

PREVENTION

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How an imaginary stick insect helps kids cope

20 January 2014

Zippy may be the world's most famous stick insect. The starring character in a program that teaches coping skills to six- and seven-year-olds, he and his friends feature in classrooms in two dozen countries. The most recent evaluation from Norway finds modest positive results of the program, although different outcomes for boys and girls mean there's still more to learn.

Previous evaluations of Zippy's Friends have produced some promising findings. The universal, school-based program was first tested in Denmark and Lithuania and found to improve children's social skills, particularly their coping skills. A later study, following the same children, highlighted how the transition from kindergarten to school was significantly better for children who had received Zippy's Friends. The promising early evidence led the World Health Organization to feature Zippy's Friends in a 2005 publication.

The most recent published evaluation is a large randomized trial of nearly 1500 children from 35 schools, representing the largest and most rigorous test of the program to date. Oslo-based researchers found that Zippy's Friends modestly improved coping skills among girls, but not among boys.

Who is this stick insect?

Zippy's Friends grew out of efforts in the late 1990s by a suicide-prevention agency, Befrienders International, to create school-based programs that would

The universal, school-based program aims to prevent psychological problems in children by helping them develop a broader range of coping skills at a young age (6–8 years). This logic is that having a repertoire of coping strategies can serve as a buffer to the effects of stress. Today, the program is distributed by the charity Partnership for Children.

The content of the program is based on six stories about the lives of cartoon characters including Zippy, a stick insect. During 24 weekly sessions facilitated by trained teachers, children explore themes of emotion, communication, relationships and conflict resolution, participating in class discussion and sharing their experiences and perceptions with their peers.

The program is based on the idea that coping strategies fall into two broad categories. With emotional coping, individuals try to change the negative emotions triggered by a problem, such as by playing music, having a drink, spending time alone, or crying. With action-focused coping, individuals try to change the frustrating situation.

The results from the recent Norwegian trial build on previous positive findings, offering new insights and implications for future research.

For girls, more active coping strategies, less opposition

The trial was conducted with almost 1500 children from 91 second-grade classrooms in 35 schools. At the end of the trial, parents of girls who participated in Zippy's Friends reported that their children used more active and support-seeking coping strategies, on average, than parents of girls in the control group did. The girls themselves also reported a reduction in their use of oppositional coping strategies. The authors suggest that, in the face of adverse events, such as peer rejection, girls in the program learned to use alternative coping strategies rather than confronting or opposing others. There were no significant improvements in coping strategies for boys.

As well as coping, the study also measured children's mental health. It measured emotional and behavioral problems, as well as the impact of the problems on children's levels of distress and social impairment. Although there were no significant improvements for mental health outcomes for the intervention group as a whole, teachers reported an average improvement in the impact of emotional and behavioral problems among boys who had received Zippy's Friends.

Overall, Zippy's Friends produces some meaningful benefits for children in terms of their coping skills and psychological wellbeing. Girls were able to employ more positive coping strategies as a result of the program, while the impact of present psychological problems decreased for boys. However, this inconsistency between outcomes for boys and girls is an important issue that requires explanation.

What next for Zippy's Friends?

One of the benefits of the recent evaluation of Zippy's Friends in Norway is that, unlike previous quasi-experimental evaluations, it uses a randomized controlled trial design. This allows more confidence in the assumption that participants are equal before the randomization occurs, and that differences at the end of the study are due to the intervention.

However, although the participants were randomly assigned to the intervention or control group, they were not randomly selected to participate in the study. Schools volunteered to enroll in the program. Arguably, these schools are not typical. On the one hand, participating schools may be more receptive to this



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EDITOR'S PICKS

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There is more to the international transfer of prevention programs than just hitting the "copy and paste" buttons. The introduction of

results. On the other hand, these schools may already be creating a strong environment for children to learn coping skills, meaning that there is less room for improvement. Overall, it's uncertain whether a broader roll-out of the program would show stronger or weaker results.

The modest results may also result from the relatively strong social skills programs already used in many Norwegian schools, and the relatively low incidence of mental health problems. Dramatic improvement from a good starting point is a tall order.

The key findings of the study were that, as a result of receiving Zippy's Friends, there were significant improvements in some coping strategies for girls, and reduced impact of psychological problems for boys. These findings are promising but the gender differences are not well explained.

Why did Zippy's Friends improve the coping skills of girls and not boys? The authors suggest that this could be due to the fact that girls are more adept at cognitive and oral skills required by the program, but admit that this requires further investigation. Future evaluation of Zippy's Friends will hopefully improve our insight into this issue.

Reference:

Holen, S., Waaktaar, T., Lervåg, A., & Ystgaard, M. (2012). The effectiveness of a universal school-based programme on coping and mental health: A randomised, controlled study of Zippy's Friends. *Educational Psychology* 32(5), 657–677. DOI: 10.1080/01443410.2012.686152.

Links:

Partnership for Children: www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk
(<http://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk>)

World Health Organization report on mental health: www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/MH_Promotion_Book.pdf (http://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/MH_Promotion_Book.pdf)

EXPLAINERS

offers insights into how to succeed.

PREVENTION NEWS

(SECTION/92) | PREVENTION

SCIENCE – ALL IS REVEALED

(/PREVENTION-NEWS/PREVENTION-SCIENCE-ALL-REVEALED/5842)

Few people working with children will have heard the term "prevention scientist," let alone know what one is or does. Yet this relatively new breed of researcher is behind the growing list of evidence-based programs being promoted in western developed countries. A new publication puts them under the microscope.

WHAT WORKS (SECTION/93) |

INSPIRATION FROM A

DECADE OF DEVELOPMENTS IN PREVENTION SCIENCE

(/WHAT-WORKS/INSPIRATION-DECADE-DEVELOPMENTS-PREVENTION-SCIENCE/5845)

Crime and antisocial behavior prevention efforts have flourished over the last 10 years in the US. This progress can and should be used to help communities improve the life chances of their young people, a recent update urges.

WHAT WORKS (SECTION/93) |

MOVE ASIDE PROGRAMS, STEP UP PRACTICE

(/WHAT-WORKS/MOVE-ASIDE-PROGRAMS-STEP-PRACTICE/5545)

Given the well-known barriers to implementing evidence-based programs, is it better to identify their discrete elements and trust practitioners to combine them in tailored packages depending on the needs of the child and family in question?

WHAT WORKS (SECTION/93) |

NO GREEN LIGHT FOR EVIDENCE FROM MUNRO REPORT

(/WHAT-WORKS/NO-GREEN-LIGHT-EVIDENCE-MUNRO-REPORT/5563)

The final official review on child protection offers a shakeup of services.