

SUSTAINING EMOTIONAL LITERACY

-an evaluation for the Trustees of Family Links of the medium- to long- impact of the Nurturing Programme in schools

Executive summary

This is a summary of an evaluation of how successfully the Nurturing Programme has been implemented and sustained in schools in six different geographical areas where it has been in place for at least one year. Family Links, a voluntary organisation based in Oxford, was set up in the mid 1990s to develop training and support structures to introduce the Programme, which is designed to enable children and their parents to develop their emotional literacy and personal well-being through a consistent and structured whole-school approach and a course for parents. This summary starts by outlining the methodology, summarises the evidence and concludes with the main findings and then the recommendations verbatim. However, readers are urged to read the full report for more detailed explanation of what is set out here.

Methodological approach: The evaluation was conducted by Dr Tony Eade, previously a primary school headteacher, now a Research Fellow, Department of Educational Studies, University of Oxford and an independent research consultant. It considered how the Nurturing Programme has been adopted and adapted by schools and its impact on children, on professionals and on school culture. The success criteria in relation to the impact on children were in two categories:

- measurable performance indicators, namely schools going out of (or into) special measures /serious weaknesses, attendance, violent incidents, exclusions, SATs scores, referrals to Behaviour Support Teams and numbers of children with statements or at School Action + related to emotional and behavioural difficulties; and
- the attributes, qualities and behaviour associated with emotional literacy, namely empathy, confidence, sense of personal responsibility, self-esteem and well-being and the ability to understand and regulate their own feelings and behaviour.

Judgments on the impact on professionals were based mainly on the quality and impact of training and support and the resources to support the Programme. Those relating to school culture were based on all of the above, how the Programme had impacted on parents and a broader range of indicators related to school ethos.

The data were collected retrospectively and did not track individual children. The two main sets of evidence were a survey consisting of a school profile and four questionnaires sent to 127 schools in six geographical areas, and day visits to twelve of the schools which returned the survey, five describing themselves as fully involved and seven as partially so. The profile requested details about the school and statistical evidence on the performance indicators. The questionnaires asked about the different aspects of the Programme and the respondents' perceptions of the impact on children's attitudes, qualities and behaviour. Where applicable, other evidence, such as that from Ofsted inspections, was also considered. The level of response, at 38.6%, was reasonably high. Of the 49 returns, 36 indicated that the Nurturing Programme was still in use, though two of these consisted of only a letter. Of the 34 surveys analysed, 21 schools described themselves as fully involved. Of the 28 profiles

returned, many were incomplete, usually because the data was not available either easily or at all. This presented considerable difficulties in making valid or reliable judgments in relation to the performance indicators. 108 questionnaires could usefully be analysed.

Summary of evidence: The survey provided a good picture of how the schools have adopted the Programme and which elements they perceive to be most and least useful. Almost all schools timetable circle time each week. Most indicated that they use whole-group collaborative rewards and 'time-out'. Most use all or part of the language associated with the Programme, especially that of choices and consequences and to a lesser extent personal power. That of warm fuzzies/cold pricklies was less widely used and mainly with younger children. The knowledge and use of resources, apart from the handbooks which were almost universally used and *The Parenting Puzzle*, was patchy. While most schools had set up parents' groups, only about a quarter had managed to sustain these regularly. While these have been very successful for those parents involved, schools have found it very difficult to involve a wide range of parents except where there has been a parent group leader with outstanding personal qualities and commitment. Successful parent groups usually depended on well-respected parent group leaders, with a good knowledge of the community, supported by the senior management, often located within a wider programme of provision. The visits suggested a tendency for schools to overstate their level of involvement, for instance by describing themselves as fully involved even though they were not, or no longer, running parents' groups.

The main reasons given for initial involvement with the Programme were concerns about children's behaviour, often linked to a perceived need for greater consistency, and/ or a wish to make better provision for the children's emotional needs, usually expressed in terms such as low self-esteem. A minority of schools cited the children's family background and previous experience outside school. A few mentioned the attraction of additional support at little or no cost to the school budget. None mentioned explicitly factors highlighted in the key performance indicators, apart from special measures and attendance.

