The Friendship Group Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary of the report of the process evaluation of the implementation of
the Friendship Group in Barnardos during 2008-2009

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Executive Summary

The Friendship Group

In 2008 Barnardos introduced a new group work programme called the Friendship Group. The programme, developed by Dr Karen Bierman, a professor of psychology at Pennsylvania State University (PSU), is a 22-week proven intervention for children aged 6 to 8 years that seeks to:

- Increase positive peer relationships
- Increase emotional understanding
- Increase social problem solving and negotiation
- Increase social interaction and cooperation

Purpose of the Evaluation

The main objective for carrying out this evaluation is to use the learning from our collective experience of implementing the friendship group over the period 2008-2009 to help inform the future implementation of the friendship group in existing and/or new project sites.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was adopted for this evaluation; that is the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data in a single study.

The qualitative aspect to the study included semi-structured interviews with the friendship group coaches, their project managers, regional and national managers, children and their parents. In sum, a total of 55 respondents were interviewed as part of this friendship group programme evaluation.

Quantitative data was collected from the children's teachers and the friendship group coaches assessed changes in the children's target behaviours e.g. shy/withdrawn, aggressive/oppositional and pro-social behaviours before the programme, during and after the programme.

Conclusions

On the whole the experience of running the friendship group during 2008-2009 was a very positive experience for Barnardos staff, participating children and their parents. The variety of staff interviewed for the evaluation commented on the value and importance, for both the organisation and the participating children, of implementing a proven programme with a clear theoretical and conceptual foundation. Rather than finding it limiting, as confidence grew and experience developed many of the staff found the use of the manual to be a very useful and reassuring guide to support their implementation of the programme. However, the implementation of the group was

not a positive experience for one group: they found the experience of delivering the group challenging; they did not use the induction strategies for behaviour management, did not report any real benefits for the children and ultimately felt that group work programmes designed by their project staff were more effective.

The coaching model and some of the induction strategies represented new ways of working, and for the most part they were embraced by staff.   The impact of the programme was reported to be felt beyond the coaches to their wider team as coaches discussed the programme with their colleagues at team and regional meetings and in their day-to-day case management discussions about children and families. Coaches and their managers often reported that the methods and styles of the coaching model were being used by other staff members and they reported that they spoke to each other and to the children in a different way.

The evidence on the outcomes in the area of pro-social behaviour is promising: both the qualitative reports from coaches, parents and the children themselves and the questionnaire data from teachers and coaches show that the children's pro-social behaviour improved over the course of the programme. Typical skills that were developed included an increased capacity to name and talk about their feelings and emotions, greater confidence, sharing with others and cooperative play.

The findings on outcomes in the area of shy/withdrawn and aggressive/oppositional are more ambiguous: the qualitative reports from the staff, parents and children suggests that the programme has benefited children experiencing these difficulties whereas the questionnaire data shows that no real change in either area was affected. The reasons for these differences are difficult to discern but may be the result of the different contexts in which the children were observed e.g. coaches observed and assessed the children's behaviour in the managed setting of the group while teachers observed the behaviour of the children in the school and classroom setting. Furthermore the coaches, for the most part reported that the group dynamic and interaction was quite good and so the children may have been less inclined to act out or display withdrawn behaviour as they felt comfortable with their friendship group friends.

The assessments from the teachers proved difficult to interpret on occasion for two main reasons; firstly there were large amounts of missing data and secondly, at times the data seemed contradictory with increased frequency of negative behaviours sometimes assessed as an improvement. That is not to say that the Social Competence Scale (SCS) should not be used by teachers, in the future, to assess child behaviours but rather it is important that the appropriate teacher i.e. one who

knows the child well complete the questionnaire at the appropriate time and that they give time and attention to completing the questionnaire as best they can.

