



Garfield Weston Post-Project Report

Exploring the benefits of a storytelling-based wellbeing and emotional education programme across primary schools in Northern Ireland

Table of Contents

01

Executive Summary

01

02

Introduction

02

03

Methods

03

04

Results: Participant Overview

07

05

Results: Mental Wellbeing

08

06

Results: Managing Emotions

09

07

Results: Classroom Feedback

10

08

Results: Child Feedback

12

09

Results: Teacher Feedback

14

10

Discussion & References

21

Executive Summary

This project was delivered by Verbal with support from the Garfield Weston Foundation. Verbal designed a 12-week Shared Reading programme aimed at improving mental wellbeing and helping young children to understand and manage challenging emotions and behaviours.

Providing young children with these skills is vital in the context of relatively poor childhood mental health in Northern Ireland (Bunting et al., 2020) and funding cuts to mental health services in schools that are posited to leave children “without vital support” (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2023).

The programme adopted a whole-school approach. Sessions were delivered by teachers and supported by classroom assistants. Programme delivery was completed in 21 classes in 14 schools between January-June 2023, reaching a total of 527 students delivered across 213 storytelling sessions.

Mental wellbeing significantly improved in 43% of children after taking part in the programme and helped children to feel calmer. Improvements in wellbeing were highest for the youngest children in the programme.

The ability to understand and manage emotions also improved in 43% of children. Children particularly improved in

their ability to recognise their emotions, regulate their emotions, and to empathise with others. Children were also less likely to be hurt by unkind words and were more likely to self-soothe when upset.

Programme feedback was positive from both children and teachers. Children enjoyed stories and accompanying illustrations, felt listened to during classroom discussions, and would take part in the programme again. Children learned lessons from stories such as being kind to themselves and others and what they should do when they are feeling overwhelmed. Teachers felt that stories were effective in providing mental health lessons that children could relate to, leading to important classroom discussions such as the importance of not bottling up emotions.

Our programme significantly improved mental wellbeing and helped children to understand and manage their emotions in a manner that they found enjoyable and could relate to. These findings indicate that Verbal’s programmes are effective in improving children’s mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, they suggest that Shared Reading can both improve mental wellbeing and embed mental health knowledge and support directly within schools, helping to reduce stigma and to make mental health support more accessible.

Introduction

The first theme of the Northern Ireland (NI) Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 is to promote *mental wellbeing, resilience, and good mental health across society* (Department of Health, 2021). To achieve this aim, it is imperative to promote positive wellbeing at a young age and to provide children with the skillset to manage their mental health.

Research indicates that symptoms of mental health problems such as anxiety can appear by the age of six (Merikangas et al., 2010). Children who have difficulties with their mental health can struggle with making friends and achieve lower grades than their classmates (Drake & Ginsburg, 2012; Asher & Cole, 1990; Jones et al., 2011). These findings highlight the need to help young children with their wellbeing and to provide them with tools to manage their emotions when faced with future stressors.

Despite the importance of promoting positive wellbeing in children, funding cuts in NI have impacted the capacity to provide wellbeing resources in schools. The loss of the Healthy Happy Minds programme in 2023 has resulted in primary schools losing access to mental health support such as counsellors and creative therapy support, leaving children “without vital support” (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2023).

In a recently-published report, academics stress that children in NI are already 25% more likely to exhibit symptoms of depression or anxiety compared to the rest of the UK (Bunting et al., 2020), and emphasise how these cuts will widen gaps in education and future economic prospects (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). A recommendation of the report is to take a whole-school approach to mental wellbeing, embedding mental health knowledge and support directly within schools to reduce stigma and to make mental health support accessible through trusted adults in schools.

In the context of funding cuts and poor childhood wellbeing in NI, Verbal have developed a new early intervention mental health and wellbeing storytelling programme. This programme, titled ‘Managing Difficult Emotions’, is designed to help children aged 6-9 years understand and manage challenging emotions and behaviours. These skills will help children to manage current distress while also providing a skillset of coping strategies to use when faced with future stressors.

The overall aims of the Managing Difficult Emotions programme are to enhance emotional wellbeing in young children and to help them understand and better manage their emotions and behaviours. This report will evaluate the programme’s ability to achieve these aims across primary schools in NI.

Methods

The Programme

A 12-session intervention designed to improve mental wellbeing and help children to manage their emotions was delivered in 21 classes across 14 primary schools in Northern Ireland:



Participating Schools

St Nicholas' Primary School; St Patrick's Primary School; Lissan Primary School; Holy Family Primary School; St Mary's Primary School, Brookeborough; St Columban's Primary School, Belcoo; Hollybush Primary School; St Finlough's Primary School; Millburn Primary School; Chapel Road Primary School; Drumgor Primary School; St Columba's Primary School; Carntall Primary School; Moat Primary School.

The Managing Difficult Emotions programme aimed to instil the following tenets of good mental wellbeing and emotional awareness in children:



Managing unhelpful thoughts



Naming emotions



Compassion and self-care



Relaxation and distraction techniques



Building self-esteem



Gratitude and positive wellbeing



Managing worries and facing fears



Friendships and bullying

Shared Reading Model

This intervention was developed using Verbal's Shared Reading Model. This model is derived from Affective Bibliotherapy (Shechtman & Nir-Shfir, 2008, Heath et al., 2005), a process involving the guided reading of literature combined with targeted discussions. Shared Reading fosters change and understanding in others by gently breaking through defence mechanisms to help develop insight (Shechtman & Nir-Shfir, 2008). Stories act as an “intermediary object” between the person and their problems (Gray et al., 2016), offering a less direct but appropriate way of discussing their emotions and experiences in a safe and inclusive environment (Detrixhe, 2010).

