

‘FRIENDS for Life’: a School-based Positive Mental Health Programme

Research Project Overview and Findings

National Behaviour Support Service



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The National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) was established by the Department of Education & Skills in 2006 in response to the recommendation in *School Matters: The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools* (2006).

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The 'FRIENDS for Life' Research Project was conducted under the auspices of the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) in collaboration with the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Support Service.



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Executive Summary

'FRIENDS for Life' is a school-based positive mental health programme that promotes emotional resilience and reduces anxiety in children and adolescents. It is the only anxiety prevention programme acknowledged by the World Health Organization for its 12 years of comprehensive evaluation and practice (WHO, 2004). This research project set out to explore if 'FRIENDS for Life' could be successful in reducing anxiety levels with young people in Irish post-primary schools.

The findings from the research project demonstrated significant reductions in anxiety levels following the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme. Positive gains in young people's emotional wellbeing, reported in previous Irish and international research, were confirmed by students and their parents in both universal and small group settings in post-primary schools geographically distributed across the Republic of Ireland.

Before the programme, 18.8% of the 244 students who participated in the project rated themselves within the 'elevated' anxiety level (1 in every 5.3 students). This reduced to 10.2% of students (1 in every 9.8 students) following completion of the 'FRIENDS for Life' 10 session programme. Continued improvement has been recorded following completion of the two booster sessions four months later.

The qualitative and quantitative findings from the Teachers' Reviews and the Fidelity Checklists give further weight to these results. Twenty seven teachers representing the fourteen project schools completed a Teachers' Review following completion of the ten session programme and all reported positive developments in the students including improved self-confidence, an increased willingness to speak about feelings and becoming more settled in school. Equally teachers stated that the programme had helped to normalise feelings of anxiety for the students.

Although more time for preparation and delivery and the need to adapt and supplement content emerged as the two common themes in the teachers' Fidelity Checklists for improving the implementation of the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme in the future, this did not distract from the progress made with students on those activities that were the focus of the sessions. While most of the teachers revealed that they experienced the 'time' and 'content' challenges in delivering the programme, the majority had enjoyed teaching the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme to their students. All teachers in the Teachers' Review stated that they would recommend the programme to other teachers and schools.

The findings from this project give a strong indication that the 'FRIENDS' programmes could make a significant contribution to building resilience and improving the emotional wellbeing and educational outcomes for young people in Irish schools.

Introduction

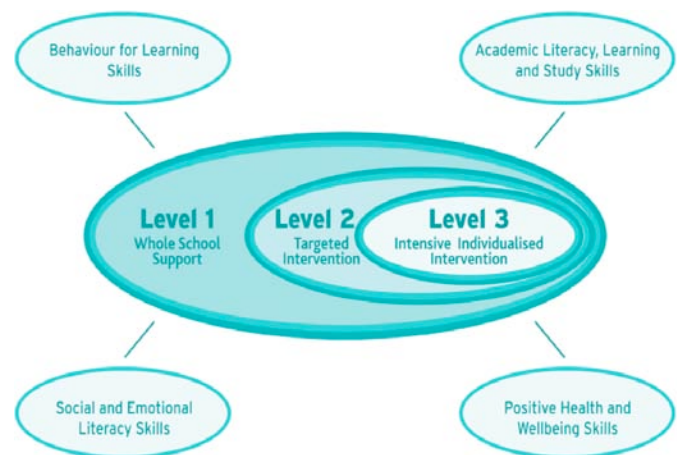
The National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) was established by the Department of Education & Skills in 2006 in response to the recommendation in *School Matters: The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools* (2006).

The role of the NBSS is to assist partner schools in addressing behavioural concerns on three levels:

- Level 1: Whole School Support
- Level 2: Targeted Intervention Support
- Level 3: Intensive, Individualised Support

This three-tiered approach, founded on international best practice, is applied to behaviour interventions and endeavours to address the behavioural, social, emotional and academic literacy and learning needs of students in partner schools. All work undertaken aims to promote positive behaviour and learning throughout the school by focusing on developing:

- Behaviour for Learning Skills
- Social and Emotional Literacy Skills
- Academic Literacy, Learning and Study Skills
- Positive Health and Wellbeing Skills



Through its three-tiered model the NBSS assists its partner schools in developing a continuum of support.

The ‘FRIENDS for Life’ Research Project

Building resilience and assisting students in the development of life-skills to cope effectively with challenging and anxiety-provoking situations is part of the work undertaken to support the emotional and mental wellbeing needs of students in NBSS partner schools. In 2011, the NBSS established the 'FRIENDS for Life' Research Project and invited the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Support Service to collaborate on the project. This school-based programme promotes emotional resilience and reduces anxiety in children and adolescents. The World Health Organisation has cited 'FRIENDS for Life' as the only evidence-based programme effective at all levels of intervention for anxiety in children (WHO, 2004).

Anxiety is the most common psychological disorder in school-aged children and adolescents. Prevalence rates in Ireland estimate that 18.7% of children suffer from some form of mental health issue or psychological disorder, including anxiety, severe enough to cause impairment (Barnardos Report: Tomorrow's Child, 2008). An Irish study conducted in 2003 by Fitzpatrick, Lynch, Mills & Daly found that out of a population of 723 12-15 year olds in Dublin, Anxiety Disorders had the same prevalence rate as ADHD at 3.7%.

The 'FRIENDS for Life' programme was introduced into 14 post-primary NBSS partner schools as a Level 1 whole school support and a Level 2 targeted intervention. The schools that participated in the 'FRIENDS for Life' National Project were geographically distributed and included single sex as well as co-ed student populations. Of the 14 schools, two adopted a "universal approach" (NBSS Level 1 support) i.e. teaching the programme to all first year students (one a

boys' school, one a girls' school). The remaining 12 schools elected to focus on small groups of first year students (NBSS Level 2 support) some of whom had elevated anxiety levels. To prepare for the project 42 teachers attended a three day training session to become accredited 'FRIENDS for Life' facilitators. 30 of these teachers subsequently delivered the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme within their respective schools.

Two main research areas were identified for the Research Project:

Research Area One

1. (a) Is the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme effective in reducing anxiety levels?
(b) Does the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme have a positive impact on student behaviour?

Research Area Two

2. Can the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme be effectively delivered through the Post-Primary School Curriculum?

This report is divided into two sections according to the above research areas. The first section of the report was researched and written by Dr. Alish Rodgers (Chartered Educational and Child Psychologist), commissioned by the NBSS to work on the project. The second section of the report was researched and written by Dr. Jean Henefer (Research and Development Officer, NBSS).

Research Area One

Research Area One

- a) Is the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme effective in reducing anxiety levels?
- b) Does the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme have a positive impact on student behaviour?

Overview

Anxiety constitutes one of the most prevalent forms of psychological distress in childhood and youth (Albano, Chorpita, & Barlow, 2003). The symptoms and behaviours specific to childhood anxiety involve excessive physiological arousal, separation anxiety, phobias, fearfulness, extreme self-consciousness, intense worrying and irrational thinking patterns about past behaviours (King & Ollendick, 1989). Adolescents experience similar anxiety symptoms, although anxiety about peer and family relationships, financial worries, and school performance tend to predominate (King & Ollendick, 1989). Anxiety can lead to other psychological disorders, including depression and can have a chronic course without treatment (Keller, Lavori, Wunder, Beardslee, & Schwartz, 1992). As regards the relationship between anxiety and behaviour, research has found that there is significant co-morbidity between externalising and internalising behaviour difficulties (Hinshaw, 1987). In other words, young people who demonstrate aggressive behaviours may also experience anxiety and, conversely, young people who are anxious may also present with conduct difficulties.

