Specifically, the study shows significant improvements in children's self awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills.

'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.'

In addition to using a number of internationally recognised scales to assess children, this study also used



'I liked when we had to share our feelings.' – Child

the Draw and Write technique, which involves children drawing a picture in response to a theme or topic and writing down their ideas about it. This is the first time the technique has been used to evaluate Zippy's Friends, and it showed that children who completed the programme were more likely to use coping strategies that directly addressed the problem they faced.

Other encouraging findings are that 77 per cent of the teachers who taught Zippy's Friends said it had a positive effect on children's academic achievement, and 87 per cent thought that the programme's effects had transferred beyond the classroom.

The study also highlights areas for improvement. Some teachers thought that a few more activities were needed, some spoke of the need to create more awareness of Zippy's Friends throughout

the whole school, and several wanted a greater role for parents. Local problems are also identified, such as lack of time in the curriculum, lack of space in cramped classrooms, and the difficulty of teaching classes where the children are of different ages and grades.

The report was officially launched in Dublin in late April by Ireland's Minister for Equality, Disability and Mental Health, John Moloney, who said that he was delighted by the findings. Geoff Day, who heads Ireland's National Office for Suicide Prevention, said Zippy's Friends had huge potential.

'The challenge now is to try to ensure that it is rolled out across the country,' he said.

Discussions are ongoing on launching Zippy's Friends in other parts of Ireland in the next school year. A one year follow-up evaluation study is also in progress.

For more information, you can download both the full report and a 12-page summary at www.nuigalway.ie/health_promotion/events.htm or contact author Aleisha Clarke at aleisha.clarke@nuigalway.ie

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