Programme Development

Literature was selected by Verbal's Literature Team to align with the mental health themes previously outlined. In the Shared Reading Model, discussions are guided by psychologically-informed annotations written by Verbal's Psychology Team to prompt personal and group growth, healing and understanding. These annotations are guided by key psychological frameworks, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to change unhealthy thoughts and behaviours, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to accept and/or change emotions and behaviours.

This programme was delivered in schools by teachers and teachers in training. Encouraging teachers to become involved in Shared Reading is part of Verbal's whole-school approach to improving wellbeing in schools. Our aim was to equip teachers, classroom assistants and support staff with sustainable resources that they could integrate into their daily school life. We also encouraged teachers and classroom assistants to become involved in discussions, to empower the children in their class to share their voice, and to continue discussions and lessons outside of the session.

Programme Assessment

Participants completed a questionnaire before and after taking part in the intervention; these questionnaires contained the same psychological measures to allow direct comparison pre- and post-intervention. These measures are:



Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (SCWBS)

This is a 12-item measure which uses positively-worded questions to assess children's emotional state and outlook on life (Liddle & Carter, 2015). For this project, the six questions relating to positive emotional state were used in our questionnaire. High scores are indicative of children feeling positive, hopeful, and getting along well with others.



Nfer-Nelson Emotional Literacy Scale

This is a 25-item measure designed to assess emotional literacy in children (Faupel, 2003). For this project, ten questions in total were selected from the empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation and motivation subscales as they most closely aligned with the aims and goals of the programme. High scores indicate that children are able to recognise and manage their emotions.

Along with a pre- and post-intervention survey, we developed a range of ways to capture programme feedback from young children and their teachers. These feedback options include:



Weekly Teacher Feedback Form

Each week, teachers were emailed the URL to a survey to provide feedback on the session that they had delivered. Teachers were asked to rate: how successful they thought the story was at achieving its intended aim; the level of classroom engagement; the depth of conversation; the ease of delivering the session; whether the story's key theme was identified; and whether teachers had any additional comments or feedback on delivering the session.



Classroom End-of-Programme Survey

At the end of the programme, classrooms completed a number of 'hands-up' exercises that were read aloud by their teacher. For example, teachers would ask children 'Did you enjoy listening to the stories?' and would tally the number of children who raised their hand at 'yes', 'not sure', and 'no'. Questions asked children whether they: enjoyed listening to the stories; whether they felt happier after listening to stories; whether they felt listened to during discussions; what they enjoyed most about the programme; what lessons they learned from the programme; and whether they would take part again.



End-of-Programme Activity Sheet

As gathering feedback from young children can be challenging, we designed an interactive activity sheet to learn more about how they found the programme. Children were encouraged to: draw and/or describe their favourite story from the programme; circle from a list of options what they felt they had learned from the programme; and colour in the emotions they felt while listening to stories.

Procedure

This programme was delivered in schools between January-June 2023. Parental consent forms were sent out to parents which contained information about the programme and were collected prior to the beginning of the programme. Children completed the pre-programme questionnaire before the beginning of the first session.

Each session, children would be read a story pertaining to themes of wellbeing and emotional literacy. Stories were selected by Verbal's Literature Team and structured breaks were implemented for discussions and for showing illustrations related to the story events. The Psychology team developed questions for these breaks that would encourage discussion and reflection on the theme. The programme was delivered in 12 sessions by teachers, typically on a weekly basis where possible. Children completed the post-intervention questionnaire and feedback exercises at the end of the programme.

Data Analysis Strategy

Quantitative data were entered, cleaned and statistically analysed by the Verbal Psychology Team using a combination of SPSS Version 28 and Stata Version 17.

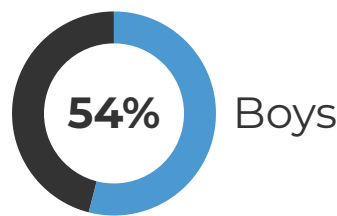
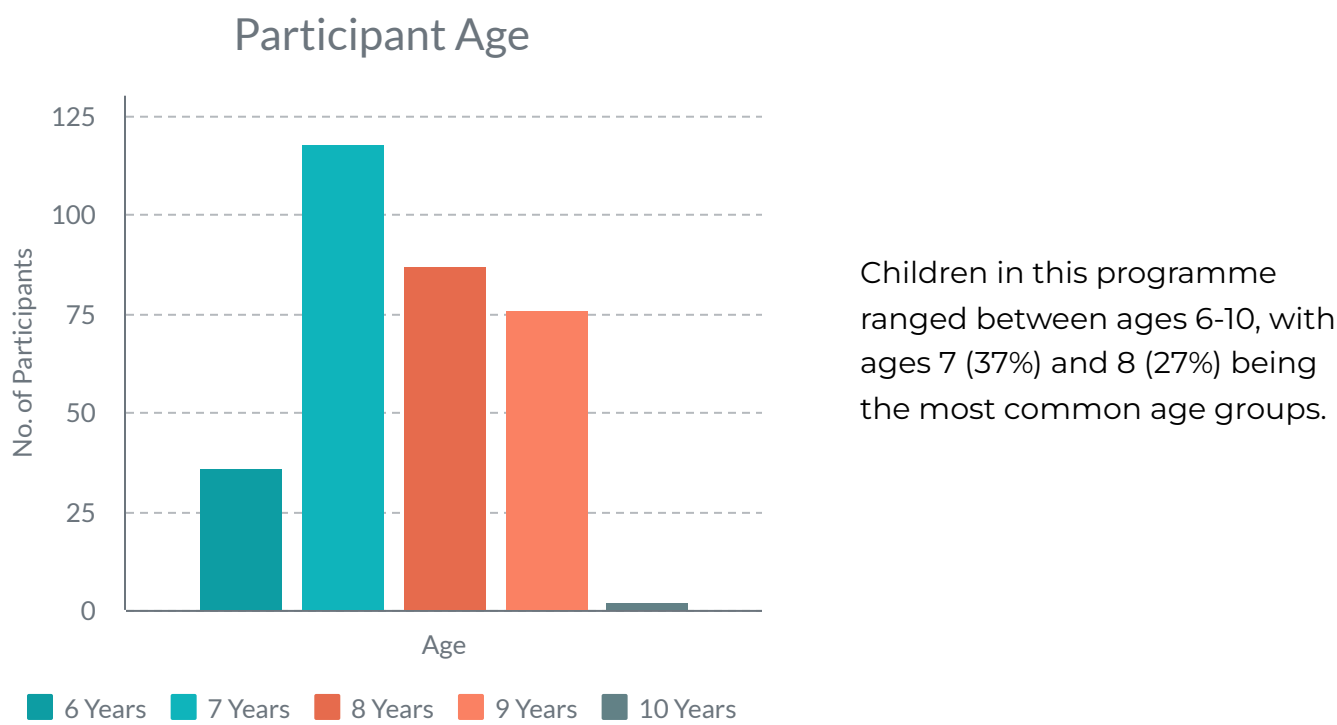
Descriptive statistics such as age and gender were explored. t-tests were used to explore whether scores on psychological measures significantly changed before and after taking part in the intervention, including by age and gender. Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVAs) were then used to explore whether changes in scores pre- and post-intervention significantly differed by age or gender.