'...anxiety symptoms and disorders significantly interfere with children's interpersonal and academic functioning.'

As regards the specific impact of anxiety on academic development, research has found that anxiety symptoms and disorders significantly interfere with children's interpersonal and academic functioning (e.g. McGee & Stanton, 1990; Woodward & Fergusson, 2001). Excessive anxious arousal has also been found to reduce concentration on academic tasks as a result of narrowed attention to threat cues (Ma, 1999). Also, according to King and Bernstein (2001) there is a well established correlation between school refusal and anxiety symptoms. From a positive viewpoint, research has shown that intervening to decrease high anxiety in students can improve school performance and social functioning (Wood, 2006).

'FRIENDS for Life' Programme

One school-based universal programme which promotes emotional resilience and reduces anxiety is the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme (Barrett, Webster, & Turner, 2000). The 'FRIENDS for Life' emotional resilience programme is a group Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) intervention based upon the well evaluated 'Coping Cat' programme that was developed in Australia (Kendall, 1994; Kendall, Flannery-Schroder, Panichelli-Mindel, Southam-Gerow, Henin, & Warman, 1997).

'FRIENDS for Life' is a standardised school-based positive mental health programme which was designed to be facilitated by classroom teachers as well as mental health professionals. Most individuals will experience at least a mild degree of anxiety at some point in their lives (Farrell & Barrett, 2003). This programme teaches the skills required to reduce anxiety and promote resilience and is therefore beneficial for all students, irrespective of their anxiety level. School-based mental health programmes have potential advantages over their use in clinical, individual settings. They provide opportunities for normalisation, social interactions, modelling, peer and group feedback and exposure to possible feared interpersonal contexts and/or school situations. Research has found that as many as 80% of children

and adolescents in need of mental health services fail to receive such intervention (Cobham, 2012). A number of barriers to accessing psychological intervention in mental health services exist including time, cost, availability, commitment and location (Jorm and Wright, 2007). Therefore, the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme has inspired a conceptual shift in the implementation of universal positive mental health programmes in education.

The word ‘FRIENDS for Life’ is an acronym that helps children and adolescents to remember the coping steps to follow; F-Feeling Worried?, R-Relax and feel good, I – I can do it!, E- Explore solutions and coping step plans, N- Now reward yourself, D – Don’t forget to practice and S- Stay cool!

It is a structured, ten-session CBT programme (see *Table 1* for programme outline). The programme has three main components based on CBT principles (1) Learning/ Behaviour, (2) Cognitive and (3) Physiological. The Learning/Behaviour component involves helping children and adolescents to problem solve, use coping skills, expose themselves gradually to feared situations, reward themselves for brave behaviour and identify positive role models and support networks. The Cognitive component involves helping children and adolescents to use positive self-talk (green thoughts), challenge negative self-talk (red thoughts), evaluate themselves realistically and reward themselves. The Physiological component involves teaching children and adolescents to be aware of their body clues, to use relaxation techniques and to self-regulate.

Session	Topic covered
<i>Session 1</i>	Introduction to ‘FRIENDS for Life’, understanding and accepting differences
<i>Session 2</i>	Understanding our own and other people’s feelings, thinking in helpful ways
<i>Session 3</i>	Listening to our body clues to understand feelings, relaxation exercises
<i>Session 4</i>	Understanding self-talk – helpful (green) thoughts and unhelpful (red) thoughts
<i>Session 5</i>	Challenging unhelpful (red) thoughts, coping step plans
<i>Session 6</i>	Role models and support teams, 6 stage problem solving plan
<i>Session 7</i>	Rewarding ourselves
<i>Session 8</i>	Practising the skills learnt in ‘FRIENDS for Life’
<i>Session 9</i>	Using the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ plan to help ourselves and others
<i>Session 10</i>	Review and party

Table 1: The ‘FRIENDS for Life’ Ten Session Programme

Evidence for the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ Programme

Numerous studies have demonstrated the efficacy of the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme. Barrett & Turner (2001) demonstrated significant reductions in anxiety following the programme. Lowry-Webster, Barrett & Lock’s study in 2003 found significant reductions in anxiety were maintained at the 12 month follow-up. Many research studies have shown that the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme can produce durable reductions in anxiety up to four years after completing the programme (e.g. Dadds, Spence, Holland, Barrett, & Laurens, 1997; Dadds et al. 1999; Barrett, Sonderegger & Xenos, 2003). As a result, the previously titled ‘FRIENDS’ programme was recently renamed the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme to highlight this positive impact. The results from these studies have led the World Health Organisation to cite ‘FRIENDS for Life’ as the only evidence-based programme effective at all levels of intervention for anxiety in children (WHO, 2004).

Within an Irish context, Rodgers (2010) completed the first controlled evaluation in Ireland of the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme with first year post-primary students in Dublin City. This study found that the programme significantly reduced ‘overall anxiety’ and specifically ‘separation anxiety’ in the intervention group in comparison to the control group. The positive reductions in the intervention group’s ‘overall anxiety’ levels were also confirmed by their respective parents. The effectiveness of the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme has also recently been evaluated in primary

schools in Carlow and Kilkenny. Crosbie et al. (2011) found significant improvements in anxiety and self-esteem measures following the programme which were maintained three months after the programme was completed.

‘FRIENDS’ in Irish Post-primary Schools

42 teachers from the 14 schools attended a three day training session to become accredited facilitators in the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme. This training was delivered collaboratively by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), SPHE Support Services, NBSS (National Behaviour Support Service) and an accredited trainer in the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme.

- Day 1 (CBT Overview)
- Day 2 (Accredited Facilitator Training Day)
- Day 3 (Programme Day outlining the National Project)

Parents were sent an information sheet and consent form on the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ project. Parents of 499 students gave consent for their child to participate in the programme. Parents and students completed the Spence Children’s Anxiety Scale and teachers and students completed the Strengths and Difficulties Behaviour Questionnaire before and after the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme. The student questionnaires were administered in small groups by Dr. Rodgers, the NBSS commissioned educational and child psychologist, alongside the Career Guidance Counsellors and NBSS Assistant National Co-ordinators.

‘42 teachers from the 14 schools attended a three day training session to become accredited facilitators...’

The following section provides more detail in relation to the measures employed:

Anxiety was measured before and after the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme using the Spence Children’s Anxiety Scale (SCAS; Spence, 1997) and the Spence Children’s Anxiety Scale for Parents (SCAS-P; Spence, 1997) – both self-report measures. These scales provide an overall measure of ‘Total Anxiety’ as well as six individual subtype scores which correspond to DSM-IV-TR anxiety disorder categories (Separation Anxiety, Social Phobia, Obsessive Compulsive (OC), Panic, Generalised Anxiety (GA), and Fears of Physical Injury). The scale has demonstrated high internal consistency and concurrent validity with other measures of child and adolescent anxiety and adequate test-retest reliability (Spence, 1997; Spence, Barrett, & Turner, 2003).

