

Effects of the Zippy's Friends Programme on Children's Coping Abilities During the Transition from Kindergarten to Elementary School

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This article explores the effects of participation during kindergarten in *Zippy's Friends*, a 24-week school-based programme to help young people better cope with everyday adversities, on their adaptation to first grade. The experimental group consisted of 140 children in the first year of primary school who had participated in the *Zippy's Friends* programme the preceding year when they attended a kindergarten in a different school. Results show that, compared to a control group of 106 children, participation in *Zippy's Friends* is related to better adaptation to the transition from kindergarten to first grade. The experimental group was higher in behavioral and emotional adaptation to school, had more positive reactions to the new school environment and used more appropriate and more diversified coping strategies, when compared with the control group. The discussion explores why *Zippy's Friends* may be related to better adaptation to transition from kindergarten to first grade.

KEY WORDS: coping; school transition; evaluation; primary school; kindergarten; mental health promotion; school adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

Children experience many significant changes in their lives including "normative changes," the usual predictable changes at different stages of their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The transition from kindergarten to elementary school is an important event in children's lives (Ladd & Price, 1987; Serve, 1999). The way in which children adapt

to the grade school environment is related to the way they cope with the challenges of this new situation (Skinner & Wellborn, 1997). This article explores the effects of participation during kindergarten in *Zippy's Friends*, a 24-week school-based programme to help children better cope with everyday problems, on their adaptation to the transition from kindergarten to first grade.

Zippy's Friends has taken over seven years to develop and perfect and is now distributed by the non-profit organization *Partnership for Children* (www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk). Over 100,000 children from Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, England, Iceland, Hong Kong, Lithuania, Norway and Poland have participated in *Zippy's Friends* to date. This programme is being offered in Lithuania throughout their kindergarten system with the encouragement of the Lithuanian Ministry of Education.

Several authors view the adaptation of children to their first years of school as a crucial determinant

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of their eventual success or failure in the school environment (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Entwistle & Alexander, 1993, 1998; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Children create an image or “reputation” in their first year of school that tends to be characteristic of their level of school performance in subsequent years (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994). These changes occur at a developmental stage where cognitive changes allow children to be more receptive to external influences and where they can be more affected by those experiences (Entwistle & Alexander, 1993, 1998; Pianta & Cox, 1999). If children do not acquire basic reading and mathematic skills in their first year of primary school, it may be extremely difficult to catch up on these skills later on (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Entwistle & Alexander, 1993).

A successful transition from kindergarten to primary school is often described as existing when the child enjoys school and there is constant improvement of his academic abilities (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Negative adaptation is usually indicated by anxiety, avoiding school, negative attitudes toward school and adaptation difficulties (Elliott, 1995). Furthermore, problems in adapting to grade school are often associated with difficulties in social integration and children who have poor adaptation are more likely to develop mental health and adjustment problems (Goal One Ready School Resource Group, 1995).

Research on adapting to the transition from kindergarten to first grade has emphasized individual factors more than the social context (Entwistle & Alexander, 1998; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). Several studies looked at the maturity of the children in terms of the concept “school-readiness” (Mangione & Speth, 1998; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). Children’s adaptation has been associated with a number of characteristics in the child including their psychological maturity, their temperament, their social skills, intelligence and abilities to learn (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Entwistle & Alexander, 1998; Ladd & Price, 1987; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Programmes to stimulate cognitive abilities early in life, including the much studied *Head Start* programme in the United States, are related to more successful adaptation to grade school (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Bryant, & Clifford, 2000; Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, & Ramey, 2001; Entwistle & Alexander, 1998; Hausken & Rathbun, 2002; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999; Ramey et al., 2000; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Zill, 1999).

