

An Independent Evaluation of Zippy's Friends for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs: Commissioned by The Judith Trust

Frequently Asked Questions on this Evaluation

What is Zippy's Friends?



Zippy's Friends, coordinated by the charity Partnership for Children (www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk) is a manualised, educational, mental health-promotion package comprising six modules. It is based around a set of six illustrated stories about a stick insect called 'Zippy' and his friends (a group of young children). Each story involves Zippy and his friends confronting issues that are familiar to young children including friendship, communication, feeling lonely, bullying, dealing with change and loss, and making a new start (titled: Feelings, Communication, Making and Breaking Relationships, Conflict Resolution, Dealing with Change and Loss, and Coping).

Programme content

The programme is built around a set of six stories. Zippy is a stick insect and his friends are a group of young children, and the stories show them confronting issues that are familiar to young children - friendship, communication, feeling lonely, bullying, dealing with change and loss, and making a new start. Each story is illustrated by brightly coloured pictures.

Module 1: Feelings

Goal: To improve children's abilities to recognise difficult feelings and to identify coping strategies to deal with those feelings

Session 1: Feeling sad – feeling happy

Session 2: Feeling angry or annoyed

Session 3: Feeling jealous

Session 4: Feeling nervous



Module 2: Communication

Goal: To improve children's abilities to communicate their feelings

Session 1: Improving communication

Session 2: Listening

Session 3: Who can help us?

Session 4: Saying what you want to say



Module 3: Making and breaking relationships

Goal: To improve children's abilities to make friends and to cope with rejection and loneliness

Session 1: How to keep a friend

Session 2: Dealing with loneliness and rejection

Session 3: How to resolve conflicts with friends



Session 4:How to make friends

Module 4: Conflict resolution

Goal: To improve children’s abilities to resolve conflicts

Session 1: How to recognise good solutions

Session 2:Bullying

Session 3:Solving problems

Session 4:Helping others to resolve conflicts



Module 5: Dealing with change and loss

Goal: To improve children’s abilities to cope with change and loss

Session 1: Change and loss are part of life

Session 2:Coping with death

Session 3:Visit to a graveyard

Session 4:Learning from change and loss



Module 6: We cope

Goal: To improve children’s abilities to use a variety of coping strategies

Session 1: Different ways to cope

Session 2:How to help others

Session 3:Adapting to new situations

Session 4:Celebrating together

The programme is delivered by teachers and teaching assistants during routine classroom time, typically over a 24-week period with one 45-minute session per week (four sessions per module, 24 sessions in total). Each session begins with a review of what pupils learned the previous week. The teacher then reads part of the story followed by the pupils participating in activities such as playing games, drawing or discussion. Repetition is a key feature of the programme to reinforce key messages and embed learning.

The SEN programme closely aligns with the mainstream programme but has additional resources and supplements to facilitate the implementation of the programme to children with a wide range of abilities. The SEN programme provides a selection of alternative activities (around five for each of the mainstream activities), and the stories have been adapted at four different ability levels using WIGGIT symbols. The activities include craft sessions, completion of worksheets, role-plays, discussion and use of metaphors.

Whilst the mainstream programme was developed for children aged 5-7 years, the SEN programme was designed to be appropriate for a wider age range to include those in primary and secondary education. Teachers are advised to take a flexible approach to make the programme ‘age appropriate’ (including consideration of mental/emotional age). Owing to the increased complexity of running the programme with SEN pupils, completion may take longer to allow for shorter sessions, repetition of sessions, or completion of a range of activities attached to each session before moving onto the next. The SEN schools took an average of 7 sessions to complete module 1 (based on feedback from 7 schools), 5 sessions to complete module 2 (based on feedback from 5 schools) and 5 sessions to complete module 3 (based on feedback from 5 schools). An average of 16 sessions were needed to complete the first three modules. The classes tended to need more than the standard four sessions per module suggesting the progress was slower than in mainstream schools. This study evaluated the first three modules to ensure adequate time for completion within one academic year.

And what is emotional literacy?

Emotional literacy is defined as the ability to recognise, understand, manage, and express emotions and five domains have been identified: self-awareness, ability to manage emotions, self-motivation, empathy, and

relationship skills. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK (NICE, 2008) published guidelines to promote social and emotional literacy and well-being in primary school education. NICE recommends that help should be provided for those most at risk of or already showing signs of social, emotional and behavioural problems, and that schools should be equipped to deliver programmes to develop children's social and emotional skills and emotional literacy.

Such skills include problem solving, coping with stress, conflict management/resolution, and understanding and managing feelings. The UK Government recognises the importance of promoting social and emotional literacy and wellbeing in their National Initiative Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) but as yet there are no adaptations for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Research shows that a child's emotional, social and psychological wellbeing influences their future health, education and social prospects.