Behaviour was measured before and after the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme using the ‘Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire’ (SDQ, Goodman, 2001) which included a teacher rating form and a student rating form. This is a brief behavioural screening questionnaire about 3-16 year olds. The SDQ ask 25 attributes, some positive and others negative. These 25 items are divided between 5 scales including emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship problems and prosocial behaviour. The reliability and validity scores relating to the SDQ were found to be satisfactory (Goodman, 2001).

All questionnaires were analysed. In the second term, the respective school care/pastoral support teams selected the students to participate in the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme. School care/pastoral support teams were advised to include within the group the students who scored above 60 on the Spence Children’s Anxiety Scale due to the fact that this indicated ‘elevated’ anxiety levels (i.e. T-score of 60 and above indicates ‘elevated’ anxiety symptoms). Of the 499 students screened, 244 students were selected by their school care/pastoral support teams to participate in the programme.

‘...244 students were selected to participate in the programme...’

All parents of students who were in the ‘elevated’ range were offered a meeting with Dr. Rodgers before and after the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme. Parent Feedback Meetings involved: (1) feeding back the Spence Children’s Anxiety Results, (2) discussing any discrepancies between the Parent and Student Version of the Spence Children’s Anxiety

Scale, (3) discussing the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme and (4) completing the consent form to indicate whether they wanted to give consent to refer their child on for additional supports (e.g. HSE, CAMHS). A handout was also given to each parent providing additional information on anxiety, the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme and how to support the programme as a parent.

All results were analysed, interpreted and fed back to parents by Dr. Rodgers following the ten session programme.

Findings

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: School Participants: Gender and Age

Intervention Group	Males	Females	Average Age
244	114	130	13.1 years

Table 3: Number of school participants: 'Elevated' Anxiety Level Range

	Number of Participants	% of Group	Ratio
Before Programme	94 participants	18.8%	1 in 5.3
After Programme	51 participants	10.2%	1 in 9.8

As is highlighted in *Table 2*, 244 students took part in the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme. This included 114 males and 130 females with an average age of 13.1 years. As is highlighted in *Table 3*, 94 students were within the 'elevated' anxiety level before the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme. This means that 1 in every 5.3 students rated themselves within the 'elevated' range before the programme. This included 63 female and 31 males. Following the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme, this reduced to 51 students. This means that 1 in every 9.8 students rated themselves within the 'elevated' range following the programme. This included 38 females and 13 males. These 51 students were assessed one final time following completion of the two booster sessions in September 2012. At this point the number of students in the 'elevated range' had further reduced to 33. The parent/carers of these 33 students were consulted regarding consent for referral on to relevant services for assessment and/or therapeutic support.

'...94 students were within the 'elevated' anxiety level before the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme... reduced to 33...'

Statistical Analysis

A t-test was used to statistically analyse the data. The t-test assesses whether the means of two data sets (i.e. before and after scores) are statistically different from each other. The assumptions of the t-test were met (i.e. data was normally distributed, the data was parametric and the two sets of data had equal sizes).

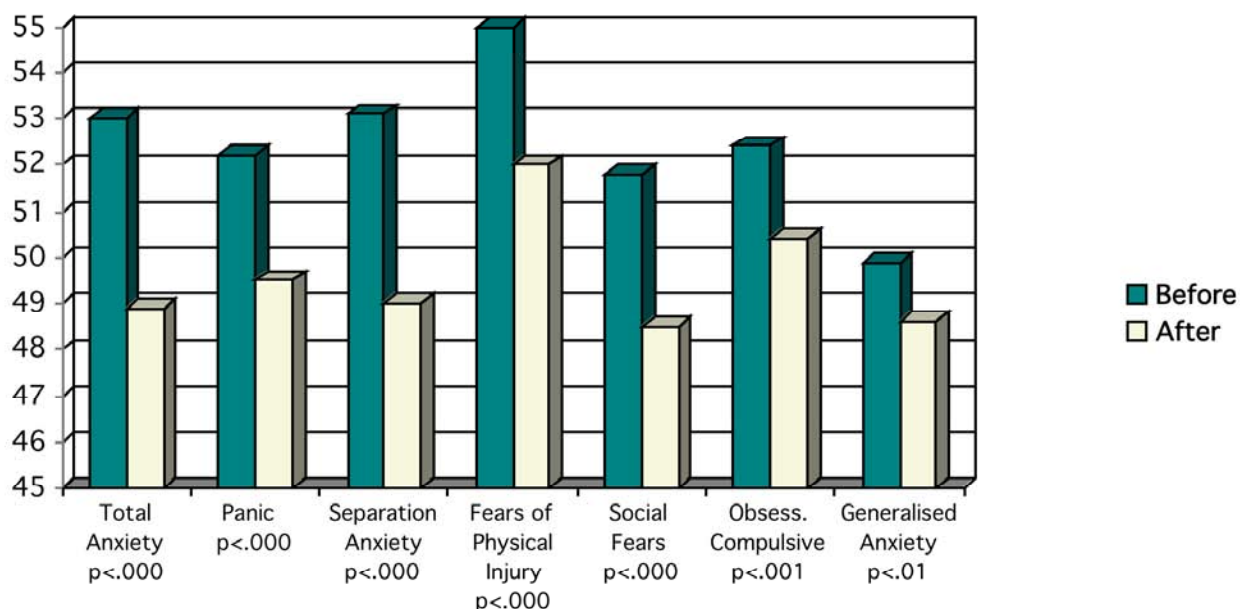
Anxiety Measure:

Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (Child Version): There was a significant reduction in Total Anxiety ($p < .000$) after completing the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme. There was also a significant reduction in Panic ($p < .000$), Separation Anxiety ($p < .000$), Fears of Physical Injury ($p < .000$), Social Anxiety ($p < .000$), OCD ($p < .001$) and Generalised Anxiety GAD ($p < .01$) after completing the 'FRIENDS for Life' Programme. These results are shown in *Figure 1*. This graph also highlights that the highest average anxiety subtype score, both before and after the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme was 'Fears of Physical Injury'. The 'Separation Anxiety' subtype score was also the second highest average before the programme but reduced following the programme. The lowest average anxiety subtype scores, both before and after the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme was in relation to 'Social Phobia'.

Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (Parent Version): Of the 244 parents, only 42 parents completed questionnaires rating their child's 'Total Anxiety' before and after the programme. However, these 42 parents recorded a significant reduction in their child's 'Total Anxiety' levels after the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme ($p < .000$).

Universal and small group format: 12 schools completed the programme using a small group format and two schools completed the programme using a 'universal' format (i.e. all first year students received the programme). The statistical results found that there was a significant reduction in 'Total Anxiety' as rated by students who completed the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme in both a 'universal' format ($p=.001$) and in a small group format ($p=.000$).

Figure 1: Average anxiety scores before and after the 'FRIENDS for Life' Ten Session Programme



Behaviour Measure:

Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (Child Version): There was a significant reduction in Overall Stress ($p <.000$), Emotional Stress ($p <.000$), Difficulties with Peers ($p <.000$), Behaviour Difficulties ($p <.004$), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Difficulties ($p <.03$) after completing the 'FRIENDS for Life' Programme. No significant increase was found in relation to prosocial behaviour ($p =.61$).