The questionnaire data from the coaches shows that 21 children (out of 29 child assessments) were assessed as having shown some positive change in their behaviours and attitudes; although eight were assessed as having deteriorated. Three projects assessed that two children from each deteriorated; in one of these projects the coaches' reported a deterioration even though the child dropped out after unit one and in the another project one of the children who was assessed as having deteriorated was identified by both his teacher and the coaches as having experienced an increasingly difficult home life. A further two projects reported that one child in each experienced a deterioration in their behaviour. Six out of the eight children the coaches assessed to have deteriorated were assessed as having shown improvement by their teachers. Just two children were assessed by their teacher to have shown worse behaviour at T_2.

The implementation of the programme during 2008-2009 was not without its challenges either. Training and ongoing support remains challenging: who should provide it, how often should it be provided, what works best and what is sustainable? These questions are discussed further in the conclusions and recommendations section.

The time allocated to the programme has been judged to be greater than for other group work programmes, particularly for staff who have never implemented the group before. The amount of time spent did diminish for some staff as they became more confident and experienced but not for all. Although, it should be noted that the estimated timings for the friendship group implementation included activities that would be undertaken irrespective of group type e.g. collecting and dropping off children, shopping for materials and snacks, record keeping and so on.

Group composition which includes age range, gender mix and the mix of children's needs remains an important and challenging aspect of the programme.

The age range suitable for the group was recommended to the teams but one-fifth of children participating in the groups were outside the recommended age range. While the sample in this evaluation study is too small to correlate outcomes with age, findings from the US study and the programme developer suggest that the programme best matches the needs of children aged between six and eight years.

The criteria for selection of children are those who are experiencing difficulties in their peer relationships as result of being shy/withdrawn or aggressive/oppositional. A

number of projects reported that children with ADHD or ODD attended the group and it should be considered as to whether this type of group is suitable for children with these types of needs.

Coaches were not always fully aware of the range and depth of needs that the children participating in the group had. This was particularly an issue for projects where all the children attending the friendship group were not previously known to project staff. In these instances coaches relied on the SCS to provide them with an initial understanding of the nominated child's friendship difficulties. However, it has become apparent that the SCS did not prove to be sufficient as the only assessment of peer difficulties. Therefore, it would be important if after referral, where the child is not known to the project and before the programme begins that a stage one assessment be completed. The stage one assessment has the capacity to provide specific details on friendship and/or peer difficulties in each of the domains included in the assessment forms and it offers a way of collecting focused and specific peer-related information.

Nine children dropped out of the programme, that's just over one-fifth. Three children dropped out during the programme because of changes in their family circumstances e.g. the family moved from the area, a child was taken into care etc. Four children were reported by their coaches to have left the programme at various stages because they didn't enjoy the group, didn't like it or lost interest in attending. One child was withdrawn from the group after the first session in unit one as result of her behaviour. In the remaining the case the reason for the child's withdrawal from the group was not reported.

Parental involvement has been identified as a gap by most of the staff involved in the programme. The parental aspect of the group is being considered by the SDDT and this would be welcomed by the staff; although parents did express their satisfaction with their existing level of involvement. Staff reported that they thought that the skills gained through friendship group could be consolidated even more if parents were more included in the programme.

In conclusion, the experience of implementing the programme during 2008-2009 was largely positive, and all the experiences described in the proceeding chapters provide good learning for the organisation in terms of what works for the friendship group in the Barnardos context. The evidence of the impact of the programme on the children participating is that positive outcomes in pro-social behaviour were achieved for many of the children attending.

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The following sets out the recommendations arising from this evaluation as they relate to the future implementation of the friendship group.

