Lessons from many classrooms

Chris Bale

Zippy's Friends is an international school-based programme that helps five to eight year old children to develop coping and social skills. It is running in primary schools and kindergartens in 12 countries, from Iceland to India, and was launched in Norway four years ago. This article looks at how the programme has grown from a pilot study involving a few hundred children in Denmark to become one of the most successful international programmes of its kind, reaching well over 60,000 young children annually, and considers what lessons can be learned for promotion of mental health and emotional wellbeing in schools.

Origins

Zippy's Friends was originally developed by Befrienders International, a charity which coordinated the work of more than 300 telephone helpline services around the world. The concept behind the programme was that if young children could learn how to cope with difficulties they would be better able to handle problems and crises in adolescence and adult life. A first pilot in Denmark was moderately successful, and the programme was then extensively revised before a second, larger pilot study and evaluation in Denmark and Lithuania. This time the results were very positive (Mishara & Ystgaard, 2006) and it was decided to transfer *Zippy's Friends* from Befrienders International to a new, independent charity called Partnership for Children, and to promote it to schools and kindergartens around the world.

Content

Zippy's Friends is a programme of 24 weekly sessions built around a set of six stories about Zippy, a stick insect, and his friends, a group of young children. The stories show the friends confronting issues that are familiar to young children – friendship, communication, feeling lonely, bullying, dealing with change and loss, and making a new start. Children take part in activities that build on the stories, drawing, acting, discussing and playing games. The 24 sessions must be taught sequentially and in full, though teachers are encouraged to add their own ideas and activities.

Zippy's Friends helps young children to develop coping skills, but it does not tell them that one strategy is good and another bad. Instead, it encourages children to explore different solutions to problems and to think for themselves. The programme does not focus only on helping children to cope with their own problems. Rather, it is a cooperative

programme, encouraging children to share ideas, to ask for help and to offer help to others. It affirms a child's ability to both use and give support.

Teachers

In the first Danish pilot of *Zippy's Friends* in 1999, some classes were taught by class teachers but others were taught by befriending volunteers, mainly psychologists, who visited the participating schools once a week to run a session. It soon became clear that it was much better for teachers to run the programme, because they are familiar figures and children are more willing to talk openly with them about their feelings. Also, because teachers are with the children for the whole week, they are able to reinforce the learning of *Zippy's Friends* in other classes and situations – for example, resolving conflicts in the playground.

Teachers are specially trained to run *Zippy's Friends* and the teaching materials are provided only to teachers who have been trained. The emphasis in this training has changed slightly over the years. Originally, more information was provided about the theories on which the programme is based, but experience has shown that most teachers are more concerned with practical issues of classroom management.

A 2005 survey of 309 *Zippy's Friends* teachers in six countries (Brazil, Canada, England, Lithuania, Norway and Poland) showed that 89 per cent felt they had become better teachers as a result of running the programme (Partnership for Children, 2005). Other findings included 80 per cent of teachers saying that the programme had improved the atmosphere in their classroom, and 95 per cent saying that it had helped them to get to know their children better.

Management

Although *Zippy's Friends* is now being taught by many hundreds of teachers to tens of thousands of children, the agency that coordinates the programme internationally is a small charity with just three staff. Partnership for Children works through a diverse network of international partners, each of which manages *Zippy's Friends* in the way that is most appropriate for its own country and culture. Partnership for Children is the small hub of a large wheel.

The charity looks for partner agencies which share its approach to promoting mental and emotional wellbeing in schools and which have the ability to deliver *Zippy's Friends* to large numbers of children. Finding such partners can be a time-consuming process and negotiations are not always successful. For instance, the programme is not yet running in Estonia or Latvia because, despite extensive research, it has not yet been possible to identify a suitable partner. Timing is also important. In 2000, Partnership for Children considered piloting *Zippy's Friends* in Poland but decided that major changes being made to the education system meant that the timing would be wrong. The launch was delayed until 2004, since when *Przyjaciele Zippiego* has thrived.