'... there was a highly significant positive correlation between 'Behavioural Difficulties' and 'Total Anxiety' as reported by the students ...'

Teacher Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: There were no significant findings (i.e. reduction or increase) in relation to any of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire Domains as outlined above.

It must also be acknowledged that there was a highly significant positive correlation between 'Behavioural Difficulties' and 'Total Anxiety' as reported by the students themselves both before ($r = .431$; $p <.000$) and after ($r = .427$; $p <.000$) the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme. Even though this does not prove causality, these results do suggest that as anxiety increases, behavioural difficulties also increase or conversely as behavioural difficulties increase, anxiety levels also increase.

'There was a significant reduction in 'Total Anxiety' as rated by students...'

The Student and Parent Voice

Student Voice

The last item on the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale asked the following question: 'Is there something else that you are really afraid of? If you want to, you can write it down on the lines below'. Four main themes emerged in relation to these answers: (1) Tests/ Schoolwork, (2) Bullying, (3) Loss/Death and (4) Other Fears. The following anonymised quotes have been taken directly from the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale.

Tests/Schoolwork

'I'm going to fail all my tests in school.'
'That I will never be as good or as smart as others.'
'If I get something wrong when I put my hand up.'
'Failing my tests and my school work.'
'Afraid about my junior cert exam.'

Bullying

'Being Bullied' or 'Bullying.'
'Saying something to the wrong person.'
'I hate when people talk about me'.
'I'm afraid of losing my temper sometimes.'
'People judging me.'

Loss/Death

'Someone I really love just going away.'
'Death – the feeling that I will die one day and leave everything I love behind.'
'A part of my family pass away.'
'If people die in my family when I was with them or without them.'
'If something bad happens.'
'Losing my mother and father.'

Other Fears

'Spiders and animals.'
'Empty streets.'
'Walking home in the middle of the night.'
'Being out in the countryside.'
'Injections.'
'Escalators, I feel like I'm going to fall.'
'Scary movies.'
'Clowns.'

At post-measure and following completion of the questionnaires, the students were asked to write down the answers to the following four questions: (1) What activities did you like best in the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme? (2) How did the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme help you? (3) Were there any activities you did not like? What were they and why did you not like them? (4) How could the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme be improved? Focus group discussions were then held with all students following completion of these answers. The following are anonymised quotes taken directly from the answer sheets.

What activities did you like best in the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme?

Family

'Homework and relaxing with my mam.'
'My family and I sat down to play a feeling game.'

Positive Self-Talk

'The I can do it!'
'Saying our happy thoughts.'
'Complimenting our friends and giving them green thoughts.'

Coping Step Plan & Support Team

'Coping step plan.'
'Step and cope plan.'
'The green, amber and red system because it helped me cope in difficult situations.'
'Exploring solutions and support team.'
'Block step plan.'
'Overcoming our fears.'

Relaxation

'Relaxation.'
'Breathing.'
'Pizza Back Massage.'
'Drawing how to relax.'

Were there any activities you did not like? What were they and why did you not like them?

Reading and Writing

'Reading long stories.'
'I didn't like writing down personal things about my feelings in the workbook.'

Childish Themes

'Some of the activities were very childish.'
'Some activities were a bit boring.'

Homework

'Homework.'

Group Formation

'Sitting in a circle because everyone stares at you when you talk.'

How did the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme help you?

Red/Green Thoughts

'I put green thoughts in my head to make me feel better.'

'The programme made me forget about my red thoughts.'

'I am more relaxed than my usual tensed self. I now know that I am in charge of my feelings.'

Family

'It makes you closer to your family...they help you cope with things better.'

'It helped me to relax more and spend more time with my family.'

'It helped me because I could do that at home with my mam and my family.'

'It helped me bond more with my family and friends.'

'I talk to my family more.'

'I spend more time with my family'.

Getting on Better with People

'It helped me get over my fears and get closer to people.'

'Getting along with people better'.

'Getting to know people.'

Coping Skills

'Because if I am in any trouble or if I have any worries I do a coping step plan.'

'I learned how to cope with difficult situations.'

'It helped me cope with things much more.'

'I know how to deal with things that I don't like.'

'When I get annoyed I now relax and explore my solutions.'

'I got more confident and not afraid like I was before.'

'It helped me with my problems and stay calm with things.'

'It made me less of a worrier!'

'I feel more confident and staying in my house by myself is not a bother anymore.'

How could the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme be improved?

Relaxation

'I would really like more relaxation exercises.'

'Relaxing.'

'I would like more relaxing to settle down.'

'I want more varieties of relaxation exercises.'

'More relaxing with my class.'

'More relaxing in the morning because then you can keep relaxed that way for the rest of the day.'

'More relaxation and green thoughts.'

More Time

'There was not enough time to fit all the activities in. It was too short.'

'More time.'

'I didn't want it to be over soon.'

Coping Skills Practise

'Coping Step Plans.'

'Exploring situations.'

'I'd like more coping step plans.'

'I would like to discuss more bad thoughts and how we can cope with it and change it to a green thought.'

'More quality time with family doing my coping step plan homework.'

Group Work/Games/ Fun Activities

'More group work as you can get closer to someone.'

'Learn more things about people...walk outside.'

'I really would like more games.'

'More group activities.'

'Go on a field trip.'

'Have more fun and laughing activities' 'more fun activities to get to know other people.'

'A bonding day trip.'

Parent Voice

The following anonymised quotes have been taken directly from parent meetings organised after the students completed the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme. Parents were asked whether they had noted any change in their child since completing the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme.

"My son needs more practise in relation to the programme concepts but he knows the theory behind it and understands it all. I have noticed that his vocabulary for expressing himself has improved greatly. For example – one day he got quite frustrated and was about to throw his bag on the ground but instead he stopped and walked up to me and said 'I am just so fed up!' This was a really big change for him."

'...his vocabulary for expressing himself has improved greatly.'

"Before the programme he used to ring to go home 'sick' at least once a week – usually on a Monday and Tuesday after the weekend. He was complaining of ongoing stomach aches. This happened twice at the beginning of the programme but since the third week of the programme there have been no phone calls from the school asking me to collect him!"

'...she is more confident in relation to speaking up in class.'

"My son has a fear of hospitals. He was a premature baby and I think this could be a reason. However, he needs to get an operation and we have been putting it off for years now. Six weeks into the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme he came home from school and asked me to make the appointment for the operation. He had decided all by himself that he was now ready."

"Before the programme it felt like I was watching my daughter struggling in 'quicksand'. The transition to secondary school is so difficult. She was very worried about going to school and wanted to stay at home a lot. Now, her circle of friends has expanded from her one friend to having 'news' from many other students. In the mornings she is not worried about going to school but more worried about how to do her hair for school."

'...since the third week of the programme there have been no phone calls from the school asking me to collect him!'

"She is a lot less anxious now. She uses her 'breathing technique' a lot now. I think the best bit about it was the 'normalising experience' of it. For her, it was so powerful to know that her peers were probably feeling anxious or worried too. It should be part of every student's school experience."

"It was really strange filling out the questionnaire for my daughter. I suddenly realised that this is what I was like as a child...and possibly still am. I never knew how to explain it to people. I didn't know this was anxiety. It has been a real learning experience for both me, her father and for her. I found the homework activities very interesting for us to complete together."

