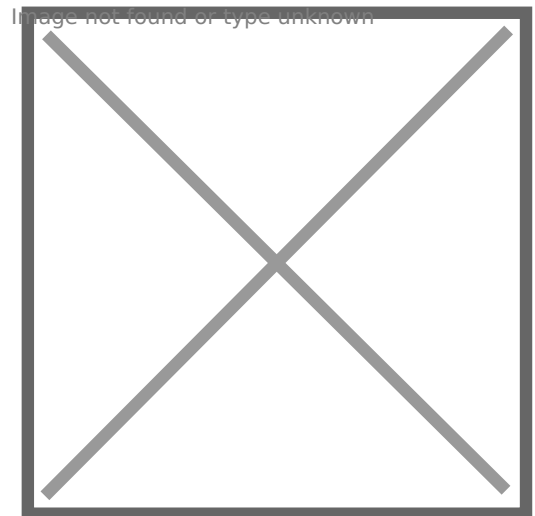


- 26% of Year 6 pupils said they had been bullied once or twice in the “past couple of months” and 17.1% said they had been bullied “two or three times a month” or more often during the past couple of months.
- 37% of all respondents to the *Young Life and Times Survey* in Northern Ireland (16 year olds) said they had been bullied in school.
- Children’s sense of wellbeing and life satisfaction in the United Kingdom (UK) falls well below other European countries.
- Investment in children’s targeted services brings significant financial benefits – for every £1 invested in early intervention forecasts, benefits of between £7.60 and £9.20 can be generated.

Building emotional resilience in children is a key challenge for public health, both for children’s own mental health and wellbeing and the impact this has into adult life.

Roots of Empathy is an evidence-based classroom programme that has been shown to reduce levels of aggression among school children, while also improving social and emotional competence and increasing empathy. Significantly, it provides an effective approach to reducing the risk factors that cause violence.



Actions

At the heart of the programme are a baby and parent from the local community, who visit the classroom on a monthly basis throughout the year. A trained instructor coaches students to observe the baby’s development and label the baby’s feelings. This ‘emotional literacy’ lays the foundations for more safe and caring classrooms.

Children become more competent in understanding their own feelings and the feelings of others (empathy) and are therefore less likely to physically,

psychologically and emotionally hurt each other through bullying.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) and Belfast HSCT, together with local stakeholders, are currently engaged with 27 primary schools to deliver Roots of Empathy. Some 584 children are participating in this pilot phase, which has a strong focus on schools serving more disadvantaged communities.

Outcomes

A number of randomised controlled trials have found that children already identified as having bullying and aggressive behaviours, and who participated in Roots of Empathy, had a reduction in these behaviours of 88% compared to those identified children who did not receive the programme. The latter group had an increase in aggression and bullying behaviour of 50%. The observed reduction in aggression among the former group continues for at least three years after completion of the programme.

Next steps

Queen's University Belfast (QUB) has been commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the pilot phase during 2010/11 and this is expected to inform the wider roll-out of the programme.

A submission has also been made to the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) for an evaluation of the programme over time. The PHA is working closely with Roots of Empathy Canada, HSCTs and Education and Library Boards to plan the roll-out of Roots of Empathy across Northern Ireland.

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