

Early start to suicide prevention: Children's programme shows promising results

By Chris Bale

Zippy's Friends is a programme that teaches young children to cope with difficulties. Evaluation studies of pilot programmes in Denmark and Lithuania have shown excellent results and Zippy's Friends is now being made available internationally. Voksne for Barn is planning to launch the programme in Norway.

Cries for help

Telephone helpline services are an integral part of suicide prevention strategies in many countries, with trained volunteers listening to people who are suicidal. The callers tell many different stories in many different languages, but one cry for help recurs – 'I don't know what to do.' Life has dealt the caller a harsh blow and she or he feels unable to cope.

This sad reality led an international group of suicidologists to ponder the importance of teaching coping skills. They formulated a simple concept – if we can teach young children how to cope with difficulties, they should be better able to handle problems and crises in adolescence and adult life. From that concept, a programme called *Zippy's Friends* was born.

Introducing Zippy

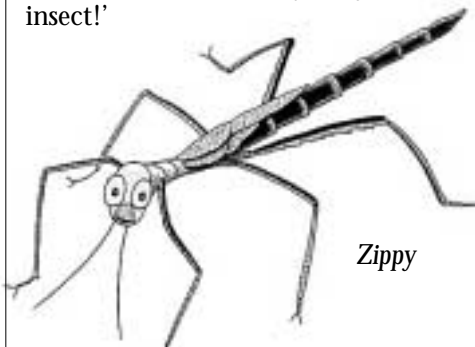
There are plenty of programmes for children who have mental health problems or who are perceived as being especially vulnerable, but *Zippy's Friends* was designed to promote the emotional well-being of all young children. It was conceived as a suicide primary prevention programme but is perhaps more accurately described as a children's mental health promotion programme.

Zippy's Friends is suitable for six and seven year old children of all abilities. It teaches them how to cope with everyday-difficulties, to identify and talk about their feelings and to explore ways of dealing with them. It also encourages children to help other people with their problems. The programme is taught in schools and kindergartens by teachers who have been specially trained, and usually runs for 24 weeks, with one session per week.

The heart of the programme is six stories about a group of children and a stick insect called Zippy. Over the course of 24 weeks, the stories track what happens to Zippy and his friends, dealing with 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.

A stick insect may seem an unlikely hero, but children love Zippy. Many teachers make model stick insects for their classes and the children leave food for them every evening. One Lithuanian mother said: 'The programme has transformed our family life. All my children now listen properly to each other. I couldn't believe it when I found out Zippy was just a stick insect!'



Each session has activities, to reinforce the messages of the stories. Children do a lot of role plays, draw pictures, work with puppets and even visit a graveyard. The emphasis is very much on encouraging them to explore, helping them to find their own solutions and expand their range of coping strategies, so that they have more options from which to choose.

Many teachers who have taught the programme in Denmark and Lithuania have said that the programme's first and most obvious impact is that children become much better at resolving conflicts. One Danish teacher overheard a playground conversation in which a boy was complaining to two others about being bullied by them. The bullies then explained why they had been bullying him. 'I couldn't believe it,' said the teacher. 'Three six year olds analysing bullying!'

Although *Zippy's Friends* is primarily intended to help young children, it also has value for teachers. Many who have run the programme say that it has

changed their perceptions of young children and improved classroom communication. One official from the World Health Organisation even commented that the programme's greatest value is as a teacher training tool.

Evaluation



Zippy's Friends has been developed and tested in the contrasting settings of Denmark and Lithuania. More than 10,000 children have already completed the programme and the results have been carefully analysed in a series of evaluation studies. The first study, in Denmark in 1999, led by Prof Brian Mishara from the University of Quebec at Montreal in Canada and Associate Professor Mette Ystgaard from the University of Oslo, recorded improvements in the social skills of co-operation, empathy and self-control, but no effect on coping. In response, the programme was suspended for a year and the materials were comprehensively revised, with an extra module being added and more emphasis being placed on the development of coping skills.

The most recent major evaluation, again led by Mishara and Ystgaard, looked at both the implementation and impact of the programme. The findings were based on data from experimental and control groups in both Denmark and Lithuania. The evaluators concluded that the programme had been implemented successfully. Teachers conducted the sessions with few problems, were satisfied with the training they had received and felt that the programme achieved its goals.



Mishara and Ystgaard concluded their study by saying: 'We don't know of another similar programme for young children that has been the object of such a detailed and rigorous evaluation process.' Most programmes simply cannot afford such evaluation and credit is due to GlaxoSmith Kline, which has funded the development and evaluation of *Zippy's Friends* for the past

six years in a particularly visionary example of corporate sponsorship.

International expansion

The whole aim of developing *Zippy's Friends* was to benefit as many young children as possible, and the strong evaluation results mean that the programme can now be offered internationally.





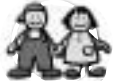
It has been transferred from the non-profit agency that developed it – Befrienders International – to a new one called Partnership for Children. Befrienders International ran a network of telephone helplines for suicidal people in more than 40 countries and *Zippy's Friends* was conceived as a primary suicide prevention programme, but it can now be more

They reported that children enjoyed the sessions – and some even commented that the programme had helped them to deal with problems in their own lives.

Looking at the programme's impact, the evaluators found that children in the experimental groups showed improvements in all the four key social skills that were tested – co-operation, self-control, assertion and empathy. There were clear improvements too in coping skills. In both Denmark and Lithuania there was an increase in positive coping strategies – such as saying sorry, talking to a friend or telling the truth – and a decrease in negative strategies, such as getting mad, screaming or biting your nails. In Lithuania, the evaluators also looked at two problem behaviours – externalising and hyperactivity – and found that children in the programme showed significant decreases in both categories, compared to children in the control group.