Recommendations

The future

The need for a programme such as the friendship group exists; the organisation is committed to achieving improved emotional well-being for children attending services and the research shows that positive peer relationships are key to emotional well-being in children. Furthermore, feedback from the coaches, project managers and regional and national managers suggests that there is a need to provide this programme to the children that attend Barnardos services. Finally, positive outcomes were achieved for pro-social behaviour and coaches reported that 21 out 29 children for which assessments were received showed improvements in their presentation and behaviour. It is recommended therefore, that the friendship group be continued in Barnardos during the period 2009-2010. It is further recommended that the experience of implementation and the achievement of outcomes continue to be monitored and assessed to ensure that the programme is meeting the needs of the children who participate.   In order to support these recommendations it is suggested that the:

- Regional meetings are re-established, as over and above the support that is provided through them, they could also be used to reflect on and monitor individual and group experiences of implementation

- SDDF to also review and reflect with individual teams about their implementation experiences during the mid-way and end of programme reviews (see recommendation in section titled **Support**)

- SCS be completed by the teacher who best knows the nominated child. This may mean asking the child's previous teacher to complete the SCS or indeed seeking referrals to the programme earlier in the year

- The outcomes and process data collected via the SCS and the post-unit measures completed by the coaches be done on an ongoing basis. This would provide the organisation, in the absence of any formal experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation, the opportunity to build a bank of data that could be analysed over time to provide further information on outcomes and the correlation of outcomes with specific variables e.g. gender, age, behaviour type etc

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The children

Having a clear understanding of the needs of the children participating in the group before it begins is crucial to ensuring that the friendship group is the appropriate intervention for the nominated children. In order to ensure that the group remains relevant and suits the needs of the children attending Barnardos, the following actions are suggested:

- The referral routes that best suit the circumstances of each project should be used, for some that may mean accepting all new referrals, for some accepting children who are already receiving a Barnardos service and for others a mixture of new and existing service users. Regardless of the referral route however, it is important that project staff can adequately assess each child's need for the programme prior to its start, to ensure the programme can meet their needs. It is likely that this too may minimise the number of children who drop out of the programme over the course of the 22 weeks.

- Where all the referrals are new, it would be advisable for projects to hold back some family support capacity in order to be able to effectively respond to the children attending the group if other needs emerge. These needs may include further direct work e.g. parent-child relationship support, parenting support or support to the child and family in referring to or accessing other services such as health and/or mental health services

- Where all the referrals are new, projects should consider working with the schools to identify appropriate children before the end of the previous school year as teachers who make referrals in September may not know the children well enough to provide an accurate picture of their needs

- Where all the referrals come from the existing service user base it is important that the children continue to be identified on the basis of need and that the friendship group does not became a default programme that is implemented every September

- The capacity of children with significant behavioural needs e.g. ADHD or ODD to participate in the programme should be assessed on a case by case basis. This is important as conditions such as ADHD may be inappropriately diagnosed and children with such a diagnosis may in fact be able to benefit from it. Questions that could inform this decision making process include:
    - Is the group appropriate for their needs?
    - Do the skills presentation strategies best suit the child's behaviour?
    - Do the induction strategies best suit children with this type of behaviour?

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o   What is the likely impact on group dynamics of including children with 'extreme' types of behaviour?

- The suitable age for participation in the group as recommended by the SDDT and the programme developer, and as evidenced by the research findings is 6-8 years, and it is for this reason that it is important that the age band be used to guide the selection process

- The social competence scale is not sufficient to determine suitability for and entry into the programme; a stage one assessment should be completed for each new child as they are referred to the programme in order that their peer relationship difficulties are appropriately assessed

Training

The provision of adequate and comprehensive training is an important factor in the successful implementation of the group. Understanding the conceptual and theoretical framework underpinning the friendship group programme is essential and the training provided thus far by the organisation has supported this. The coaches' assessments show that the children's aggressive/oppositional behaviour did not improve over the course of the programme. Additional training specifically addressing behaviour management should assist the coaches in identifying and managing these types of behaviour during the group and ultimately help to improve this behaviour in the group setting. Less well developed and/or structured to date has been formal opportunities to obtain training to help coaches understand the practical implementation issues. It was originally anticipated that this could be done through the regional meeting structure but since the disbandment of these groups these opportunities have not been available. In order to ensure that coaches feel competent and confident to deliver the friendship programme at all levels it is suggested that:

- Two days introductory training focusing on the theoretical and conceptual framework be continued

- Specific behaviour management training be provided to support coaches in their identification, early intervention and management of aggressive/ oppositional behaviour as dealing with children who have more challenging behaviour requires an enhanced skill base

- Training to support coaches to understand the practical issues associated with implementation be considered. This training would facilitate the teams to review the materials, watch the relevant DVDs and have the opportunity to

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learn and share with each other. This type of training could be delivered through either:

- o The regional meeting structure if one were scheduled before each unit
- o An additional day of training to the whole group of project staff implementing the programme for the first time could be delivered in late August/early September to cover units one and two and a further day provided in early January to cover units three and four

- The DVDs that all projects implementing the group have produced provide an invaluable source for relevant and local experiences of programme delivery and could be used more systematically in formal training events

- Refresher training should be offered to staff at least once per year, perhaps during the summer; if the training for trainers programme currently being discussed with Dr Bierman goes ahead there will be the internal capacity to deliver such training

- Project leaders should attend the two-day introductory training where possible

- Continue with the policy of training two coaches per project plus one further staff member to act as a reserve coach

Support

The friendship group coaches were able to draw on a range of supports to assist them in the implementation of the group: their project manager, the SDDF, their fellow coaches in other projects and their co-coach. The support and advice of fellow coaches was generally sought when coaches had questions about practical aspects of the programme e.g. what kind of materials does a particular activity require, how long did different activities take and so on and the pairing of an experienced team with a less experienced team worked well and should continue. Coaches also relied on their co-coach and watching their DVDs of the sessions together proved a useful way to support and learn from each other, for this reason it would be important that the coaches continue to watch their DVDs regularly together outside of the support and supervision structure offered by their project manager.

The support and advice of the project managers and the SDDF was usually sought in relation to the watching of the DVDs, issues of behaviour management, fidelity, general group management and other practice issues. However, it was not always clear where these roles began and ended and this lack of clarity resulted in uncertainty for some about their roles and responsibilities. In order to ensure that these uncertainties are minimised it is suggested that:

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- The roles and responsibilities of the project manager and the SDDF should be clarified and documented so that the line management role of the project manager and the supportive role of the SDDF do not become blurred

- The project managers watch the DVDs of the friendship group with staff; it may not be possible to watch every one (the optimal) but by watching at least one selected DVD per month the project manager can stay in touch with the coaches' practice and support them as appropriate

Once the regional meetings were stopped on the recommendation of CSMT, the teams had no formal structure for engaging with the SDDF. Therefore it is recommended that:
- The regional meetings be re-instated.   The terms of reference and purpose of these meetings should be agreed and shared with all the participants. An agenda should be prepared and circulated ahead of the meeting
- At least one project manager from the region should attend these regional meetings, but optimally all project leaders should attend. Project managers should brief the Chair of the meeting ahead of time on any particular difficulties or problems that they may be experiencing in their implementation of the group so that the Chair can react appropriately during the meeting, for example, recommend that an item should be discussed outside of the meeting etc

- ADs should be able to attend the regional meetings if they wish

- More experienced coaches (e.g. coaches who have run the group two or more times), in consultation with their line manager, should be able to decide if they attend regional meetings; having clear terms of reference and agreed agenda items in advance of the meetings would help in making this decision for the next round of implementation

During 2008-2009 the SDDF supported seven projects, as more sites begin to implement the friendship group their capacity to support each project individually diminishes and therefore the role of the SDDF will be required to change. In light of this it is suggested that:

- The SDDF offer structured and formal support to new teams implementing the group e.g. a one-to-one visit prior to the programme, mid-way through and at the end of the programme

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- The SDDF should watch one DVD from each unit for coaches' implementing the programme for the first time; these DVDs should be watched in advance of the one-to-one meetings mid-way through and at the end of the programme to facilitate discussion