External factors also explain why some children have a more successful adaptation to the transition to first grade than others. Some researchers emphasize the continuity between experiences at school and the family (Brizuela & Garcia-Sellers, 1999; Bruns & Fowler, 1999; Mangione & Speth, 1998; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999; Serve, 1999), while others emphasize family characteristics, such as parental education, ethnicity, single parents, and parent’s intelligence (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Brizuela & Garcia-Sellers, 1999; Elliott, 1995; Entwistle & Alexander, 1993, 1998; Hausken & Rathbun, 2002; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999; Skinner, Bryant, Coffman, & Campbell, 1998; Yeom, 1998). Others emphasize school characteristics, including school climate, curriculum, size of class, etc. (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Brizuela & Garcia-Sellers, 1999; Entwistle & Alexander, 1998; Hausken & Rathbun, 2002; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Mangione & Speth, 1998; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Skinner et al., 1998; Yeom, 1998; Zill, 1999). Although the study of these variables may be of great interest, many of the studies examine factors that are not easily modifiable (the ethnicity of parents, parental characteristics, the nature of the school environment and school programmes are not easy to change). Other researchers point to the relationship with peers as an important factor in influencing school adaptation, particularly making new friends and losing friends, social rejection and whether or not there are familiar friends at the new school (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Brizuela & Garcia-Sellers, 1999; Ladd & Price, 1987; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Yeom, 1998).

Regardless of the external factors, it is possible to look at individual differences in adaptation to the change from kindergarten to primary school in terms of the way children cope with difficulties encountered during this potentially stressful process. Coping involves both behaviors and cognitive-emotional strategies one uses to diminish the perceived stress in difficult situations. Children who use more positive coping mechanisms have been found to be more likely to have positive attitudes towards school experiences and greater intrinsic motivation and see themselves as more competent when compared to children who use so-called “negative” coping mechanisms, such as denial, projection and self-blame (Mantzicopoulos, 1997). Children who drop out of school tend to use more avoidance as a coping mechanism; they use fewer coping strategies to resolve their problems and are less likely to seek social

support than children who succeed in school (Gélinas et al., 2000).

In Lithuania, children participate in *Zippy's Friends* in kindergarten, before they are obliged to change schools and enter into the more academic structure of primary school. *Zippy's Friends* has significant short-term effects on children's social skills and coping abilities (Mishara & Ystgaard, 2006). Because of the importance of the transition to the new school environment, it is important to determine if this programme is related to better adaptation to grade school. This study compares the adaptation to grade school of children who have and who have not participated in *Zippy's Friends*.

The Zippy's Friends Programme

Zippy's Friends, is a universal school-based programme for pre-school and first grade children, which has its main focus on training children to cope with everyday adversities and negative life events. It has been shown in research studies conducted in Denmark and Lithuania, to improve children's coping abilities and social skills as well as decreasing problem behaviors of externalizing and hyperactivity (Mishara & Ystgaard, 2006).

Research on coping over the past twenty years, based upon the conceptual framework of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), has demonstrated that the negative effects of stressful life events and problem situations in youth and adults can be moderated by the use of appropriate coping skills (Boekaerts, 1996; Sandler, Braver, & Gensheimer, 2000). The underlying hypothesis in developing *Zippy's Friends* is that if children learn at a young age to expand their repertoire of coping abilities, they will be less likely to develop serious problems in childhood, adolescence and even adult life when they are confronted with the inevitable occurrence of stressful situations.

Segal (1983) cautions that effective public education to improve children's coping responses should not be based on the hypothesis that there are certain ways of coping which are intrinsically better or worse for children in all situations. This caution concurs with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) view that various ways of coping may be more appropriate for different situations and different children. Therefore, *Zippys Friends* aims to provide effective training in coping skills by expanding children's repertoire of coping skills and their abilities to adapt their coping patterns to different situations.

Preventive models based on training single skills have been found to be less effective than multi-modal programmes that integrate problem solving, social skills and emotional understanding (Weissberg & Elias, 1993). Thus *Zippy's Friends* also teaches social and emotional skills such as recognizing and expressing feelings, exercising self-control, self-assertiveness and dealing with conflict situations. Such skills are considered important abilities that facilitate adaptive coping behavior. Furthermore, in accordance with recommendations for effective preventive strategies, transfer of training to real life situations is also a main component of the programme.

Zippy's Friends is taught in Lithuania by kindergarten teachers and involves 24 weekly sessions in which children participate in activities to help them identify their feelings, express themselves and learn how to better cope with common problems they experience. The programme is built around a set of six illustrated stories that concern a group of young children and a pet insect called Zippy. The sessions are divided into six modules, each focusing on a particular theme: (1) understanding feelings, (2) communication, (3) making and breaking relationships, (4) conflict resolution, (5) dealing with change and loss, and (6) general coping skills. Each session has specific goals and includes 2–3 participatory activities.