The analysis of the profiles shows no pattern of success, or otherwise, which can with confidence be correlated with the introduction of the Nurturing Programme, based solely on the performance indicators. On some of these, the data was not available. Others, such as the number of statements, are likely to be related to availability rather than perceived need. On others, notably attendance, improvements were relatively slight and the Nurturing Programme represents only one of many possible factors. On academic standards, the size of and variability of cohorts makes it hard to isolate the role of the Nurturing Programme, especially in the absence of a control group. The quantitative aspects of this evaluation do not confirm whether the Programme had a positive effect on those elements measured by the performance indicators, though the visits confirmed that many staff believed this to be so. A much larger, longer-term study would be required to indicate this and, in my view, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to do so with confidence in the absence of reliable, consistent data, which would, at best, be very hard to gather.

The questionnaires indicated a widely held belief that the Programme had been of greatest benefit in building the children's sense of self-esteem and well-being, followed by sense of personal responsibility, with behaviour and empathy close behind and confidence and ability to assess and deal with one's own feelings slightly behind them. The last four of these were scored at similar levels. Fewer than 3% of the responses indicated that in any of these

there had been little benefit or less. While there was a widespread view that all children benefit, the main beneficiaries were seen to be children who lack secure boundaries, those whose immediate response is confrontational and those who are quiet. The greatest impact was perceived to be with younger children, with some evidence that the effect may reduce over time, especially with older children. While its role in enhancing speaking and listening made the Programme easier to place within the curriculum for younger children, a few schools found it more difficult to do so in Key Stage 2. Where the Programme had run successfully for longest the schools had adapted it to their own context, emphasising those elements perceived to work best and using the Programme as a foundation for emotional literacy rather than as materials to cover the whole of the PSHCE curriculum. Several schools had supplemented the Nurturing Programme materials with others, notably the SEAL materials. Very few schools had involved children significantly in discussions about adapting the Programme.

The quality of the initial training was rated very highly and regarded as making a significant and positive impact on school culture and relationships. Unsolicited, and therefore especially powerful, comments attested to this in relation to teaching and, especially, support staff. In particular, the use of a common language was regarded as very valuable in establishing positive relationships between adult and adult, adult and child, child and child. There were indications that this positive effect tended to reduce over time, as staff leave and new people arrive, and a sense that the initial reasons for involvement are no longer so pressing, given the new demands on, and expectations of, schools and budgetary pressures. The 'top-up' training and on-going support was considered to be variable, in type, availability and quality, in large part according to geographical area, possibly reflecting the time available from area co-ordinators. This, and the cost, had resulted in a minority of schools not sending all new staff to be trained externally. The extent and quality of induction in school seemed to vary considerably. Local external support, such as the co-ordination of meetings for staff in different schools, staff meetings and training for parent group leaders was seen as helping to maintain momentum. There was little direct collaboration between schools in a locality.

The visits broadly supported, and provided further detail on, the conclusions from the analysis of the survey. They brought home the very challenging circumstances in which many schools were working. They highlighted some variation in how circle time was organised, for instance using smaller groups, sometimes led by an adult other than the class teacher. Those observed varied from extremely sensitive, thoughtful practice to situations where the balance of nurture and behaviour management was tilted more towards the latter. The comments of children mostly demonstrated considerable enthusiasm. In a few cases, older children commented on a sense of repetitiveness, supporting the views of adults that the materials need to provide a greater level of progression, especially towards the older end of Key Stage 2.

Staff changes and external factors such as new initiatives, structural changes, and curricular pressures affect how successfully the Programme has been sustained. However, the quality of on-going training and support, the handbooks and the commitment of key staff, both to particular aspects of the Programme and to ensuring that it is presented imaginatively and with a focus on enhanced awareness among children of their own and others' emotional needs, are major factors in schools where it has been successfully sustained.

Summary of main findings: The quality of the initial training was rated very highly and regarded as making a significant and positive impact on school culture. Aspects especially welcomed were the variety, the emphasis on positive ideas, the practicality and the enjoyment. In particular, there was a widespread recognition of the value of all staff being trained together and how this had helped to create positive relationships among staff where morale had been low. The emotional impact of the training was highlighted, especially in helping adults understand their own and children's feelings. There was a widespread appreciation of the clarity of the handbooks and these were used almost universally. Many of those teachers who were less confident or experienced followed the handbook fairly closely, and found it very helpful. The mixture of practical activities and the underlying rationale was thought to be a good feature. However, the quality of the on-going support and training was variable and for schools and staff to receive appropriate on-going training and support should be one major priority.