Why do we need to read this report?

This report is based on an 18-month study which 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. Data was collected using standardised assessment scales, purposive-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 was collected from children, parents/guardians/care givers, and teachers before and after the Zippy's Friends programme. It is a particular goal of the Judith Trust (funders of this evaluation) to investigate and seek to prevent and provide remedies for mental ill-health in children and adults with learning disabilities, retaining awareness of the variations in types of mental ill-health suffered by girls and boys, women and men.

What were the key findings?

- The Zippy's Friends for SEN programme is both feasible and acceptable to and for children with SEN.
- Comparisons of scores pre- and post- Zippy's Friends 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 three key areas of emotional literacy: self-awareness, ability to manage emotions, and relationship skills.
- Self-motivation and empathy did not improve and this may relate to the challenges in measuring these constructs using informant report; both are subjective sensations and may not be amenable to direct observation by others. Problem behaviour also did not change which may in part be due to the lack of focus of the programme on problem behaviour or the lack of sensitivity of the measure used.
- Younger children demonstrated a significant improvement in empathy whereas empathy remained stable in older children. Those with higher abilities in English speaking demonstrated improved prosocial behaviour and self-control whereas these remained stable in lower ability children.
- The children and young people demonstrated improved emotion recognition skills. More specifically, they demonstrated improved emotion naming when presented with symbols. It is not clear whether these improved skills would generalise to more 'real-life' scenarios and further work within the programme may be required to help children to transfer these skills.
- Teachers provided positive feedback about the programme and the support and training they had received. Teachers were especially impressed with the flexibility and comprehensiveness of the programme, including the range of activities and resources. They especially valued the opportunity to adapt resources. They felt that the programme covered topics that were important for children with SEN.
- 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. They found that the programme was most suited to more

able children with SEN, with expressive verbal communication and without severe autism spectrum disorder or ASD. These children responded better to the programme. Teachers found the programme unsuitable for some SEN pupils (children with severe communication and cognitive deficits and those with severe autistic features and peer relationship and engagement problems).

- Teachers reported that the children struggled to understand the concepts of jealousy and nervousness and those with limited expressive communication struggled with the communication module.
- 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's Friends.
- 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. The 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.

What did the children say about participating in the Zippy's Friends SEN programme?

The interviews with children were conducted one to two months after the programme and all four participants still recognised Zippy. When presented with a picture of Zippy, they all responded positively, smiling and saying "it's Zippy, Zippy's Friends". The non-verbal participant demonstrated that he recognised Zippy and was looking at his picture during the interview. All the participants looked carefully at the picture of Zippy's friends and enthusiastically read aloud the names of his friends "It's Tig, Sue, Leela, Sandy, Sandy was Tig's friend". Two of the participants also remembered some of the stories they had been taught. All the children provided positive verbal and non-verbal feedback about the programme: they liked Zippy and enjoyed learning about Zippy and Zippy's friends.

Zippy [...] Yeah, we do work at Zippy's.

That's Zippy!

I kind of like him. I like his face by the way [...] It's Tig, Sue, Leela, Sandy, Sandy was Tig's friend.

Zippy, Zippy's Friends [...] Yeah, Sandy, Ali, Sue, Tig, Leels [...] They like playing football, Tig likes playing with Zippy.

These children and nice friends, his friends and this girl Sue. I liked about Zippy these boys, children and I liked Zippy [...] I like Zippy because it's clever.



MODULE 1

FEELINGS

The child participants were asked to reflect on what the programme had taught them about feeling sad, feeling happy and about friends. The children reflected most on learning about friends and two participants explicitly referred to the importance of having friends. When the children were presented with the 'Rules for Choosing a Good Solution', they recognised them and read them loud. They provided positive feedback and said that they use these rules. One child demonstrated an understanding of the rules "You can't bully them back, it would be a bad idea" and felt that "these rules make everything much better". The children also offered some coping strategies such as "If you get sad, you tell an adult". They also described appropriate interactions between friends and the importance of being nice to others.

I am gonna be nice and make friends [...] Oh he teach me lots of things, making friends, you can also make one [...] Be nice to them [...] It's nice making your own friends.

He is teaching me about the lesson about his friends and he was very good Zippy and I like his friends. I like Tig and Sue! Cause they are the best!

Oh yeah I remember these rules! [...] Yeah I will, I use them, I remember yeah I can use them [...] These rules make everything much better [...] You can't bully them back, it would be a bad idea.

What did the parents say about their children participating in the Zippy's Friends SEN programme?