Zippy's Friends does not tell children what to do, nor does it indicate what is right or wrong. Instead, it encourages children to explore and think for themselves. Furthermore, rather than focusing on helping children to cope individually with their own problems, the programme emphasizes the importance of talking to others, listening, as well as giving and receiving help. Repetition is used to reinforce learning of key elements. Each session begins with a review of what the children learned the previous week and the key messages are reinforced throughout the programme.

Teachers receive 2 days in training on how to conduct the programme and receive supervision during the course of the programme. An evaluation study, comparing participants in the programme with a control group in Lithuania and Denmark, has shown that the programme was successfully implemented with minimal support and that both children and teachers greatly appreciate and enjoy it (Mishara & Ystgaard, 2006). They found that participants used significantly more positive coping strategies and showed significant improvement in Social Skills compared to the control groups. In Lithuania, where

control group scores on these variables were available, the problem behaviors of Externalizing and Hyperactivity decreased.

METHODS

Participants

The experimental group consisted of 140 children (74 girls and 66 boys) in the first year of grade school, who had participated in the *Zippy's Friends* programme the preceding year when they attended a kindergarten in a different school. The control group consisted of 106 children (49 girls and 57 boys) who were in the same classes as the experimental group, but came from kindergartens where the *Zippy's Friends* programme was not offered. The age of the children ranged from 7 to 9-years-old with the majority being age 8 at the time the study was conducted. There were no statistically significant differences in the proportion of boys and girls in the two groups and since the children attended the same primary schools that served fairly homogeneous socio-economic areas, they may be considered to come from similar socio-economic backgrounds.

Procedure

Three months after the beginning of the school year, University Master's level students approached the primary teachers and asked them to fill in the questionnaires, without revealing to the teachers the status of the children in terms of their participation in the experimental or control group, nor the fact that the study's goal was to evaluate *Zippy's Friends*. The study was presented as an investigation of how children adapt to first grade. Parents were given questionnaires that did not have the child's name on them, but only a code that allowed for verification that all questionnaires were received. In four instances the parents did not complete all of the items in the questionnaire. These four cases were not included in the sample.

Measures

Three questionnaires, specifically developed for this study, were used to assess adaptation to the transition to a new school in first grade. The *Behavioral and Emotional Adaptation to the Transition Questionnaire*, independently answered by the child's first grade teacher and a parent, consisted of nine items that were rated on a four or five point Likert scale, depending upon the item, indicating the extent

of positive to negative adaptation to the school environment. Questions explored the child's desire to attend school, his reactions before school and after school, adjustment to school rules and his capacity and success in making friends. Sample items are "Did the child attend school eagerly in the second and third month of the school year?" Internal consistency of the scale was good ($\alpha = 0.79$ for the parents and 0.80 for the teachers). There was a significant correlation between the responses by parents and teachers ($r = .51$; $p < .001$), which suggests that the items have good reliability.

The *Problems Encountered Questionnaire* was independently answered by the child's first grade teacher and a parent. The respondents were asked "(1) Please remember and describe the instances where the child had difficulties, problems or felt bad during the first 3 months of the school year? (2) What did he/she do then, how did he/she try to resolve the problems? (Please describe)."

The *Reactions Observed in the New School Environment* is a 34-item questionnaire using a six point scale ranging from a score of zero when the behavior was never observed, to a score of five when the behavior always occurred. It explores how the child reacted to the new situation, reactions to school routines, rules and failures, reactions to strangers, reactions to peers, etc. It was only rated by teachers. Sample items include "Easily accepts changes and schedules", "Respects the norms of class for behavior." The internal consistency of the scale was good ($\alpha = 0.96$).

Data Analyses

Analyses of variance were used to compare quantitative data on behavioral and emotional adaptation and reactions to the new school environment. Responses to open-ended questions were categorized by research assistants who were not aware of whether or not participants were in the experimental or control group. Content analysis by themes was conducted using the method proposed by Bardin (1996) which involved two steps: (1) systematic classification of data, and (2) grouping data into categories based on meaning. Frequencies of occurrence of these categories in the experimental and control groups were compared using χ^2 analyses.