The way in which the language had helped the whole school community to have a common way of discussing feelings and behaviour, and children to reflect on their behaviour, was commented on frequently, especially where the Nurturing Programme was most successfully embedded. This was the aspect which had made the most lasting and distinctive impact and was perceived to have been of greatest benefit to individual children and to the school culture. While there was a widespread view that all children benefit, the main beneficiaries were seen to be children who lack secure boundaries, those whose immediate response is confrontational and those who are quiet. The greatest impact was perceived to be with younger children, with some evidence that the effect may tail off with time especially with older children. The responses indicated a widely held belief that the Programme had been of greatest benefit in building the children's sense of self-esteem and well-being, followed by sense of personal responsibility, with behaviour and empathy close behind and confidence and ability to assess and deal with one's own feelings slightly behind them. However, no definite correlation between the Nurturing Programme and key performance indicators, based on quantitative data, could be established.

Those parents who had attended parent groups were aware of the importance of dealing with their own emotional literacy, saying that, at times, the sessions had been difficult, even painful, but that both they and their children had gained from the course enormously and that relationships at home were much improved. Some spoke very movingly of how it had changed their whole way of approaching not only parenting but had improved their own emotional well-being. However, all but a few schools had found parent groups difficult to sustain. Success usually depended on a highly committed parent group leader.

In summary, the Nurturing Programme is judged to have had a considerable positive effect on children's emotional literacy and on school culture, in a substantial majority of those schools responding, many in very disadvantaged and challenging communities. However, this cannot confidently be supported by evidence on the key performance indicators, in part because of the lack of reliable evidence, in part because of the difficulty of isolating the specific contribution of the Programme. To encourage more schools to remain, or become, fully involved and enable their children to gain maximum benefit from the Programme, the main priorities for Family Links should be to encourage and enable continuing training and support appropriate to the school's context and level of involvement, to review the materials especially for older children and to provide guidance on how to set up and sustain parent groups in school.

Recommendations: The rationale for these recommendations is contained in Section 11 of the full report, based on the factors which contribute to the Nurturing Programme being maintained over the medium- to long-term, which are considered in Section 10 of the full report.

Recognising the many benefits of the Nurturing Programme, I recommend that, to introduce, support and sustain it more effectively, Family Links should:

R1 develop an audit tool to summarise, at the point of initial contact, the school's reasons for involvement and current situation to form the basis of a self-evaluation process, preferably with external support, at the least every two years, to assess the success of the programme and the school's level of involvement and to determine future developments and support required.

R2 review the feasibility of establishing a standard support package in the first two years of the school's involvement (if need be tailored to local availability of support) and then, separately, a bespoke package, negotiated locally, based on the school's identified needs.

R3 encourage more sharing of expertise between schools involved in the Nurturing Programme by establishing local support groups, co-ordinated locally.

R4 consider an approach to the financing of training and support whereby schools are expected to provide some funding from the school budget from the point of initial involvement.

R5 review the materials in the handbook, especially in relation to Key Stage 2, and models of continuing support, to encourage and enable schools to provide a more coherent pathway of progression and, as appropriate, to support children in addressing the challenges they face, or will face, in the world beyond school.

R6 review the range of resources available to schools other than the handbook both for use with children and to develop adults' expertise, with the latter possibly including web-based materials and more extensive support materials with the use of video.

R7 encourage, through the training, support and resource materials, schools to involve both staff and children, especially those in Key Stage 2, in discussions about how the Nurturing Programme's approach should be adapted to the school's own context.

R8 review the model of how schools can best set up and sustain parents' groups to work in parallel with the school's approach, involving a close analysis of the factors, both personal and structural, which have enabled these to be sustained successfully where they have been.

R9 encourage strategic partners to involve a wider range of schools so that the Nurturing Programme is introduced in more schools where the challenges are less severe, as well as those in very challenging circumstances.

R10 seek funding for an evaluation to assess the impact of the Programme in finer detail, based on assessments both before and after implementation, over a period of at least one year, focusing on the impact on individual children and on specific groups of children.