'...she is not worried about going to school but more about how to do her hair for school.'

"She stayed over in her Granny's and her Auntie's house during mid-term break. I couldn't believe it – she was not ringing me constantly...just the odd few texts. I thought she would be panicking about leaving me but she was a lot calmer. Also, her teachers have said that she is a lot more confident in relation to speaking up in class."

Research Area Two

Research Area Two

Can the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme be effectively delivered through the Post-Primary School Curriculum?

'FRIENDS' Within The Curriculum

The 'FRIENDS for Life' programme has been proven through international empirical research to be effective in addressing the needs of children and young people who are prone to or are experiencing anxiety (Barrett & Turner 2001; Barrett et al. 2006; Cooley-Quille, Boyd, & Grados, 2004; Liddle & MacMillan 2010; Stallard et al., 2005). From the outset, in the initial planning of the research project, the NBSS, NEPS and the SPHE Support Service agreed that it would be essential to identify and explore the issues involved in the delivery of FRIENDS within an Irish post-primary context. The teachers involved in the project included Career Guidance Counsellors, SPHE teachers, NBSS Behaviour Support Classroom teachers, Tutors, SEN teachers, Home School Community Liaison teachers and NBSS Behaviour for Learning Programme teachers.

While it is clear from the research evidence that 'FRIENDS for Life' is effective, the partners agreed that it was important to document Irish teachers' implementation of FRIENDS as well as their views on the programme because of the differences internationally in educational provision and practice. In order to do so, the teachers were asked to complete a Fidelity Checklist (Barrett & Turner, 2001) after each FRIENDS session they taught as well as a brief review document on completion of the ten sessions in May 2012. The following presents both the qualitative and quantitative data that were gathered from the teachers upon the completion of Sessions 1 to 10 (excluding two booster sessions).

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings were collected by:

- (a) Leaving space in each section of the Fidelity Checklist for teachers to describe not only any additional materials that they used in teaching a session but also to offer any comments or observations about working with their students on particular activities within each session. In the majority of cases, the teachers were extremely generous and open in providing this element of the data collection. Their replies described in detail what they found had worked well during the session, the challenges they experienced in delivering the session, their reflections on the responses of their students to a session as well as how they would perhaps "tweak" a session in the future. Their responses have provided a wealth of data, session by session, highlighting and suggesting the ways which post-primary teachers can implement the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme within an Irish context.
- (b) The completion of a brief 'Teachers' Review' document when the ten sessions were completed. This review was completed by 27 teachers, representing the 14 project schools, who attended the 'FRIENDS for Life' review held in May 2012. The teachers were asked to respond to the following questions:
 1. In your opinion, did the programme have significant or important impacts for your students?
 2. Have you enjoyed teaching the programme?
 3. From your experience of teaching the programme this year, do you have suggestions for ways in which the implementation of 'FRIENDS for Life' could be improved next year?
 4. Based on your experience and the responses of your students, would you recommend the 'FRIENDS for Life' Programme to other teachers and schools?

Significant Impacts for Students

In completing their Fidelity Checklists a number of teachers included anecdotes with regard to students in terms of how they reacted to a particular activity, or a conversation they held or their participation in lessons. For the most part these observations were positive but also highlighted in some cases, aspects of the programme that students found particularly challenging.

“Some excellent insights into boys’ reactions to doing this type of material (embarrassed, etc.). Even difficult boys from previous week came on board. Relaxation techniques – group identified sleeping patterns as being hugely problematic.”

‘Students were genuinely surprised that they could use these skills to help others and seemed to grow in stature...’

“A minority of students struggled to come up with “feeling” words i.e. to describe how someone may feel. I’m unsure if this is a lack of empathy or lack of vocabulary.”

“Students more relaxed this week and really seemed to enjoy the group and the activities. Students were willing to do the relaxation techniques and didn’t feel self-conscious as last session. A couple of participants slow to participate and have to be invited to speak. Others telling “too much”. Some students described the experience as “deadly”.”

“Students were genuinely surprised that they could use these skills to help others and seemed to grow in stature when we called them our “FRIENDS for Life Experts”. Most heartening of all was how well the students did on the closing quiz. It was amazing to see how much they had absorbed despite themselves and us!”

‘...gave me huge insight into world of 12/13 years. How streetwise but innocent.’

“The students’ answers were extremely perceptive and some were very forthcoming about their home situation and especially how sensitive they are to any disturbance or change there. Some of the young people still struggle with the relaxation and will actively resist any attempts to calm themselves completely.”

Once the teachers had completed the ten sessions, they were asked whether they felt that the programme had had any significant or important impact on their students as a group. All 27 teachers reported positive developments including improved self-confidence, an increased willingness to speak about feelings and becoming more settled in school. Equally a number of teachers stated that the programme had helped normalise feelings of anxiety for the students.

“I really believe that this programme was a huge help. Firstly, the children really enjoyed the sessions. They described them as “relaxing” and “fun”. It also opened up the whole issue of anxiety and depression. Talking about options, about being in control of your feelings and about helpful self talk was brilliant!”

‘...talking about being in control of your feelings and about helpful self talk was brilliant!’

“Boys got opportunity to learn language – emotional literacy. Raise issues. Articulate their experiences e.g. pressure of going out with girls. Pressure of school. Gave me huge insight into world of 12/13 years. How streetwise but innocent.”

“Students seemed more confident as the programme ran. More at ease in each other and the teachers’ company. Students’ physical demeanour changed – better eye contact with teachers, initiated conversations. Students who previously seemed anxious seemed relaxed, less stressed. One student would physically shake when you spoke to her, now seemed less stressed – smiled more.”

“As the sessions went on students became more confident in sharing – open and safe atmosphere. Quieter students began to use their loud and brave voice without having to be reminded. Students were happy and comfortable to tell other students and teachers about their participation in FFL. Friendship/ bond formed within the groups. Quieter/anxious students became less so as time went on.”

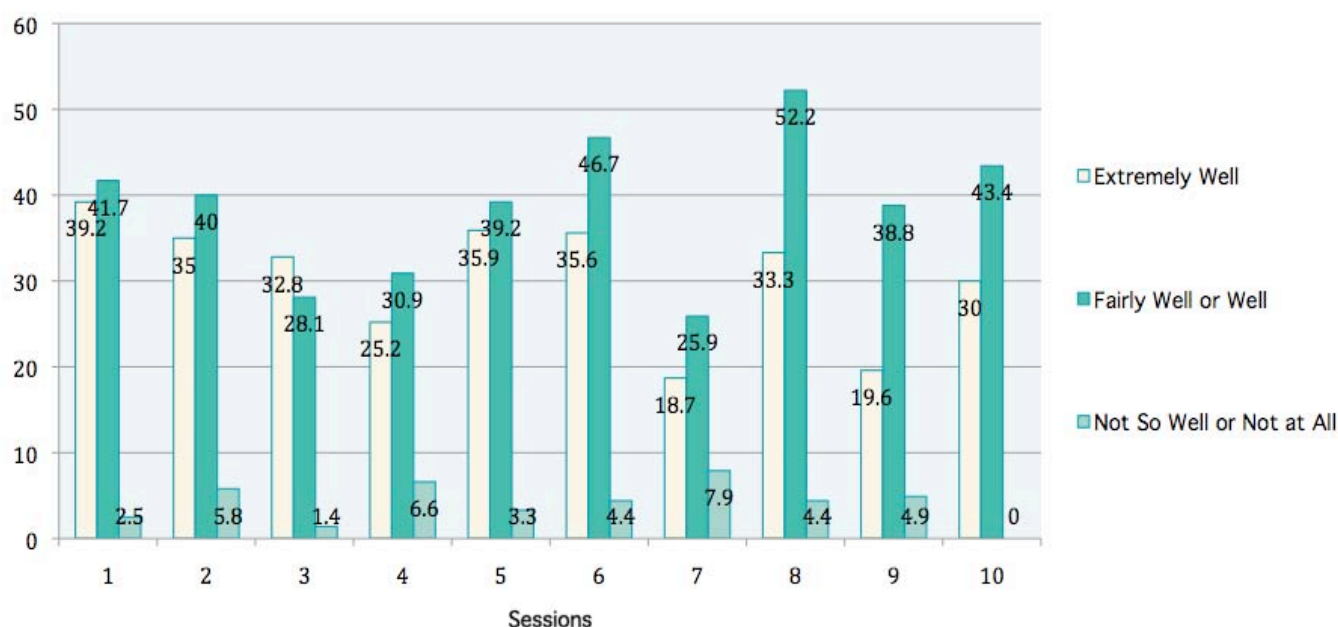
‘...quieter students began to use their loud and brave voice...’