- For more experienced teams of coaches the SDDF could offer support on a more ad-hoc or reactive basis. For example, the SDDF might meet with such teams once before the programme at the regional meeting and then meet with the team again in a one-to-one at the end of the programme for review and reflection and offer of telephone support if required

It may become important to review the type of support and the capacity of the SDDF to provide individualised support over the period 2009-2010 and beyond. The experience to date has been that although projects' have experience of running the group, individual staff within those projects may not. For example, from the three projects that had run the group during 2008, only one member of staff was available to implement the friendship group in its entirety in those same projects over the period 2008-2009. If this level of staff changes were to be maintained it would be difficult for a single SDDF to offer the kind of support described above.

Implementation

On the whole, implementation of the friendship group went well and was experienced positively by most staff. Some practical challenges that were faced by staff included time management, the physical environment, and planning and preparation. None of these challenges were insurmountable and ultimately did not prove to be limiting factors in delivering the programme. In order to minimise some of these challenges it is suggested that:

- Teams should aim to spend not more than two hours[1] preparing for the group; this may be difficult for teams implementing the group for the first time, but with experience and confidence it is possible to reduce the amount of time needed

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[1] Dr Bierman suggests that preparation should take approximately one hour, however, some of the environments in which the groups take place require significant preparation in order to make them suitable for the group e.g. moving furniture, toys and books etc; also coaches implementing the group for the first time may need to take some additional time to familiarise themselves with the materials, it is likely that this would diminish over time as confidence builds

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- Photocopying and preparation of materials should be done in bulk before the programme begins rather than on a week-by-week basis, if possible teams should try to draw on volunteer or student capacity to get this done

- Teams who are implementing the group for the first time should all start during the same week so as to facilitate regional and peer support mechanisms

- In order to be truly needs led (rather than service focused) more experienced teams should have some flexibility as to when to start the programme

The implementation of the friendship group also meant working in a number of different ways for the coaches, chiefly in the areas of behaviour management and using coaching rather than facilitation skills to deliver the group. Staff identified the importance of understanding the theoretical and conceptual framework as a key component to the successful implementation of the group. This suggests therefore that the staff identified to implement the programme should have the capacity to understand, interpret and reflect on conceptual and theoretical approaches to child development. The current model of delivery in Barnardos is based on both coaches taking equal responsibility for delivering the group, albeit that the coaches do take the lead on specific tasks. In order to ensure that all coaches delivering the group have the necessary skills and attributes Barnardos may wish to consider the following options:

- To specify the baseline qualifications needed to deliver the programme (while recognising that qualifications, in of themselves, may not be an indicator of these attributes)

- To revert to Dr Bierman's original model of programme delivery which used a lead and assistant coach set-up; in this scenario it would be expected that the lead coach be the more experienced and qualified member of staff. This model may offer more flexibility for staff pairing in projects where there may not be a sufficient complement of project workers or similarly qualified staff

Growth and expansion

The friendship group has thus far been implemented in seven projects around the country, in order to expand its implementation further the following circumstances were identified as considerations for future growth and expansion
Staff and teams:
- Stable team

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- Motivated staff who want to learn new skills and are open to new ways of working
- A substitute coach should be trained and available to support the implementation of the group
- Leadership and commitment from the project manager
- Project manager with the ability to manage change
- Capacity and willingness to prioritise all the programme by the coaches and project manager
- Team-wide buy-in
- Staff awareness of the strategic fit of the friendship group
- Training and support

Project conditions:
- The physical space to run the group
- Funding partners who will support or at the very least not resist the use of the programme
- Geographic location may need to be considered in terms of the time spent bringing children to and from the friendship group and in small communities or geographic areas the implications on group dynamics when the children all know each other and have developed deviant group behaviours

Target group:
- Access to children in the appropriate age range
- Access to children whose needs meet the purpose of the programme
- A good relationship with referrers in order to ensure appropriate referrals

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