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Evaluation of Zippy's Friends for improving socio-emotional and academic outcomes in six to seven year olds: Protocol for a cluster randomised controlled trial and process evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Zippy's Friends is a social and emotional learning programme currently delivered in UK primary schools as well as across 30 countries worldwide. It aims to develop coping and social skills among five to seven year old pupils. It typically runs over the course of one school year, and is designed to be delivered by the class teacher on a whole-class basis. This protocol details the methodology underpinning the first large-scale, rigorous evaluation of the programme in a UK context, consisting of a cluster randomised controlled trial and process evaluation. It will assess the impact of the programme on both socio-emotional and academic outcomes, and is the first evaluation to include a direct assessment of academic attainment.

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1. Background

1.1. Significance

An estimated 10% of children and young people aged between five and 16 years in the UK have a clinically diagnosed mental disorder (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2005), with an estimated prevalence of 13.4% worldwide (Polanczk, Salum, Sugaya, Caye, & Rohde, 2015). There is a substantial body of evidence that links early socio-emotional development to later academic performance and a number of key health, social and economic outcomes, such as stress and mental health, workplace readiness and adult wellbeing (Chien et al., 2012; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Gutman & Schoon, 2014). Prevention and early intervention in children's emotional wellbeing through universal, school-based programmes may therefore constitute an effective, as well as cost-effective option for improving a range of short and long-term outcomes in the social, emotional, academic and economic domains (Allen, 2011; Knapp, McDaid, & Parsonage, 2011). Educators are increasingly recognising the importance of social and emotional skills for effective learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015; DfE, 2015; DoH, 2012).

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Within this context, schools are seen as playing a crucial part in contributing to the positive mental health of children and young people. Several reviews have concluded that universal interventions promoting social and emotional competencies can have significant positive outcomes for children's mental health, wellbeing and educational attainment (Adi, Killoran, Janmohamed, & Stewart-Brown, 2007; Browne et al., 2004; Clarke, Morreale, Field, Hussein, & Barry, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg, 2010; Tennant, Goens, Barlow, Day, & Stewart-Brown, 2007).

1.2. Intervention

Zippy's Friends is a universal, classroom-based social and emotional learning programme that aims to develop children's repertoire of coping skills and their ability to adapt those coping skills to various situations. It is designed to be delivered to five to seven year olds by the class teacher over the course of an academic year, through 24 weekly sessions which last around 45 min. The 24 sessions are divided into six modules which focus on specific themes: feelings, communication, making and breaking relationships, conflict resolution, dealing with change and loss, and general coping skills. Weekly sessions are centred around a set of illustrated stories about a group of children, their families, friends and Zippy, a pet stick insect. Pupils also actively participate in activities such as role playing, group discussions, drawing and crafts, and playing games. Through listening to the stories and joining in activities, it is proposed that children learn how to find their own solutions to problems and in turn they become better equipped to cope with difficulties in life, and get on better with others.

Teachers undergo a one-day training and are provided with a set of teaching and children's materials. Three follow up, twilight support sessions are held after modules two, four and six, in which teachers in the same area are brought together to discuss experiences, address any questions and look at the forthcoming modules.

Zippy's Friends is underpinned by conceptual frameworks of coping in which individual attributes such as coping skills can reduce the impact of environmental stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2000; Segal, 1983). In this context, coping skills are defined as the skills or strategies used to manage needs and emotions caused by stressful situations or experiences (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The programme recognises that a variety of coping strategies, including problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, can be helpful, and that good coping skills can vary between individuals and situations. Thus, it aims to develop children's repertoire of coping skills and their ability to adapt those coping skills to various situations. Further, it integrates problem solving skills, social skills and emotional literacy as skills that may facilitate adaptive coping behaviour. Such competencies may be linked to academic engagement and achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Qualter et al., 2012), and it a central aim of this study is to test whether *Zippy's Friends* has an impact on children's academic attainment. The logic model (Fig. 1) which was developed during project set up meetings between the programme delivery team, the evaluation team and the funder, depicts the proposed pathway through which it is theorised that the programme will impact on academic attainment. It is proposed that the programme will have an indirect impact on academic attainment through a pathway that involves increased emotional self-regulation (the control and inhibition of emotions and emotional reactions), through which an improved focus on learning (self-regulated learning) is achieved.

Zippy's Friends was first piloted in Denmark and Lithuania using a quasi-experimental design (Mishara & Ystgaard, 2006) in which the control group were matched to the intervention group based on gender and socioeconomic background. This study found improvements in coping ability, cooperation, empathy, assertion and self-control. Also, the problem behaviours of externalizing and hyperactivity decreased. The study, however, had major methodological limitations (i.e. no random allocation and differential measurement attrition).

The programme has since been evaluated using cluster-randomised controlled trials in Norway (Holen, Waaktaar, Lervåg, & Ystgaard, 2012; Holen, Waaktaar, Lervåg, & Ystgaard, 2013) and Ireland (Clarke, Bunting, & Barry, 2014). These trials demonstrated a positive impact of the programme on children's coping strategies (ES = -0.38; Holen et al., 2012), self-

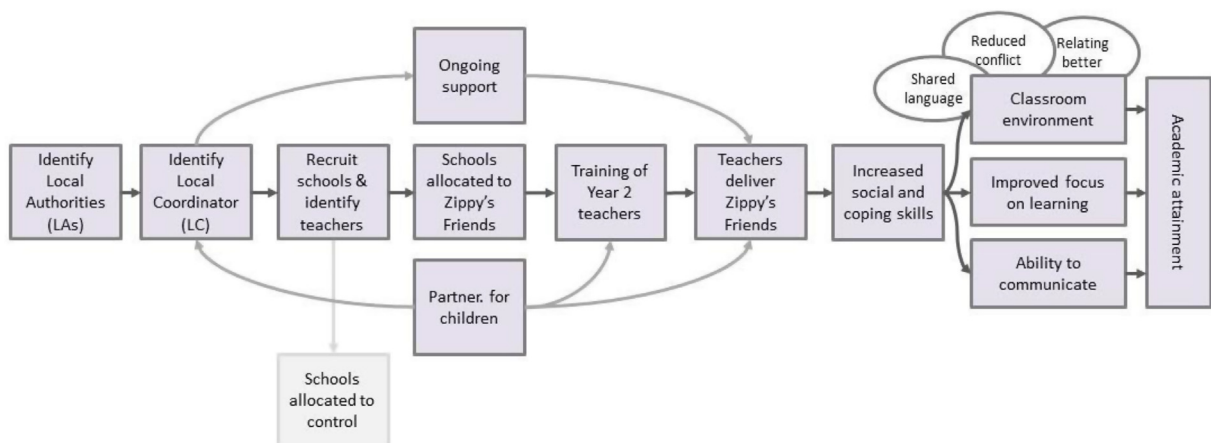


Fig. 1. Logic model outlining how *Zippy's Friends* is proposed to impact on socio-emotional and academic outcomes for participating pupils.

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