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings are drawn from the data provided by the teachers in the Fidelity Checklist. This was comprised of a section for each of the ten sessions in the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme that asked the teachers to rate (on a scale of 1 to 5...positive to negative), for each activity as set out in the FRIENDS workbook, how well they felt they had achieved the stated aims (identified in the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ “Group Leader Manual”) of the activity undertaken. Additionally, they were requested, in recording their work to identify how many of the activities in the programme had not been covered (perhaps because of time limitations or their view that some activities were not appropriate for their students). There are two series in the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ programme – ‘FRIENDS for Life’ for children and ‘My Youth’ for adolescents. The children’s series was selected for the project because there was a concern that the density of the text in the adolescent series would be inaccessible to some students who experience reading difficulties. However, during their in-service, teachers were encouraged to supplement the work with materials from the adolescent series, ‘My FRIENDS Youth’, if they felt this appropriate.

The following graph presents the findings from the Fidelity Checklists (Sessions 1 to 10) completed by the teachers. Frequency analyses were conducted on the data. For each activity within a session, the percentages of the 30 project teachers who reported that they had met the aim “Extremely Well”, “Well or Fairly Well” and “Not Very Well or Not at All” were calculated. Some teachers did not cover various aspects of some sessions.

Graph 1:

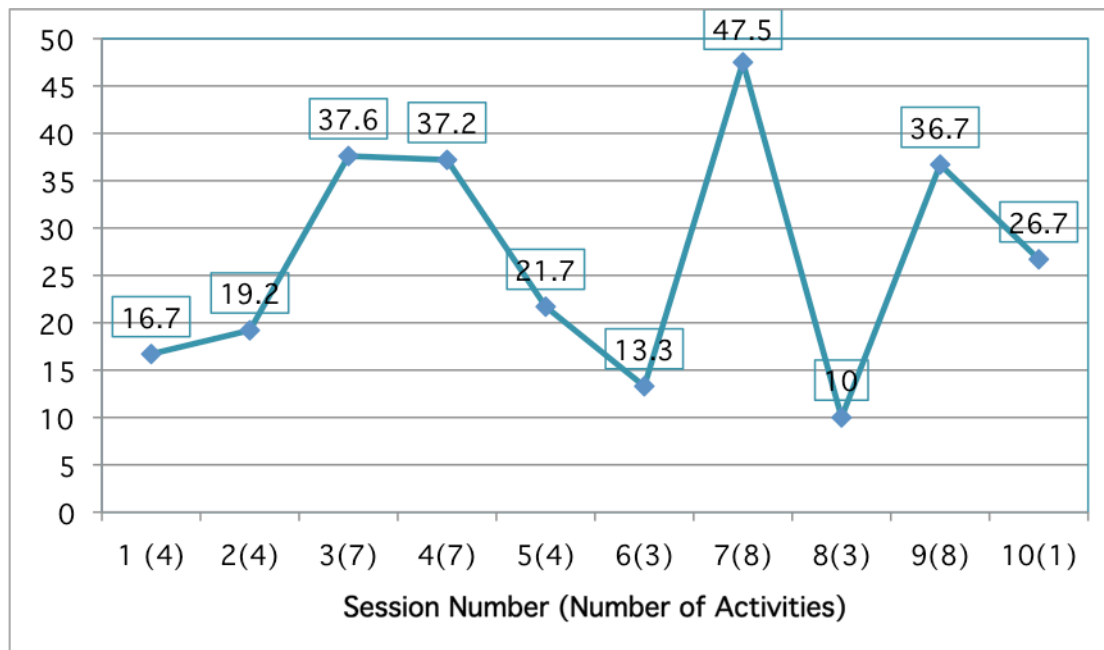


More than three quarters of the teachers reported that they felt they had met the aims undertaken in five of the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ sessions and more than a third indicated that they had achieved the aims extremely well in five of the ten ‘FRIENDS for Life’ sessions.

During the in-service, it was emphasised that it was not necessary to complete all of the activities in each session (for example, appropriateness of an activity for a particular group, etc.). However, it would also be valuable, in terms of the

research, to learn which activities were not taught during the project. There were a variety of ways in which teachers indicated that they had not taught a particular activity. Some specified in writing that they had not, while others left these areas of the checklist blank. Additionally, there were a small number of teachers who had not been able to teach a particular session due to their absence from school. The following graph presents the overall percentage of activities not taught or not completed.

Graph 2:



There would appear to be an association between the degree to which teachers reported achievement of aims (Graph 1) and the number of specific activities within each session (Graph 2, horizontal axis). Apart from Session 10 (“Review and Party”), the sessions in which less than 75% of the teachers indicated that they felt they had met the aims were those that contained 7 or 8 activities. The fact that teachers, within the time constraints of their lessons could not undertake each of the activities would have an effect on the overall percentage of achieving all of a session’s aims, as set out in the programme.

Professional Benefits and Observations

Teacher Review Documents

An aim of the research was to not only measure the effect of the programme on the students who participated but as well to gain a sense of whether the experience for the teachers was valuable to them as educators. Having completed the ten sessions, the teachers were asked whether they had enjoyed teaching the programme. Of the 27 teachers who completed the brief Teachers’ Review document, the majority were very positive including comments about being perceived in a different light by students, the ability to develop relationships with first year students and working collaboratively with colleagues through team teaching.

“Yes, I loved it – it was collaborative. You feel that you are making a difference and teaching something valuable.”

‘... a rare opportunity to work closely with a valued colleague...’

“Yes, huge learning but very demanding and exhausting work.”

“A real pleasure to watch them grow – a rare opportunity to work closely with a valued colleague – learned from her. Have now excellent relationships with FRIENDS girls.”

"I learned new skills and enjoyed passing them on to students. I enjoyed working with a small group. Had a good rapport with the students."

"I got to work with students I wouldn't otherwise work with. It was very enjoyable and rewarding to see the progress they made. It was also challenging because it was something new and positive for the students and us facilitating it."