Statistical significance was explored when analysing data. Statistical significance refers to the probability that a finding happened due to a specific cause, most likely the result of the programme. In alignment with established guidelines, results were considered as statistically significant if $p < .05$. This means that we can be at least 95% sure that a finding was not due to chance or coincidence. Statistically significant findings in charts and graphs were denoted using an asterisk (*).



Results: Participant Overview

This intervention was delivered to 21 classes across 14 schools between January-June 2023. The programme reached a total of **527 students** delivered across **213 storytelling sessions**. A parental consent form, a pre-programme questionnaire, and a post-programme questionnaire were available for **319 participants (61%)**.



Slightly more boys (54%) than girls (46%) took part in the programme.

Results: Mental Wellbeing

Programme Results

Mental wellbeing **significantly improved** in children after taking part in the programme ($t=2.20, p=.014$). We found that mental wellbeing **increased in 43% of children**. After taking part, 25% of children reported that they **felt calmer**.

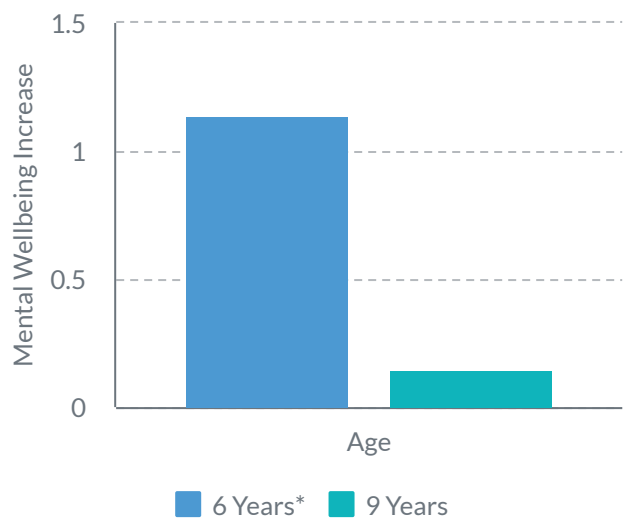
 **43%**
Improved wellbeing

 **25%**
Felt calmer

Exploring Demographic Differences

Analyses explored whether age or gender differences were apparent between the pre- and post-intervention assessments.

Figure 1



We found that improvements in mental wellbeing significantly differed by age ($F=2.44, p=.047$). When exploring this difference, we identified that improvements in wellbeing were highest **in younger children** (Figure 1).

Results: Managing Emotions

Programme Results

↑ **43%**

Improved in
managing emotions

We found that by the end of the programme, the overall ability to recognise and manage emotions **improved in 43% of children.**

We explored which components of managing emotions particularly improved from the programme. **41% of children improved** their understanding of their own emotions and their personal strengths. The ability to manage and regulate their own emotions **improved in 29% of children**, and the ability to empathise and understand the emotions of others **improved in 28% of children.**

↑ **41%**

Improved
understanding
of emotions

↑ **29%**

Felt more able
to regulate their
emotions

↑ **28%**

Improved their
empathy skills

When exploring individual survey questions, we found that **30% of children** were less likely to be hurt by unkind words, and **25% of children** were more able to calm themselves after becoming upset.

↓ **30%**

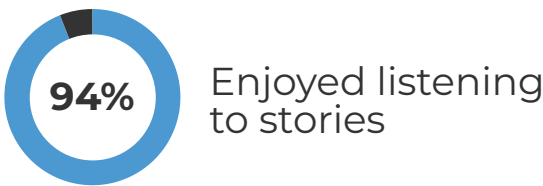
Less likely to be
hurt by words

↑ **25%**

Increase in self-
soothing

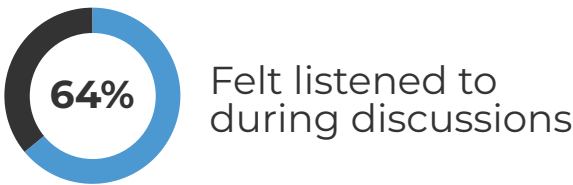
Results: Classroom Feedback

End-of-programme classroom feedback was gathered from **16 classes (76%)** with a total of **329 students (62%)** in attendance.