All parents recognised the importance of teaching social, emotional and coping skills to children with SEN and had a very positive perception of the programme. The parents were pleased that their children had taken part in the programme. As part of the interview, parents were asked to provide feedback and reflections on the content of the programme. They felt that the six modules cover “all the main aspects” and are “really comprehensive”. They also thought that the programme and resources, such as the activities and the pictures, were appropriate for children with SEN and could not identify any potential barriers to implementation or any recommended changes. Issues of ability, age, gender, and cultural appropriateness were explored and all the feedback was positive. One parent felt that the neutrality of the programme helped ensure its relevance: “There is no culture in there at all I think, it could be relevant to anyone. I think it's not gender-oriented either”. Another explicitly reflected on the pictures which they felt were appropriate.

Parents were asked whether the programme has had any impact on family relationships and on children's communication and coping skills. A range of improvements were reported. Three parents felt that there was an increase in their child's ability to understand and express feelings, and communicate with others. Parents reported that the children were more able and willing to express their needs and one highlighted that her son listened more. One parent reflected on how her son's ability to show ‘sympathy and empathy’ and relationships with peers had improved over the last year. Three parents reported that their children had fewer outbursts, had more stable moods, and appeared calmer.

It is important because they don't understand how to express their feelings and having any technique that allows them to 1) understand it, and 2) express it, it's got to improve their communication with people around them and to deal with real life.

Anything that allows them to communicate, it's got to be good because they suffer with that particular issue more than anyone else.

I think that's a good idea [...] anything that helps him understand how he is or tell other people how he is doing, it's got to be a benefit.

This is very good for special children [...] opens their brain to catch up new things, new skills, I am happy.

I am quite happy about it, I think it covers everything [...] I think all of them [the topics] are really important, all of them.

No, I think that's really comprehensive, they [the topics] are all the main aspects, certainly for autism, that they struggle with. So I think it's something I am glad it's been around for that long, I hadn't realised.

I think it's appropriate content to teach something and I think sometimes you have to make it quite engaging for the child to be interested.

What did the teachers say about using the Zippy's Friends SEN programme?

I was a bit nervous, because I didn't know how they would respond to something new, but I think having Zippy as an item really helped. Because they understand Zippy. And they understand, 'oh I know what's going to happen now'. And they've really enjoyed it. They've enjoyed the stories a lot and the little activities. They've really enjoyed that.

On the whole we are really, really impressed with it, and quite surprised with the results that we're getting with the children... I think it's a really good programme. I know that any PHSE programme would have results but this has some really good results. I'm only in class a few lessons a week. So it's very easy for me. I have the plan for the whole year, and I've got all the resources. So I found that really helpful.

We've had to kind of adapt slightly those little bits, but in general it's working quite well really and they've got used to the kind of structure of the session, and they seem to, kind of when we do the feedback session at the end, where they're kind of talking about did they like the session, how did they feel during the session, they've seemed to have really got to grips with that and I'm, finding the longer we go on, the more sessions we cover, the more engagement I have in the session, and the better I see they're beginning to understand it. I mean the first session of module three we did looking at friends and how to treat our friends they seemed to really understand, even the low level children seemed to have really grasped that quite well.

I have a couple of children who will initiate interaction with the children, but it's not sort of a prolonged interaction, I only have one child that is sort of fully verbal and even his communication is a lot of mimicked communication, so it is a lot of contact with meaning behind what he's saying, so they're always going to find it difficult to interact and sort of communicate, that's part of their Autism, so I don't think it's going to have a huge impact, but in terms of their understanding in what we are talking about during the session I've seen definitely an increase in that.

It's in one of the examples in the special needs bit about feeling angry, well we did that as part of one of the angry sessions and then as I say ...they taught that to somebody else in the class and now when the people come in and they go 'oh I'm feeling really angry about this, shall we do our Zippy relax?' And then everybody joins in with the person doing it, so they're sort of already seeing that that's quite a way out of getting angry and it's a good way of coping with it and perhaps not feeling so angry.

There's been a definite improvement since we have been doing, starting it. With the way the children are communicating and saying how they're feeling. So it's not just happy and sad any more, it's cross, angry, and we've sort of said to them when they are upset 'use your words, explain what's happened'. And they are better now at doing that.

And I have seen an improvement in my most able child. In their ability to sort of name and identify emotions.

What happens next?

The evaluation identified a number of further modifications 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 than would be anticipated for mainstream schools (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 pupils. This class included a larger proportion of non-verbal children and the class teacher cited this as the primary reason for her decision to cease the programme. The programme may therefore require some further development to improve its suitability for children with limited expressive verbal communication.

- 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. Further developments should also include additional alternatives to discussion exercises.
- As it stands, the programme appears to be most suited to those with P Levels 6 and above.
- The teaching on jealousy and nervousness and how to cope with these emotions were least successful and require 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.
- Schools may consider active involvement of parents in the programme to improve consistency and generalisation from school to home environments