'... you feel that you are making a difference and teaching something valuable.'

"The programme was well structured with resources at hand. It allowed me as a BSC (Behaviour Support Classroom) teacher to work with a wider range of students."

"Student-centred approach. Very helpful and practical approaches to problem-solving. Opportunity to build positive relationships with students."

Most of the responses revealed that while the teachers had experienced challenges in delivering the programme, the majority had enjoyed teaching the 'FRIENDS' programme this year. However, two of the 27 respondents were not as positive, one stating that she had:

"...found it frustrating – had to find suitable space to do many of the activities – "formulaic" approaches was not something I was comfortable with. Group size too large."

Improving the Implementation of the Programme

While the teachers were specifically asked in the review document if they had any suggestions for improving the implementation of the programme in the future, many also shared their observations and views throughout the Fidelity Checklist. Two common themes emerge from their data – "time" and "content".

Time:

In order to qualify as a 'FRIENDS for Life' facilitator the teachers had to undertake a one day training course provided by an accredited Pathways Health and Research Centre trainer. However, it was agreed amongst the partner research organisations that CBT training was also crucial in enabling the teachers to effectively teach the programme to their students. As a result, many of the participating schools were not able to initiate the programme before January 2012. Therefore many teachers felt under pressure (with the various school holidays, exams, etc. in the second and third terms) to deliver the ten sessions before the school term ended in May. The need to start the programme earlier in the academic year was identified as a way to improve its implementation.

"The programme needs to be incorporated in the timetable from the beginning of the year which means during school planning in August."

"More time. It needs to be less rushed. Whole year to do it. Every student"

"Time allocation for teachers needs to be timetabled. Time of year it is done. Mixing students from different classes is very difficult when removing them from class to do the programme."

"Time" was also an issue for the teachers in terms of the amount that was timetabled for the programme this year. The weekly class time allocated by schools varied from 40 minutes (in many cases) to 80 minutes. Teachers, both in the "universal" schools and the "small group" schools commented throughout their Fidelity Checklists on how difficult it was to cover all of the activities within a session as well as to ensure that their students were actually understanding the concepts and benefitting from the work.

"This was an excellent module but there were far too many activities to be done and we were under pressure to get through them. Students love to talk about their helpful/unhelpful thoughts and we did not want to cut them short when very meaningful and interesting discussions were taking place. As a result, we felt under pressure. It was too rushed."

“The contents in this session were extremely hard to cover, as a result we had to eliminate some of the activities as time did not permit to include them. We felt it was important that the students grasped who could help them with their Coping Step Plan and understand who their supports were. We had also promised the girls a break at the end of class so we ran out of time. I didn’t have enough time to complete or give homework.”

‘...the weekly class time allocated by schools varied from 40 minutes (in many cases) to 80 minutes...’

“In this session we did not have time for a lot of the activities as we had to spend a significant amount of time revising the Coping Step Plan and explaining the concept of rewards to the students. A little bit of time was (spent) reassuring the students at the beginning of class and the students were anxious about finishing next week and had a lot of questions. We felt it was more important to answer (their questions) than to rush through the programme for the sake of it. We just had to cut out or in some cases shorten some of the activities.”

‘...we felt it was important that the students grasped who could help them with their Coping Step Plan and understand who their supports were...’

“Other thoughts: I felt today was very rushed and I don’t think I delivered the programme to the best of my ability. Having said that, I think it is important to let the students have their say if they have any contributions to make as this programme is for them! I realise that this is a big group that we are working with and if it were smaller maybe we would get all the activities completed with them.”

Content:

Throughout their Fidelity Checklists a number of teachers replaced ‘FRIENDS for Life’ materials with resources recommended by the accredited ‘FRIENDS’ trainer. Reasons given were that certain activities and materials were “babyish” or were not appropriate, for instance culturally (“...too much Aussie stuff”) or domestically due to students’ home circumstances.

“Number of the activities were not suitable for our students as they made presumptions about home life. Some activities were altered to suit age profile of students. As in other sessions, some materials “Milkshake Song” and “Robots, Towers, Jellyfish” were far too babyish. Blob situation cards worked really well – ‘FRIENDS’ material was about kangaroos so it was not used.”

‘...I think it is important to let the students have their say if they have any contributions to make as this programme is for them!’

Linked in with the issue of time, a number of teachers raised concerns about the accessibility of the content for their students as well as the work that was needed to ensure that they had a good grasp of the concepts being taught during the different sessions. Other teachers found that there was an excess of worksheet/reading based work and that activities became repetitive. Some stated that they tried to introduce less sedentary elements into the sessions.

“Very difficult language and concepts for students with literacy difficulties. Pizza Massage was very difficult to do with the group. Found it very difficult to talk thoughts, feelings re:behaviour. More background work should be done before doing “Our Control Centre” (p.25).

“This session was too long. We completed only two activities. We felt they were somewhat repetitive and students were getting a little bored... Some students struggling with concepts at times. It is necessary to go over materials very methodically and often.”

“I have noticed, now half way through the programme, that there is a lot of repetition in the style of activities – e.g. stories that must be underlined. These also pose a problem for those with poor literacy skills.”

“A lot of repetition in style of activities in workbook – read passage and underline not “literacy friendly” – a lot of reading therefore we felt it necessary to replace some activities with more “hands on” activities or “talk time”.

‘... while many of them were feeling pressure to deliver the programme as set forward, they ran the sessions responding to the specific needs and dynamics of their groups’.

Additionally, in suggesting ways in which the programme can be effectively implemented, some teachers wrote about the importance of team teaching and having the support of management, staff and parents. What was clear both from their comments in the Fidelity Checklists and in the review was that while many of them were feeling pressure to deliver the programme as set forward, they ran the sessions responding to the specific needs and dynamics of their groups.

Having completed the ten ‘FRIENDS for Life’ sessions, the teachers were asked if they would recommend the programme to other teachers and schools in Ireland. Of the 27 respondents, all stated that they would recommend the programme.

“Yes. Mental health programmes should be a cornerstone of the school. School is a natural, more comfortable avenue to begin conversations on mental health (much easier than a doctor’s office or hospital setting).”

“Yes. It is great for the students who do suffer anxiety but because of their demeanour, being quiet, they would have been under the radar.”

However, some of the teachers qualified their responses with advice about implementing the programme.

“I would recommend it as a tool to give students coping skills but it does involve a big time commitment from the school.”

“I believe that once students are aware that there is a lot of work involved in the programme, it can be extremely beneficial.”

‘...of the 27 respondents, all stated that they would recommend the programme...’

Conclusion and Recommendations

Research Area One

The findings from the 'FRIENDS for Life' Research Project demonstrate that significant reductions in anxiety levels were found following the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme within an Irish school context. This was confirmed by both students (Spence Children's Anxiety Scale) and parents (Spence Children's Anxiety Scale – Parent Version). According to the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, students also recorded a significant reduction in overall stress, emotional stress, peer difficulties, behaviour difficulties and attention deficit hyperactivity difficulties after completing the programme. However, no significant differences were found between the Teacher's SDQ forms before and after the programme despite the fact that students rated themselves as experiencing significant reductions in stress, difficulties with peers, behaviour difficulties and attention deficit hyperactivity difficulties following the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme. It is also important to note that no increase in internalised or externalising behaviour difficulties was observed or rated by teachers. Before the programme, 18.8% of students rated themselves within the 'elevated' anxiety level (1 in every 5.3 students). This reduced to 10.2% of students following the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme (1 in every 9.8 students).