Enjoyed listening to stories

94% of children enjoyed listening to stories during sessions.



Felt listened to during discussions

64% of children felt that they were being listened to during the discussion portions of the sessions.



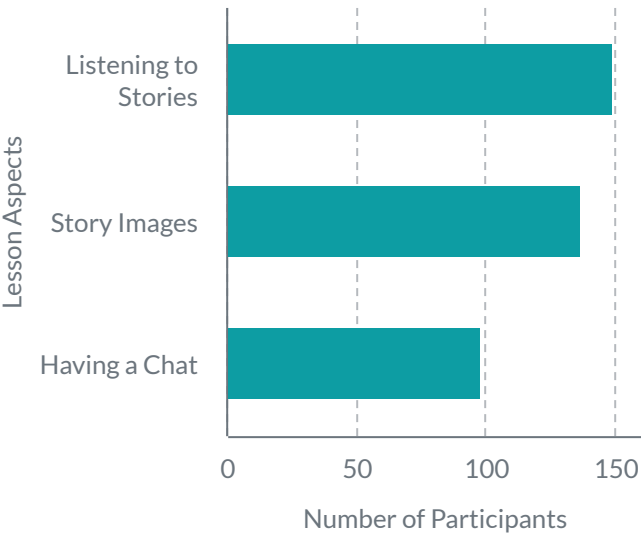
Felt happier after stories

When children were asked if they felt happier after hearing the stories, **60% responded yes.**

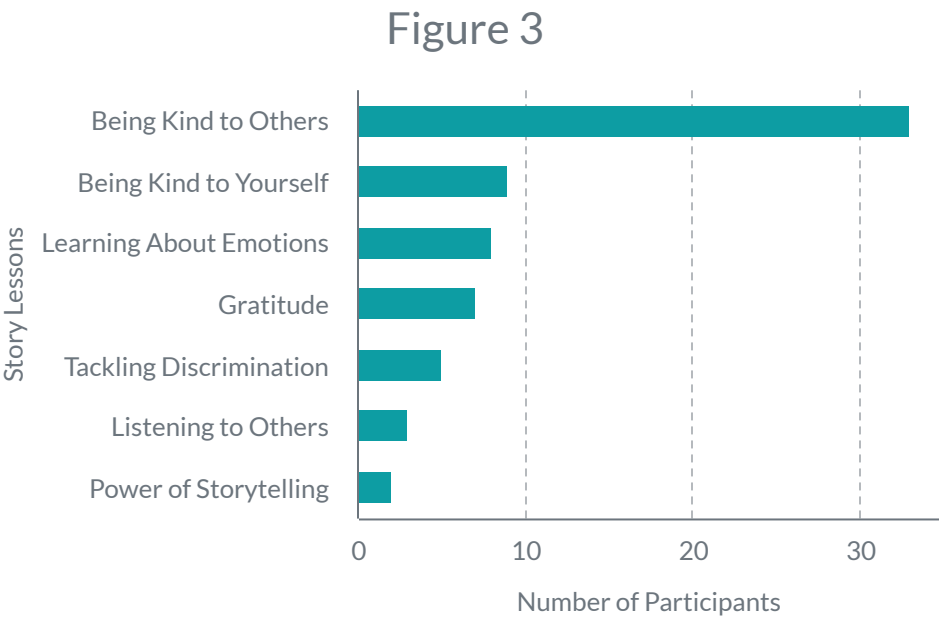
Children were asked to pick which aspect of the sessions they enjoyed the most; these responses are shown in Figure 2. Please note that while these answers aimed to be mutually exclusive, some children raised their hand for multiple answers and were therefore counted more than once.

The most popular aspect of the programme was listening to a story being read aloud (**45%**). Children similarly enjoyed the accompanying illustrations shown that corresponded to story events (**42%**). Finally, **30% of children** enjoyed the ability to have a chat about the story, their feelings, and how they could personally relate to events in the story.

Figure 2

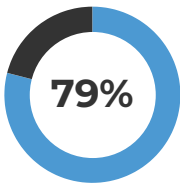


Teachers asked children in the class what they learned from the stories. A summary of responses is shown in Figure 3.



The lesson that children most frequently learned from the programme was to be kind to others. Children described kindness as “*really special*” and stressed the importance of being kind to and helping others, especially those “*who are upset*”. Children learned that “*sharing helps you make friends*” and to “*let people be included*”. They also learned to love and care for themselves, leaving feedback such as “*believe in yourself*”, “*follow your dreams*” and “*care for yourself*”.

Children appreciated learning about emotions, including “*what I should do when I feel overwhelmed*” and how “*we should use our calming tricks when angry or scared*”. Gratitude was a topic that children learned more about as they expressed sentiments such as to be “*thankful*” and “*grateful*” for what they have. Tackling discrimination also emerged in the feedback as children learned to “*[not] judge others on looks*” and to “*love everyone equally*”. Smaller themes that emerged included the importance of “*listen[ing] to people*” and how you don’t have to write down a story, you can “*tell a story*”.



