

Summary of an Evaluation of Zippy's Friends

Second Pilot Programme in Denmark and Lithuania, 2000-01

Background

Zippy's Friends has had two in-depth evaluations of its implementation and effects. The programme was originally piloted in Denmark from October 1998 to April 1999, and evaluated for the first time. It was then revised and further piloted in Denmark and Lithuania, between October 2000 and April 2001. The evaluation was conducted by Prof Brian Mishara of the University of Quebec at Montreal, and Associate Prof Mette Ystgaard of the University of Oslo. This paper summarises the evaluation of the second pilots, and the full article has been published as follows: Mishara, BL and Ystgaard, M, 'Effectiveness of a mental health promotion program to improve coping skills in young children: *Zippy's Friends*', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 21 (2006) 110-123.

The evaluation looked at the implementation and short-term effects of Zippy's Friends with large numbers of children in two different cultures, Denmark and Lithuania, compared to control groups. The main findings were that, firstly, the programme was 'successfully implemented with minimal support', and secondly, that 'participants used significantly more positive coping strategies and showed significant improvement in social skills compared to the control groups'.

Participants

The evaluators wanted to examine whether the programme could be equally successful in different cultures and settings, so the evaluation was conducted with 322 children in 17 first grade classes in Denmark, and 314 children in 16 kindergarten classes in Lithuania. They formed the 'experimental group', i.e. those taking part in Zippy's Friends, compared to 'control groups' of 110 children in six classes in Denmark and 104 children in six classes in Lithuania, who did not take part.

Methods

The implementation of the programme was assessed by the participating teachers, who filled in session reports as they progressed through the programme, and who were interviewed by the evaluation coordinators at the end. The effects of the programme were assessed by both teachers' ratings, and interviews by trained interviewers, of the children before and after the programme, and at equivalent times for the control groups. Teachers used the *Social Skills Questionnaire, Teacher Form, Elementary Level* (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) and a specially designed version of the *Schoolagers Coping Strategies Inventory* (Ryan-Wenger, 1990). Interviewers used the *Social Skills Questionnaire, Student Form, Elementary Level* and the *Schoolagers Coping Strategies Inventory*.

Results

In general, teachers completed the programme as planned, and felt it was useful for the children. The teachers were also very satisfied with the training they received and the guidance notes given to them in the programme materials. They rated the children's enjoyment of Zippy's Friends highly – on a five point scale, the average response was four, or 'very much'. There was a high degree of participation in the classes – an average of 67% of children in Lithuanian classes and 89% in Denmark.

The effects of Zippy's Friends were measured using pre- and post-test scores. Social skills were tested in the areas of cooperation, assertiveness, self-control and empathy. All were found to have increased significantly in the experimental group compared to the control group. Problem behaviours were also tested, and it was found that externalising and hyperactivity had significantly reduced in the experimental group, although there were no significant findings for internalising.

The most important findings were on children's coping skills, since improvement in coping is the main aim of the Zippy's Friends programme. The evaluation found that the number of coping strategies used by children taking part in the programme increased significantly, in both Lithuania and Denmark, compared to a small decrease in the number of strategies used by the Lithuanian control group. In addition, there was an increase in helpful strategies such as 'Said I'm sorry or tell the truth', 'Talk to a friend', 'Thought about it' and 'Tried to relax and stayed calm', compared to a decrease in less helpful strategies such as 'Got mad', 'Bit nails' and 'Yelled or screamed'. These were the specific skills targeted by the activities in Zippy's Friends.

Results were very similar in both cultures. In addition and perhaps surprisingly, as some teachers had felt the programme to be 'too feminine', the authors found no significant gender differences in the results – the programme was equally effective with boys and girls.

Conclusion

The authors therefore concluded that: 'Zippy's Friends has the significant short-term effects of improving children's abilities to cope with everyday adversities, increasing some social skills and empathy, and decreasing behaviour problems'. They also found that the quantitative data were backed up by qualitative reports from the teachers – that children had learned how to relate better to those around them, that the social atmosphere in the class improved, and even that the teachers themselves had learned to cope better with their own problems.

The evaluators noted that, while this study found that Zippy's Friends had significant short-term effects, it would be desirable to assess whether those improvements are maintained over time. A subsequent study in Lithuania found that all the improvements in children's social skills and problem behaviours that were recorded during the programme were maintained one year later, based upon teacher observations and interviews with the children. A five-year study with large numbers of children has now commenced in Norway, to assess the programme's more lasting impact.