'Before the programme, 18.8% of students rated themselves within the 'elevated' anxiety level (1 in every 5.3 students). This reduced to 10.2% of students following the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme (1 in every 9.8 students).'

In relation to the trends identified in the data set, the highest average anxiety subtype score was in relation to 'Fears of Physical Injury' and 'Separation Anxiety'. A strong fear of physical injury has previously been found with older children (Spence 1998; Muris, Merckelbach, Gadet, & Moulart 2000). Vasey, Crnic and Carter (1994) found that older children more frequently display worrisome thoughts and specific fears such as blood-injury-illness fears. The 'Separation Anxiety' subtype was assessed through the following items on the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale: 'I would feel afraid being on my own at home', 'I worry about being away from my parents'; 'I worry that something awful will happen to someone in my family', 'I feel scared if I have to sleep on my own', 'I have trouble going to school in the mornings because I feel nervous or afraid'; 'I would feel scared if I had to stay away from home overnight'. It appears that this trend is in line with other research findings. For example, Spence (1998) stated that fears of harm befalling family members were relatively common (around 20% of young adolescents reported such concerns). Although fears of being at home alone or being away from parents were less frequent, they were still reported by 5–6% of young adolescents.

'... the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme is effective in reducing anxiety levels ... as measured by both students and parents...'

Interesting findings were revealed in the four main sources of worry for the 'FRIENDS for Life' group which included (1) Tests/Schoolwork, (2) Bullying, (3) Loss/Death and (4) Other Fears. These themes are in line with previous research carried out by Muris et al. (2000) who found the top intense fears were animals, social threats, being kidnapped, test performance, dying or death of others, and personal harm or harm to others.

'...the four main sources of worry included (1) Tests/Schoolwork, (2) Bullying, (3) Loss/Death and (4) Other Fears.'

Research Area Two

The research elements consisted of:

- The experiences of the teachers in delivering the programme.
- Exploring those aspects of the programme that worked well within an Irish post-primary context
- Identifying any aspects of the programme that did not work well within an Irish post-primary context.

It is clear from the pre and post quantitative screening (Spence Anxiety Measure and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) that significant improvement was made by the student cohort having completed ten sessions of the programme. The qualitative and quantitative findings from the Teachers' Reviews and the Fidelity Checklists make these results compelling.

'It is clear from the pre and post quantitative screening that significant improvement was made by the student cohort having completed ten sessions of the programme...'

While teachers reported that they had not taught or had not completed all of the activities within a session (particularly those sessions that had 7-8 activities), this did not detract from the progress they made with their students on those activities that were the focus of their lessons. In five of the sessions, more than a third of the teachers felt that they had achieved the aims of the session extremely well. Equally, many of the teachers, as they worked with their students through the programme, adapted materials and were selective in terms of the activities they undertook, based on the needs and dynamics of their particular groups. This was despite the fact that teachers, whether they were in "universal" schools or "small group" schools, those who had only 40 minutes of class time or those who were allocated two lessons per week, felt they did not have enough time to either:

- address all of the activities contained within the sessions.
- ensure that the concepts were fully understood by their students.
- allow for the students' necessary reflection and conversation.
- a combination of the three concerns.

In considering the use of the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme in Irish post-primary schools, the data demonstrate that flexibility is needed in terms of teaching the sessions and using the programme's materials. From the data provided by the teachers in their Fidelity Checklists, it was apparent that some of the 'FRIENDS' materials were not suitable for students within an Irish context and were therefore replaced by resources and strategies that would be more appropriate and lead to better outcomes. Additionally, some teachers found that there is an over-emphasis on worksheet/reading based work within the programme and found that introducing more active, oral and movement based exercises were more effective for their students. Some teachers spoke about the need to introduce "energisers".

The 'FRIENDS for Life' Research Project is significant not only because it has tested the programme in post-primary schools geographically distributed across the Republic of Ireland but as well because it viewed the challenges of delivering the programme on a universal basis as well as in small groups (NBSS Level 1 and Level 2 support). The data from the teachers would suggest that this programme would benefit all students. One teacher wrote *"It is an excellent programme much needed to teach emotional literacy to children, especially 'at risk' children."* This project has been effective in gathering, from the classroom "chalk-face", the ways in which some programme materials may need to be adapted in order to most effectively meet the learning needs of Irish students. This research has highlighted the ways in which planning has to be given in terms of providing adequate time for both teachers and students to gain best value from the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme. The results of the research project with respect to the student outcomes, demonstrate the value of this programme in Irish post-primary schools as an intervention for all adolescents.

'...the results demonstrate the value of this programme in Irish post-primary schools as an intervention for all adolescents.'

Recommendations

The following school-based actions are recommended to address the main themes that were identified as causing concern to first year students in the 14 project schools:

1. The active promotion, through school-wide structures, systems, policies and practices of a positive school culture and climate.
2. The revision and/or development of prevention and intervention responses (incorporating evidence-based approaches) to all forms of bullying behaviour, including homophobic and transphobic bullying and cyberbullying.
3. The introduction into more schools of programmes to assist students experiencing a significant loss in their lives through death, separation or divorce (for example the Rainbow and Spectrum programmes).
4. The revisiting each term of the Personal Safety Module in the SPHE Junior Cycle Curriculum to educate students about all aspects of personal safety including the development of a personal safety plan.
5. The development of modules on study and learning skills, test preparation and relaxation techniques for students in all year groups, as well as the direct and explicit teaching of learning and thinking skills across the curriculum.

To promote the introduction of the 'FRIENDS' programmes to more post-primary schools, the following actions would be beneficial:

1. The development of a standardised Post-Primary Teacher Training Programme that covers Cognitive Behavioural Therapy principles and the accredited training to become a 'FRIENDS' facilitator.
2. The inclusion of internalising mental health issues in all mental health Continuous Professional Development training for post-primary school staff.
3. The development of 'FRIENDS' resource packs to reduce preparation time for school staff.
4. The involvement of the school community in the 'FRIENDS' programmes through school-wide events and promotions which focus on key 'FRIENDS' themes.
5. The inclusion of the 'FRIENDS' programmes as part of a New Junior Cycle short course (example: schools could integrate the 'FRIENDS for Life' and 'My FRIENDS Youth' programmes into a 100 hour SPHE short course).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme, an evidence-based, emotional resilience programme has been found to be effective within the post-primary school setting. The programme equips students with the coping skills required to face life's many challenges. The practical life skills outlined in the 'FRIENDS for Life' programme (e.g. Coping Step Plan, 6-Stage Problem Solving Plan) need to be taught explicitly to children and adolescents. It cannot be taken for granted that these skills will develop innately in young people through 'trial and error.' In these uncertain and challenging times, it is essential that these coping mechanisms and ultimately youth resilience is developed and nurtured. The findings from this project give a strong indication that the 'FRIENDS' programmes could make a significant contribution to building resilience and improving the emotional wellbeing and educational outcomes for young people in Irish schools.

'...the programme equips students with the coping skills required to face life's many challenges...It cannot be taken for granted that these skills will develop innately in young people through 'trial and error...'

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