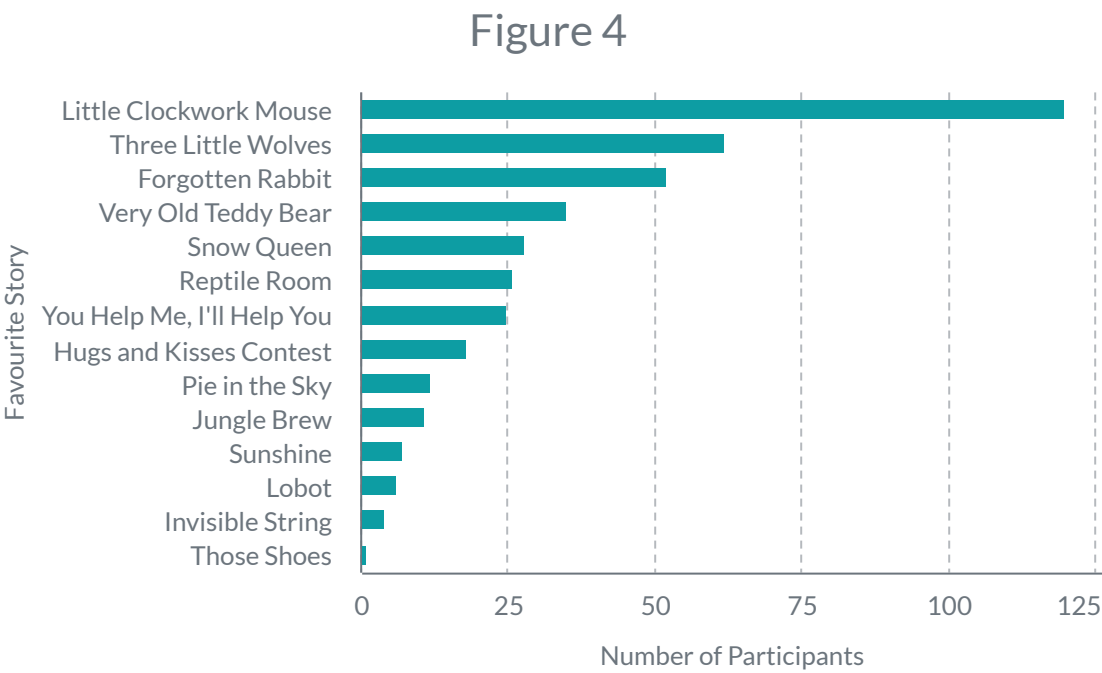
Would take part again

79% of children felt that they would like to take part in the programme again.

Results: Child Feedback

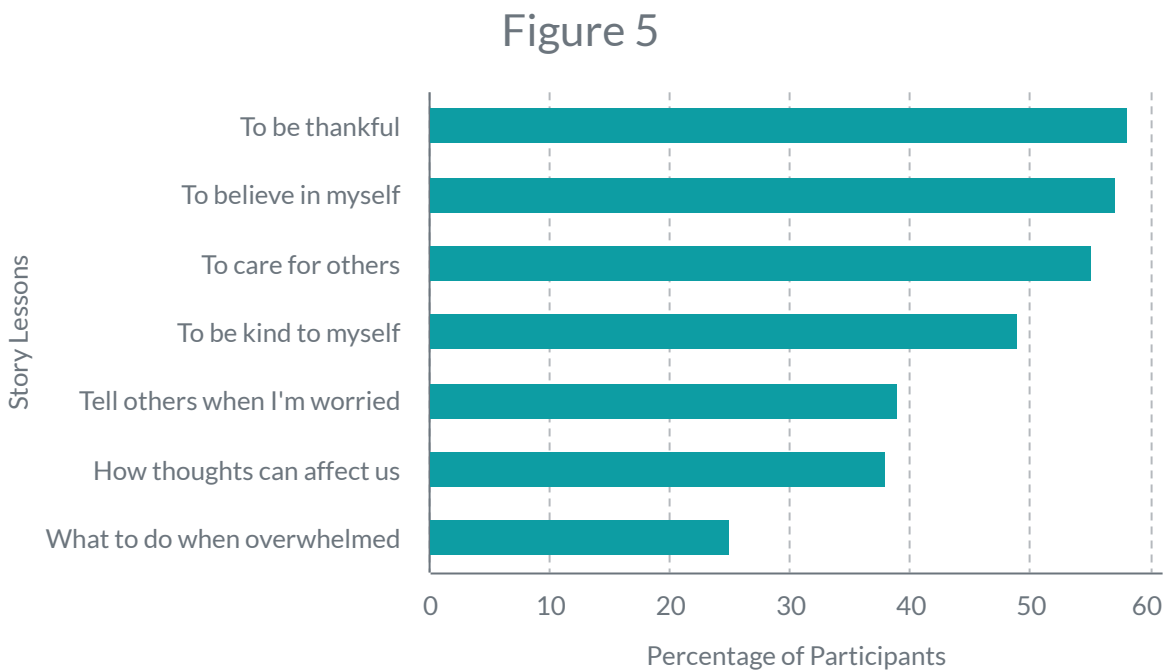
End-of-programme feedback sheets were collected from **417 children (79%)**.

Children were asked to draw pictures from and/or describe their favourite story. Drawings and descriptions were collated and are organised in Figure 4.



The most popular story was **The Little Clockwork Mouse (29%)**, a story detailing and resolving the titular mouse not being invited to a party. Following this story was **The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig (15%)**, a subversion of the classic fairytale where the wolves and the pig become friends. Stories such as **The Forgotten Rabbit (12%)** and **The Very Old Teddy Bear (8%)** were enjoyed for encouraging kindness and compassion alongside showing the harm of bullying and discrimination.

Children were provided with a list of lessons that the programme taught them and could circle the lessons that they felt they had learned. The percentage of circled answers can be seen in Figure 5.