Although local partner agencies adopt differing approaches to managing and expanding *Zippy's Friends*, the content of the programme remains unchanged. Children in a small rural school in Norway hear the same stories and do the same activities as children in a bustling kindergarten in Shanghai. This is not because teachers are prohibited from suggesting cultural adjustments, but because they feel that the programme is already suitable for their children. This might not be possible with resources aimed at older children, where cultural specificity is much more of an issue.

Zippy's Friends is now running in 12 countries – Brazil, Canada, China (Mainland and Hong Kong), Denmark, England, Iceland, India, Ireland, Lithuania, Norway, Poland and the United States. This number is expected to grow substantially, as discussions continue with prospective partners in other countries. Looking across the very different cultural settings in which the programme is running, and reflecting on the experiences of the past six years, it becomes clear that some challenges are universal but that there are also clear differences in the ways in which governments and societies view and address the need to promote mental health in schools.

Common Concern

Perhaps the most encouraging conclusion from the expansion of *Zippy's Friends* – and other programmes – is that there is a growing international awareness of the importance of promoting the mental health and emotional well-being of children, and a recognition that schools are the best and most accessible place to do it. This may in part be due to the mounting evidence of the mental ill-health and lack of wellbeing of so many people, including children. Education writer and consultant Sue Palmer (2006), whose book *Toxic Childhood* examines the pressures on modern children, has written of 'an epidemic of misery' among children and young people, especially in developed countries. She writes: 'In a global culture whose citizens are wealthier, healthier and more privileged than ever before, children grow unhappier every year' (p.1). It is perhaps hardly surprising that governments, schools, parents and teachers are increasingly accepting the need to start promoting children's mental health and emotional well-being as early as possible.

Curriculum Pressure

Despite this growing acceptance of the need for such programmes, and the mounting evidence of their beneficial effects for children and teachers, it is often very difficult to find time for them in a crowded curriculum. Primary schools and even kindergartens complain that non-academic lessons are being squeezed out by government demands for

testing of academic standards. In China and Lithuania, for example, *Zippy's Friends* is run mainly in kindergartens because primary schools say that they simply do not have time for it. However, it is also true that more and more countries are setting out clear learning objectives for this area of education, and programmes need to match these objectives.

Education or Health?

Some countries regard *Zippy's Friends* as a health programme. For instance, in Iceland, Ireland and Norway it is funded by the Ministry of Health. Others, though, see the programme as education. In Poland, for example, it is managed by a training agency attached to the Ministry of Education, and classes in England are coordinated by local education authorities or groups of schools. The European Commission has noted that it is a health promotion programme being delivered by workers from another sector – education. The impact of poor mental health on overall public health is already well-known, and there is growing evidence of the links between mental health and academic performance. If mental health promotion programmes can demonstrate that, in addition to improving personal wellbeing, they also raise academic standards, it is easy to imagine that governments and schools which are obsessed with academic results will find both the money and the space in the curriculum to accommodate them. This is beginning to happen in some countries, but there is a long way to go.

Local partners

Although nationwide programmes require the active support of many people, Partnership for Children's experience has been that there are usually one or two people who are critically important and that their enthusiasm and hard work can produce extraordinary results. The most spectacular example of this is *Amigos do Zippy* in Brazil. One woman believed in the programme and decided to devote five years of her life to delivering it to as many teachers and children as possible. She started with no budget, and yet in four years has built the largest *Zippy's Friends* programme in the world, with well over 20,000 children due to enrol in 2008.

Local partner agencies range from small charities to government departments. In China and Denmark the programme is managed by teacher training institutions, and in Lithuania it is run by a charity that was started specifically to manage *Zippy's Friends*. There is also diversity in funding sources. In some countries the costs of teaching materials, teacher training and programme management are wholly covered by national or local government, but in other countries the bills are paid by commercial sponsors or charitable foundations. For instance, HSBC, one of the world's leading banks, funds the programmes in Hong Kong and Shanghai, the IKI chain of supermarkets sponsors *Zippiu draugai* in Lithuania, and the fledgling programme in the USA is mainly supported by the Todd Ouida Children's Foundation, which commemorates a young man who was killed in the attack on the World Trade Centre on 9/11.