RESULTS

The experimental group members have significantly higher mean scores on behavioral and

emotional adaptation to school than the control group according to Analysis of Variance ($F = 13.62$, $p < .001$, $df = 1,242$). There was a general main effect of girls adapting better than boys ($F = 15.57$, $p < .001$, $df = 1,242$), but there was no significant relationship between this main effect and the differences between experimental and control groups. Parents rated the adaptation higher than teachers ($F = 6.23$, $p < .05$, $df = 1,242$). There were no significant interactions between the source of the rating, the gender of the child, and the differences between experimental and control groups.

There was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the teacher ratings of reactions to the new school environment, with the experimental group scoring significantly more positively ($\chi^2 = 16.85$, $p < .001$, $df = 1$). There were no significant differences on this measure between boys and girls and no significant interaction between gender and experimental conditions.

Analyses of the categories of problems reported in response to the open ended questions found that there were significantly more problems in social relations and concerning selfishness in the control group than in the experimental group according to both teachers' and parents' ratings (See Table I). According to teachers, the control group had significantly more problems in self-regulation, learning, and discipline. Boys had more problems than girls in self-regulation according to both teachers ($\chi^2 = 14.58$, $p < .001$, $df = 1$) and parents ($\chi^2 = 16.83$, $p < .001$, $df = 1$) and more problems in discipline ($\chi^2 = 11.06$, $p < .01$, $df = 1$) and

concerning selfishness ($\chi^2 = 6.19$, $p < .05$, $df = 1$) according to teachers. According to teachers, girls have more problems in self-esteem than boys ($\chi^2 = 4.30$, $p < .05$, $df = 1$).

When the number of problems listed in response to the open-ended questions was calculated, there was an average of over twice as many problems reported in the control group than in the experimental group ($F = 48.42$, $p < .001$, $df = 1,221$). There were no significant differences between teacher and parent reports or interactions between the source of information (teacher or parent) and experimental conditions. Boys were reported by parents and teachers to have significantly more problems ($F = 16.20$, $p < .001$, $df = 1,221$). Again, there was no interaction between gender and experimental condition.

Methods used to solve the problems were categorized into "appropriate" and "inappropriate." For instance appropriate methods were: apologize, try to solve the problem or ask for help. Inappropriate methods included: refusing to go to school, passivity, etc. Some methods were considered mixed when they included both types (appropriate and inappropriate). When analyzing the adequacy of methods used to solve problems, the experimental group used significantly more appropriate methods, when compared with the control groups (See Table II). Boys and girls did not differ significantly in their use of appropriate and inappropriate methods.

When we examined the number of methods listed in response to open-ended questions on the methods used to solve problems, experimental group members used significantly more different coping strategies

Table I. Presence or Absence of Problem by Group and Respondant

	Group	Teachers			Parents		
		Absent	Present	χ^2 (df=1)	Absent	Present	χ^2 (df=1)
Relations	Exp.	133	7	21.23***	129	11	16.85***
	Cont.	79	27		77	29	
Communication	Exp.	109	31	1.01	109	31	0.01
	Cont.	88	18		82	24	
Self-Regulation	Exp.	116	24	11.20**	122	18	1.21
	Cont.	68	38		87	19	
Learning	Exp.	98	42	4.09*	101	39	2.22
	Cont.	61	45		67	39	
Discipline	Exp.	112	28	6.89**	109	31	2.53
	Cont.	69	37		73	33	
Self-esteem	Exp.	129	11	2.53	128	12	0.75
	Cont.	91	15		100	6	
Selfishness	Exp.	140	0	38.40***	138	2	18.07***
	Cont.	80	26		89	17	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table II. Adequacy of Problem Solving Methods by Group, Sex and Respondant

Group	Teachers				Parents			
	Methods				Methods			
	Appropriate	Inappropriate	Mixed	χ^2 (df=2)	Appropriate	Inappropriate	Mixed	χ^2 (df=2)
Exp.	66 ⁺	5 ⁻	8 ⁻	34.44***	76 ⁺	5 ⁻	9	44.80***
Cont.	28 ⁻	28 ⁺	17 ⁺		28 ⁻	36 ⁺	11	
Sex								
Boys	46	21	16	3.20	52	22	12	0.72
Girls	48	12	9		52	19	8	

+ = Adjusted residual > 1.96; - = Adjusted residual < -1.96.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

when compared to control group members ($F = 48.9, p < .001, df = 1,108$) and there were no differences between boys and girls nor significant differences between the number of problem solving methods reported by teachers and parents.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that participation in *Zippy's Friends* is related to better adaptation to the transition from kindergarten to first grade. The transition from kindergarten to first grade involves not only a change in school structure but, for all the children included in this study, it involved going to a new school where they were integrated into classes which was comprised of mostly children they did not know. This common change of school environment is one of children's first early experiences with adapting to a new situation where they must make new friends and learn how to behave in a different structure away from home. Our results show that negative effects of this transition can be diminished by participation in this programme. Furthermore, these results add to our understanding of the potential benefits of this mental health promotion programme, which focuses upon improving children's coping skills and social abilities.