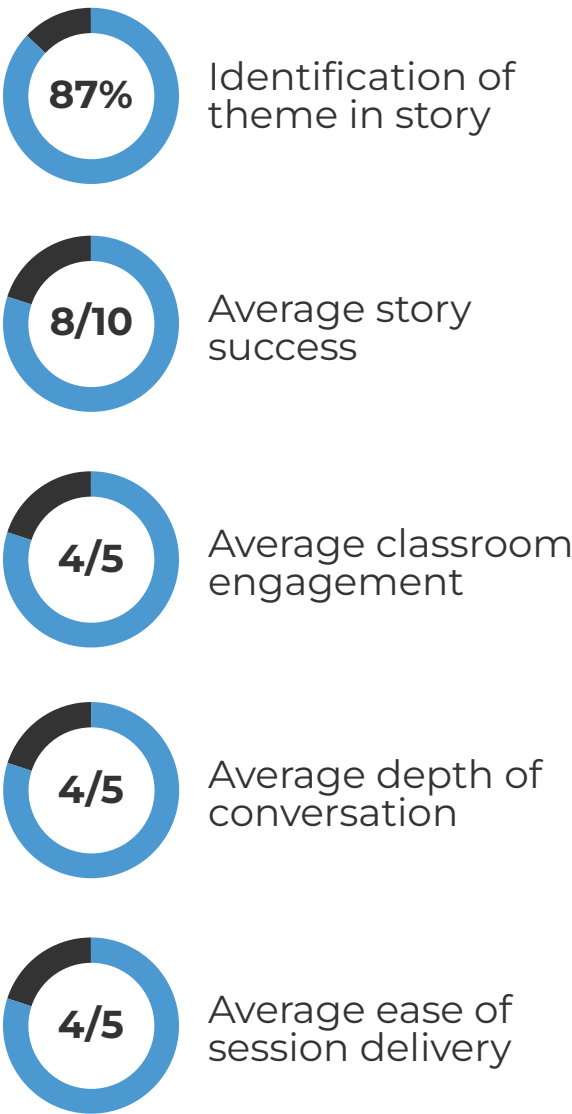


The circled themes reflect the classroom feedback as gratitude, self-love and kindness were popular lessons that the children had learned. Over a third of children learned the importance of help-seeking and talking to others when they are experiencing negative emotions. A quarter of children felt that they had learned how to calm and soothe themselves when they are feeling overwhelmed.

Finally, children were asked how they felt when listening to stories. **42% of children** felt that listening to stories helped them to feel calm, while **39% of children** felt happy when listening to stories.

Results: Teacher Feedback

Each week, teachers were asked to complete an online survey after session delivery. Questions asked teachers to rate the success of the story, the level of engagement, the depth of conversation, the ease of delivering the session, whether the story's key theme was identified, and whether they had any additional comments or feedback on delivering the session. These numbers were averaged to give an overall impression across the weeks and are detailed below:



Comments provided by teachers throughout the programme were collated and organised to identify themes from delivering the programme. These themes are:

Story Enjoyment

“

The children commented on how they loved the pictures, the ending, the adventure element, the fact it spoke about strong friendships.

Teachers shared feedback on children *“really enjoying the stories”* and how they *“absolutely loved”* the story sessions, including how stories *“really made [children] smile!”*.

Teachers described stories as *“lovely”* and *“fantastic”* and valued stories that were *“the perfect length”*, *“very age appropriate”* and were *“very relevant to children in this age group”*.

“

The children said they liked how it started a little sad and ended happy.

Children enjoyed a range of story elements such as finding stories *“so funny”*, enjoying *“the adventure element”* and liking themes such as *“strong friendships”*. Children appreciated stories that had an arc, saying they *“liked how it started a little sad and ended happy”*.

Story Engagement

Teachers commonly provided feedback that children were *“really engaged”* by stories and class discussions. Teachers said that *“children were keen to discuss the story”* and that *“the discussion [the story] elicited was very insightful”*. Examples of classroom discussions include *“the reasons [the Clockwork Mouse] may not have been invited”* and *“what a true friend is”*.

“

There was great discussion around the reasons the mouse may not have been invited.

“

We do like the set up of questions and how it can lead into great discussions due to them being open ended...no 'wrong' answer makes the children feel empowered.

Several teachers praised the psychologically-informed questions used to encourage discussion. These questions were described as “*perfectly pitched and allowed for lots of discussion*” which led to children being able to “*answer all the questions*”. One aspect that was particularly praised was how questions were “*open-ended and [had] no ‘wrong’ answers which makes the children feel empowered*”.

Receiving weekly feedback allowed us to see how children would become more comfortable sharing their voice and opinions as the weeks progressed. Teachers “*found that there were more children willing to answer questions*” as the weeks went on, leaving feedback such as “*all listened carefully and everyone answered*” and “*this time all children made a contribution to the discussion*”.

Several teachers noted that the programme was helping quiet and shy children as “*some of the quieter children took part*” during sessions and “*the quieter children were keen to share their views*”. The programme could also help lower-ability children to “*answer appropriately using very relevant vocabulary which was great to hear*”.

“

Children [are] showing greater ability to answer questions and discuss feelings and emotions with greater accuracy.

“

One child of low ability answered appropriately using very relevant vocabulary which was great to hear.

Relating to Stories

“

A lovely story and even more special as we have someone in our class with a hearing aid so it was lovely to explore this in the story!

Children were generous in sharing their stories and could relate to characters using their own personal experience.

Teachers described how *“children were able to pick up on the theme and then relate this to their own experiences”* and how they *“related to the character... further [extending] this by giving real life*

scenarios”. These experiences include *“something they have personal experiences of (losing a toy, forgetting something)”* and *“the idea of friendship and care”*. Being able to talk about these experiences was helpful to teachers as *“it tied in well with issues we have been dealing with in class”* such as not *“judging a book by its cover”*.