Attitudes to Evaluation

Partnership for Children's decision to offer *Zippy's Friends* internationally was based on a major study in Denmark and Lithuania (Mishara & Ystgaard, 2006), which showed that children who took part in the programme showed clear improvements in their coping and social skills when compared to children who did not take part in it. A further study in Lithuania showed that participating in *Zippy's Friends* in the final year of kindergarten can help children to handle the transition to primary school (Monkevicien, Mishara and Dufour, 2006).

These published studies have helped the spread of the programme and led the World Federation for Mental Health and the World Health Organisation to include *Zippy's Friends* in their review of evidence-based mental health promotion programmes (WFMH and WHO, 2004). Yet at national and local levels, attitudes to evaluation differ widely. Some countries insist on conducting their own full evaluations, some are happy to have less rigorous studies, and some are content to rely on feedback from teachers. Within England, for example, some local authorities have conducted their own evaluations but

others have simply accepted the findings of Mishara and Ystgaard's 2006 study. Partnership for Children welcomes further evaluation studies and provides advice or assistance when asked, but believes that its own priority at this time must be to make the programme available to as many teachers and children as possible.

Expansion

Internationally, *Zippy's Friends* is promoted through conference presentations and approaches to potential partners. At the time of writing, detailed discussions are in progress about launching the programme in a further four countries. Partnership for Children is a founding member of the International Alliance for Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Schools, Intercamhs (www.intercamhs.org), and also provides a lot of information on its own website, including a short introductory video about *Zippy's Friends* and interviews with children who have completed the programme (www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk).

Zippy's Friends usually starts on a small scale, with a few teachers from a handful of schools being trained, but can then expand rapidly. For instance, the annual enrolment of children in Poland rose from 358 to 7,851 in just three years, and in Hong Kong it went from 287 to 9,358 over a similar period. Experience has shown that it is best to launch the programme in the most enthusiastic primary schools or kindergartens. When it was launched in Lithuania, there were suggestions that it should be made available to children from the minority Polish and Russian speaking communities, that it should cover rural as well as urban areas, and that provision must be made for Roma children and children with special needs. Instead, the programme was launched in a few carefully selected kindergartens and primary schools in the capital, Vilnius, and the positive results achieved there have provided a springboard for nationwide expansion. Today, *Zipiu draugai* is running in all ten counties of Lithuania, and more than 38,000 children have already completed the programme.

Many factors contribute to expansion. Strong evaluation results can be very helpful, but so too is word of mouth recommendation from teachers who have taught the programme. Government endorsement, as in the inclusion of *Zippys venner* in Norway's National Action Plan for mental health in schools, is very significant. Less obvious is the value of positive media coverage. For instance, in Hong Kong, a large article in a popular weekend magazine led to many phone calls from parents, demanding to know why their child's kindergarten was not offering the programme. As a result, the original expansion plan was overtaken by demand and the number of teachers being trained shot up. Political support can be equally powerful. In Brazil, the Mayor of the city of Sorocaba decided to make *Amigos do Zippy* available to every child of the target age, and so the programme runs in every school. These examples demonstrate the need for school mental health promotion programmes to look beyond the usual channels of discussion and distribution and to foster community-wide support.

Underestimating Children

One final conclusion from the experience of developing *Zippy's Friends* internationally has been that adults, including experienced teachers, sometimes underestimate young children. Many teachers are surprised to discover through the programme that their children have so many ideas and concerns and can generate so many coping strategies. The most striking example of this involves the session dealing with death, which includes a class outing to a graveyard. Many teachers say this would not be appropriate in their cultures or worry that it is not a good idea to talk to young children about death. However, after the session the feedback is almost universally positive. Indeed, some teachers have said that giving children an opportunity to talk and ask questions about death is like opening the floodgates!

Conclusion

When the development of *Zippy's Friends* began 12 years ago, the idea that one programme could promote the mental health and emotional well-being of young children across different continents and cultures seemed singularly ambitious. Yet as the programme continues to reach more countries, more teachers and more children every year, that is now happening.

Chris Bale is Director of Partnership for Children and an Advisory Board Member of Intercamhs.
chris.bale@partnershipforchildren.org.uk

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