Previous research (Mishara & Ystgaard, 2006) has indicated that there are improvements following participation in the programme in social skills and coping abilities, when compared to control groups, as shown in research conducted in Denmark and Lithuania. However, their findings did not indicate if these changes have any lasting effects on children's behaviors, and their study could be criticized for using teachers who were aware of whether the children participated or did not participate in the

programme as raters of children's behaviors. The present study of transition to first grade indicates that there are positive consequences for participating in *Zippy's Friends* one year later when children face the challenge of adapting to a new school environment in first grade. Moreover, the teachers who rated experimental and control group children had no knowledge of their participation in *Zippy's Friends* in their former kindergarten school and thus could not be construed as being biased in their ratings. The high level of concurrence between teachers' and parents' ratings, who obviously knew their children participated in *Zippy's Friends* but were not aware that their children's participation was being evaluated, suggests that these findings may be indicative of observable differences in children's everyday behaviors.

How can we understand why *Zippy's Friends* may be related to better adaptation to the transition from kindergarten to first grade? *Zippy's Friends* focuses upon practicing how to cope with different situations and expanding children's repertoire of coping mechanisms. It is based upon the premise that children who have a wider range of coping skills and the ability to assess the advantages of different coping strategies will actually use those skills to deal with real life problems and situations. This supports the coping model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) upon which *Zippy's Friends* is based.

Another way of understanding these effects is to examine the education literature on "school readiness." The US National Centre for Infants, Toddlers and Families (cited in Meisels, 1999, p. 62) defines school readiness as "characteristics that equip children to come to school with knowledge of how to learn. These characteristics include confidence, curiosity, intentionality, self-control, relatedness,

capacity to communicate and cooperativeness." *Zippy's Friends* focuses on developing communication skills and cooperation. The evaluation by Mishara and Ystgaard (2006) indicates that the programme did improve social skills and the use of positive coping mechanisms. Serve (1999) felt that some of the best ways to facilitate the transition to a new school are to encourage children to talk about their concerns and fears and to read stories to children that discuss changes and moves. *Zippy's Friends* is based upon stories that concern changes, losses and new beginnings and the exercises involved in this programme include practice in learning how to express oneself to other children and adults.

It is not surprising that we found that boys generally experience more difficulties adapting to first grade than girls. Hausken and Rathbun (2002) found that boys were 13% more likely than girls to complain about school and boys were 24% more likely to be upset or reluctant to go to school than girls. However, boys and girls both appear to have benefited from *Zippy's Friends* according to the results of this study. This concurs with the previous evaluation (Mishara & Ystgaard, 2006) that found that there were no significant differences in the extent of the improvement in boys and girls on coping and social skills.

One of the major weaknesses of this study is the fact that the measures of improvement were based upon questionnaires specifically developed for this study that, although having high internal consistency, have not been validated on large samples. One must rely upon the face validity of these measures. It is important to confirm these findings with larger samples and instruments that are better validated.

CONCLUSION

This study supports recommendations that children should be better prepared to face transitions from kindergarten to first grade. Ladd and Price (1987, p. 1187) felt that "preventive efforts should take the form of preparing preschoolers for the challenge or demands of kindergarten" and "that the temporal focus of preventive programming should be both prior to and during the transition period." Our findings indicate that a programme prior to the transition period has significant positive effects. It would be interesting to determine if programmes during the transition also have significant effects. Furthermore, it would be interesting for future research to determine if *Zippy's Friends* has other significant effects on the adaptation of children to

different situations outside of the school environment, as well as to determine how long these effects may be sustained without further interventions. Overall, the programme appears to have positive results that could contribute to the transition process for children entering grade school.

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