Relating to and empathising with characters in a story helped more diverse students in the class to feel understood and appreciated. The story of Lobot follows Auggie and his journey of receiving hearing aids as he fears he will look like Lobot the Robot. One teacher described how the story was special to their class as *“we have someone in our class with a hearing aid so it was lovely to explore this in the story!”*. The story of Lobot also helped a child on the autistic spectrum to feel that *“it is ok to be different!”*.

“

We had one child who is on the autistic spectrum and spoke to his classroom assistant saying, "It is ok to be different!"

Recognising and Managing Emotions

“

Having friends or people to help with a solution can help so much. Realising that sharing your worries are much more effective than hiding them. This is very useful as in this class there are a few children presenting with anxiety according to parents.

Teacher feedback described a range of ways that the programme helped their class to recognise *“a good range of feelings”* and to manage their emotions. Children appreciated *“the fact the [stories] had sad elements because it is good to talk about sad things”* and allowed them to have classroom discussions on topics such as *“being left out and the feelings associated”*, *“how arguments start over things that cannot be controlled or perceptions that don't exist!”* and *“unhelpful thoughts”*.

“

The children discussed how they manage different emotions, many mentioned [coping] strategies learned previously. Made reference [to a] fizzy juice bottle that will pop if you keep shaking it.

Stories such as The Forgotten Rabbit and Lobot helped children to learn and talk about worry and anxiety. Discussions helped children to recognise physical symptoms of worry such as when you *“can't sleep, can't eat...can't concentrate etc.”*. Stories also helped children to recognise and reflect on *“times they were worried about things that they shouldn't have been”* and *“enjoyed how the child was nervous and worrying and realise[d] he didn't need to be”*, relating back to their own experiences of worry. In these sessions, children *“discussed how we can learn how not to worry in different situations”*.

Children learned and discussed various other lessons on managing their emotions. Children felt that it was important to be *“honest with our feelings and not masking [how we feel]!”*, comparing it to *“a fizzy juice bottle that will pop if you keep shaking it”*. Teachers felt that seeking help from others was a *“solution [that] can help so much...sharing your worries are much more effective than hiding them”*. This teacher appreciated this lesson being stressed as *“there are a few children presenting with anxiety according to parents”*.

Learning About Positive Actions



We concluded with a lovely saying for the children that kindness counts!

Along with learning how to recognise and manage emotions, children enjoyed the prosocial elements of the stories and the power of positive actions.

As mirrored in the child feedback, teachers felt that *“love and kindness and*

how [they] can affect people” were popular topics of discussion. Children liked *“learning how to treat people”* and sharing *“times when they had helped others and others needed their help”*. Children even discussed *“examples about when peers were not kind”* and how it is important to *“[treat] others as you would like to be treated”*. One teacher described how their class *“concluded with a lovely saying for the children that kindness counts!”*.

Other positive actions that children learned and discussed include the importance of friendship and forgiveness. After listening to The Forgotten Rabbit, *“children identified the importance of friendship and how one good turn deserves another”*. The popular story of the Three Little Wolves led to *“many of the children [discussing] the importance of forgiving someone that says sorry and changes”*.



A good story for the children to explore. They were able to discuss how we are all different and how we should celebrate differences.

Topics of diversity and gratitude also emerged as children *“[discussed] how we are all different and how we should celebrate differences”* and how stories *“made them realise that they should appreciate everything they had”*.

Teacher Impressions and Feedback



**It was a fabulous lesson.
Thank you!**

When providing feedback, teachers would share their own experiences delivering the sessions such as *“Another lovely story!”* and described how they *“really enjoyed reading this story to the children...It was a fabulous lesson. Thank you!”*.

An element of the programme that teachers and the children loved was the accompanying story illustrations. Children *“commented on how they loved the pictures”*, with the illustrations *“[helping] to maintain the children’s engagement”* and *“really helped them see the story in their heads”*.

One sentiment that was expressed across the weeks was teachers being impressed by the capabilities of their class. Teachers would describe how *“it was very interesting to see and hear the children’s responses”*. This was linked to children *“demonstrating a high level of emotional awareness”* and providing *“very mature answers”* to questions *“with less prompting”* required as the weeks progressed.



My student teacher took this lesson and she found it a great way to interact with the quieter children in the class.

One teacher was apprehensive and initially *“thought some of the questions were a little difficult”* for their class, yet the children *“answered really well and picked up on the issues explored in the story”*. Another teacher described how their student teacher *“found it a great way to interact with the quieter children in the class”*.

| Discussion

This programme aimed to promote positive wellbeing and to help young children in Northern Ireland recognise, understand and manage difficult emotions. We found that mental wellbeing significantly improved in 43% of children after taking part in the programme, with improvements to wellbeing being highest for the youngest children. We also found that the ability to recognise and manage difficult emotions improved in 43% of children. Improvements were highest for emotional recognition and the ability to manage their emotions. Nearly one in three children felt more empathetic towards others and were less likely to be hurt by unkind words.

Children greatly enjoyed taking part in the programme. 94% of children liked listening to stories, with 60% of children feeling happier after listening to stories. Children particularly liked being able to relax and listen to stories that were supported by on-screen illustrations to capture their attention. When asked what they learned from the programme, children learned lessons such as being kind to yourself and to others, understanding more about their emotions, how to listen to others, and the importance of not discriminating against others. Over 50% of children felt that stories helped them to feel thankful, to believe in themselves, and to care for others in their class.