The evaluators concluded that participation in *Zippy's Friends* results in significant improvements in coping, social skills and problem behaviours, and they were 'amazed' to find that these effects were equally evident in boys and girls.

Two more evaluation studies have also recently been completed in Lithuania, assessing the programme's effects on children. The first looked at children one year after they had completed *Zippy's Friends* and found that improvements recorded during the programme were maintained one year later. The second found that children who had participated in *Zippy's Friends* in their final year at kindergarten handled the transition to primary school more easily and more happily than children who had not joined the programme.

MODULES	
 MODULE 1 FEELINGS	STORY 1 – Full of feelings Session 1: Feeling sad – feeling happy Session 2: Feeling angry or annoyed Session 3: Feeling jealous Session 4: Feeling nervous
 MODULE 2 COMMUNICATIONS	STORY 2 – Under the bedclothes Session 1: Improving communication Session 2: Listening Session 3: Who can help us? Session 4: Saying what you want to say
 MODULE 3 MAKING & BREAKING RELATIONSHIPS	STORY 3 – Are you my friend? Session 1: How to keep a friend Session 2: Dealing with loneliness & rejection Session 3: How to resolve conflicts with friends Session 4: How to make friends
 MODULE 4 CONFLICT RESOLUTION	STORY 4 – Beating the bullies Session 1: How to recognise good solutions Session 2: Bullying Session 3: Solving problems Session 4: Helping others resolve conflicts
 MODULE 5 DEALING WITH CHANGE AND LOSS	STORY 5 – Saying goodbye 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	STORY 6 – We cope Session 1: Different ways to cope Session 2: How to help others Session 3: Adapting to new situations Session 4: Celebrating together



successfully promoted by an agency focusing exclusively on children and young people. Partnership for Children's mission is 'to help children and young people, throughout the world, develop skills which will enhance their present and future emotional wellbeing.'



Although it has so far been run only in Denmark and Lithuania, *Zippy's Friends* was designed from the outset to be generic, suitable for use in different countries and cultures. Partnership for Children does not run the programme itself, pre-

ferring to work through strong local partner agencies, and it will be interesting to see just how transferable the programme is. Its key principles are not negotiable, but adjustments or additions may be needed to make the programme suitable for a particular country or culture.

More than 7,000 children will complete the programme in Denmark and Lithuania this year. It will begin in England and India in September, and will be launched in Brazil in March 2004. A feasibility study on running the programme in Estonia has been completed, with positive results, and a similar study is ongoing in Poland. Discussions continue with Voksne for Barn, which is keen to run *Zippy's Friends* in Norway. More than 20 other countries have also shown interest in the programme.

Zippy's Friends tackles many issues that are directly relevant to young children, and different authorities are attracted to the programme for different reasons. For example, the Ministry of Education and Science in Lithuania believes the programme can help to combat drug and alcohol abuse among young people, while a partner agency in India thinks it will help to promote inter-ethnic tolerance. The agency that will run the programme in Brazil hopes that it will promote resilience in young people, while discussions in Australia are centred on the programme's value in reducing the number of youth suicides.

Conclusion

Evaluating the effectiveness of *Zippy's Friends* as a suicide prevention programme would require an impossibly ambitious, lifelong longitudinal study. However, there is now strong evidence that the programme helps young children to develop more coping skills and to both offer and receive help in difficult times. It also seems that these improvements are maintained one year on, and a further study is planned in Lithuania to evaluate the impact after five years. At the very least, *Zippy's Friends* can be said to improve the emotional wellbeing of young children. Hopefully, this will lead to fewer people feeling the need to end their own lives.

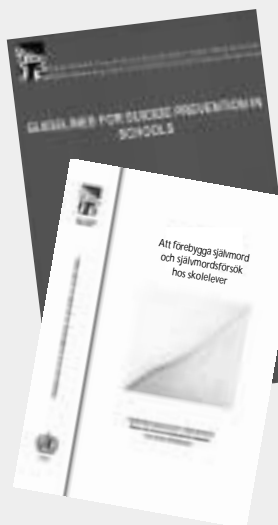


Chris Bale trained and worked as a print and television journalist before transferring to the non-profit sector. He lived and worked in Asia for 20 years and was Director of Oxfam Hong Kong, an international development agency. In 1998,

he returned to his native Britain as Director of Befrienders International, a global network of suicide prevention hotlines. He joined Partnership for Children as its first Director in January 2002.

Internett:

www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk
www.vfb.no (Voksne for barn)



Wasserman, Danuta / Naboni, Véronique:
Guidelines for suicide prevention in schools.
Stockholm: Nationellt centrum för suicid-forskning och prevention av psykisk ohälsa (NASP), 2001 (rapport 2001, nr. 1) – 97 s.

Kan lastes ned fra <http://www.ki.se/suicid/rapporter/GuidelinesWHO.pdf>

Nærmere informasjon:

http://www.ki.se/suicid/rapporter_guidelines_schools.html

Rapporten kan bestilles via e-post fra NASP, pris kr. 100 + eksp.:

Suicid.forskning@ipm.ki.se

NASP er Verdens helseorganisasjons samarbeidspartner for selvmordsforebygging, og har etter oppdrag fra WHO utarbeidet den omtalte rapporten. WHO har på grunnlag av den utgitt støttemateriell til lærere og annet skolepersonale for å forebygge selvmord og selvmordsforsøk blant skoleelever over hele verden:

http://www.who.int/health_topics/suicide/en/

Dette skolemateriellet er også tilpasset svensk skole og utgitt på svensk: **Att förebygga självmord och självmordsförsök hos skolelever.**

http://www.ki.se/suicid/nyhetsbrev/who_stodmaterial_030528.pdf