Feedback from teachers indicated that sessions led to a good depth of conversation with children frequently identifying the key theme of the session. Children particularly enjoyed the narrative arc of the stories and appreciated hearing stories that did not shy away from exploring themes such as sadness, anxiety or loneliness. Including topics of this nature ultimately helped children to recognise, understand and manage their emotions, leading to classroom analogies on the dangers of bottling up emotions. Lessons on help-seeking and anxiety were particularly appreciated by teachers as students in their class were presenting with symptoms of anxiety.

Stories led to engaging conversations that were further supported by the discussion break questions. Teachers felt that these conversations helped shy students to share their voice and were particularly helpful for helping teachers to bond with these students. These discussions also helped neurodivergent children and children with disabilities to feel heard and understood as stories would celebrate differences and discourage discrimination.

These findings in tandem indicate that our programme was effective in its aims of promoting positive wellbeing and helping children to understand and manage their emotions. The success of this programme is important in the current context of poor childhood wellbeing in Northern Ireland and the funding cuts to wellbeing

programmes and services in primary schools (Bunting et al., 2020; Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). Teachers in this project reported how students were already displaying symptoms of anxiety, and this programme could significantly improve wellbeing and taught emotional regulation skills in young children.

We found that improvements in mental wellbeing were highest in the youngest children. This finding is important as early years interventions are described as “critical” in promoting good wellbeing and demonstrate the highest impact across research (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). While Shared Reading is a common early years intervention, these interventions are primarily conducted at home and with the aim of promoting literacy (Grolig, 2020; Leech et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2005). These findings demonstrate that Shared Reading is an enjoyable and effective intervention for improving young children’s mental wellbeing that can be delivered in schools.

Academics across the UK recommend taking a whole-school approach towards teaching about and improving mental wellbeing in schools (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). The Managing Difficult Emotions programme was designed to be delivered by teachers in a classroom environment, supported by both psychologically-informed questions and illustrations to guide discussions and maintain attention respectively. Feedback from teachers suggests that the programme was effective at supporting this whole-school approach. Teachers could forge closer

relationships with their students, teachers learned more about the emotional literacy of their class, and teachers-in-training would deliver sessions as a way to bond with students in the class. The programme also provided the opportunity to discuss and enforce lessons on mental wellbeing, such as the importance of kindness and imagining your mental health like a fizzy bottle “*that will pop if you keep shaking it*”.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that our Managing Difficult Emotions programme is an effective and enjoyable way to improve mental health in young children within schools and to provide them with sustainable skills for managing their emotions and wellbeing.



References

Asher, S. R. & Coie, J. D. (1990). *Peer Rejection in Childhood*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. (2023). Healthy Happy Minds school counselling support programme to end. Retrieved July 3, 2023 from <https://www.bacp.co.uk/news/news-from-bacp/2023/17-march-healthy-happy-minds-school-counselling-support-programme-to-end/>

Bunting, L., McCartan, C., Davidson, G., Grant, A., McBride, O., Mulholland, C., Murphy, J., Schubotz, D., Cameron, J. & Shevlin, M., (2020). *The Mental Health of Children and Parents in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Health & Social Care Board.

Department of Health. (2021). *Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031*. Department of Health.

Detrixhe, J. J. (2010). Souls in jeopardy: Questions and innovations for bibliotherapy with fiction. *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development*, 49(1), 58-72.

Drake, K. L., & Ginsburg, G. S. (2012). Family factors in the development, treatment, and prevention of childhood anxiety disorders. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 15(2), 144–162. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-011-0109-0>

Faupel, A. (2003). *Emotional Literacy: Assessment and Intervention – Primary*. Southampton, UK: NFER Nelson.

Fitzpatrick, C., Loader, R., McCartney, S., McConnell, B., McMullen, J., Murray, C., ... & Simms, V. (2023). The Consequences of the Cuts to Education for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland.

Gray, E., Kiemle, G., Davis, P., & Billington, J. (2016). Making sense of mental health difficulties through live reading: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience of being in a Reader Group. *Arts & Health*, 8(3), 248-261.

Grolig, L. (2020). Shared Storybook Reading and Oral Language Development: A Bioecological Perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01818

Heath, M. A., Sheen, D., Leavy, D., Young, E., & Money, K. (2005). Bibliotherapy: A resource to facilitate emotional healing and growth. *School Psychology International*, 26(5), 563-580.

Jones, R., Everson-Hock, E. S., Papaioannou, D., Guillaume, L., Goyder, E., Chilcott, J., ... & Swann, C. (2011). Factors associated with outcomes for looked-after children and young people: a correlates review of the literature. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 37(5), 613-622.

Leech, K. A., McNally, S., Daly, M., Corriveau, K. H. (2022). Unique effects of book-reading at 9-months on vocabulary development at 36-months: Insights from a nationally representative sample of Irish families. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 58, 242-253

Liddle, I., & Carter, G. F. A. (2015). Emotional and psychological well-being in children: The development and validation of the Stirling Children's Well-being Scale. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 31(2), 174–185

Merikangas, K. R., He, J. P., Burstein, M., Swanson, S. A., Avenevoli, S., Cui, L., Benjet, C., Georgiades, K., & Swendsen, J. (2010). Lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in U.S. adolescents: results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication--Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A). *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 49(10), 980–989.

Roberts, J., Jergens, J. & Burchinal, M. (2005) The role of home literacy practices in preschool children's language and emergent literacy skills. *Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*, 48(2), 345-359.

Shechtman, Z., & Nir-Shfir, R. (2008). The effect of affective bibliotherapy on clients' functioning in group therapy. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 58(1), 103-117.





Thank you

Contact Us



theverbal.co



info@theverbal.co