

# Evaluation of the Changing Families Project in schools in Plymouth



## Background

The project is a twelve week intervention for young people who have experienced family re-organisation. It was started in Devon 12 years ago by Nina Wroe as a result of a BBC Panorama programme '*For the Sake of the Children*'. This programme focused on the research of John Tripp, Consultant Paediatrician at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital and Monica Cockett, Research Fellow, University of Exeter, *Exeter Family Study 1994*. Their work looked at the impact of family reorganisation upon the children, looking at social development, educational achievement and health issues. It was the inspiration behind the project, which also draws upon the work of the late Professor Neil Kalter and the recent developmental work in educational achievement.

The project has been operating in schools in Torbay, Devon and more recently, Plymouth. It has been funded by Devon County Council, Torbay Children's Fund, Plymouth Children's Fund and Plymouth City Council.

The success of the project is evaluated after each programme of sessions, which last for 12 weeks. This evaluation is an in depth retrospective review of the project from the point of view of young people taking part, peer mentors, education professionals and parents.

## The project in schools

The project is a structured programme lasting twelve weeks based round the creation of a fictional family going through separation, custody, new partners and remarriage. Role play is central to working through the story, with the children as participants and drawing from experience. Dramatic distancing is particularly effective in allowing youngsters to explore a full range of issues that tend to be withheld in other therapies. The programme, based on Kalter's work is very effective in mitigating negative effects of family re-organisation, but is also respectful of the individual and the family's privacy. The project also makes use of extra curricular activities which help with team building and social interaction. Yoga breathing and relaxation techniques are useful tools which the children are taught. Visualisation and techniques drawn from cognitive behaviour therapy are also used when appropriate.

The project has developed in recent years by training 6th form mentors who have experienced family re-organisation to work with primary school pupils, under supervision of Changing Family Project workers.



been able to comment on that. It was significant that not one respondent felt happy for teaching staff to deliver the project with one thinking that it would be OK to have a trained teaching assistant.

*If you do it with teachers they will know more about you and then in class you will feel insecure, they will learn stuff about you that you didn't want them to know.*

*I felt more confident with someone I was not going to see again.*

*I feel more connected with someone from outside, where you can relax with them; with a teacher you feel you are in a lesson.*

*It was fun with the mentors; I wouldn't want to share my personal details with teachers.*

*They are older children like us who understand us better and they might have been through the same experience.*



*We were sad when Dad left*

### **Thoughts about the project**

In the next section of the interview, pupils were asked to think about the project and rate their responses to a statement. They were given the choice to agree very much, a bit or not at all. There was no insistence that they give an answer, and some children chose not to, or did not feel able to express themselves. The initial statements were about the pupils relationships with others and their understanding of the situation.

The project helps me to understand what has happened to me  
62% of replies were very much with 29% a bit.

*I knew what was going on, but it helped me sort some stuff out, when I didn't know what to do.*

*Now I know that my parents weren't rowing about me I feel more comfortable about it.*

*It helps you get your feelings out and shows you are not the only person going through it.*

*It happened when I was six, but the project has helped me deal with it more.*

The project helps me understand my family more

This statement was agreed with by 55% very much and 37% at bit, with 7% not at all.

*It has made me understand why certain things happened.*

*We all have different families.*

*It's really helped at home, because I used to have loads of arguments with my Mum, but now I understand.*

It has helped me talk to my parents about what happened.

40% agreed very strongly, with 30% a bit and 21% not at all. 7 children said the statement was not applicable or did not answer. In some cases parents had split up before they were born, or one partner had never been part of the child's family.

*My parents split up when I was a baby, and before I did Changing Families Project I wanted them to be back together. The role play helped me to understand that my Mum and Dad are both happy and it would be worse if they were together because they would always be arguing.*

*I don't talk to my Mum about it, because she doesn't really help me with it, so it was nice to talk to you.*

It has helped me to talk to other relatives about what happened.

40% agreed strongly, 24% at bit and 22% not at all. In some cases children were not in regular contact with extended family.

*Now I can talk to my family about the situation.*

*I was able to talk to my brothers and sisters more.*

It has helped me to talk to my friends about what happened.

54 % agreed strongly, 15% a bit with a quarter of the respondents feeling that it had not helped at all. Many children were very guarded about talking about family issues to their peers.

*It depends which friends it is.*

*Only within the group.*

*I couldn't share it with them, but now I do.*

It has helped me to talk to the project workers about what happened.

82% agreed strongly with this statement, with 12 agreeing a bit and 2% not at all.

*You can talk about it more to them.*

*We would get to know them and it's easier for us to discuss things with them*

*Most of it, yes but didn't want to tell them everything.*

*I could trust them, I felt really close to them.*

I feel closer to the group members than I did before the project

Team building exercises always form part of the programme and the group usually form quite a close bond during the term. This was borne out by the results. 74% agreed strongly, 19% a bit and only 4% not at all with a further 4% not answering.

*I am a lot closer to the group now, I thought it was only me in the class who was going through it but it was more than one person.*

*I wasn't really friends with them, but now I get along really well.*

*We all talked about things and made friends.*

*It helps you interact with people who are doing it. It teaches you new skills, working in a team, patience and co-operating with others.*

The following questions explored the pupils well-being and self esteem while doing the project and following the course.

I feel less stressed when I have attended the project

The inclusion of yoga breathing and relaxation techniques was reflected in the high level of agreement with this statement. Only 4% of those questioned did not agree. Also the feeling of not being the only person who was undergoing family re-organisation was recognised.

*I used to get quite upset and stressed about Dad moving away but now I'm fine.*

*Most of the time I used to feel stressed and stroppy but now I am OK. They made you calm down when you were worked up.*

*The breathing was really helpful and I do it when my Mum shouts at me I do the breathing, instead of shouting back.*

*It helped me because I was able to talk to someone about what had happened and I found out that other people were going through the same as me. I felt alone.*

*We did lot of exercises to make us calm, I sometimes still do them, especially the whale breathing.*

*Yes, because I didn't realise how many other people were in the same situation as me and its just raised my awareness.*

I find it easier to cope in school since doing the project.

87% of pupils agreed with this statement.

*I found it easier to cope, I was really upset and started crying and teachers came and helped me, now I am fine.*

*I don't get as angry as I used to. I used to get really wound up, but I don't anymore.*

*I get into less trouble at school now.*

*I thought my parents were arguing because of me, because my behaviour in school was really bad and after I did the course I behaved a lot better and now I get no detentions. My school work has improved too.*

I look forward to project days.

Only 1 respondent did not agree with this statement.

*It was fun.*

*It was good to be in a group with people whose parents aren't together.*

*I would recommend it.*

*I wish I could do it all the time. It should be in all schools.*

I feel better about myself now I have done the project

98% of pupils agreed with this with 80% strongly agreeing. Many children felt that only they felt this way about the family situation, and they often kept their circumstances hidden from friends.

*I feel better about myself because when I was crying people would look at me and laugh at me but now I don't.*

*At first I thought I was the only one.*

*Sometimes I felt it was my fault and now I know it isn't.*

*It also helped me think about how it affects other people and not just my own problems because I felt I was the only one and then I went to Changing Families.*

*I feel confident and happy with myself that I have managed to get through it.*

Doing the project helped me with the transfer to secondary school

Many pupils were unable to answer this question because they were already in secondary school, or they were not due to transfer till later. However of those who did 38% found it helpful, and only 1 did not. One pupil interviewed at secondary school would have preferred to have done the project later.

*Yes because now I can tell anybody about it if they asked.*

*Now I have done this I will be able to concentrate on other things, instead of my family problems.*

*I had a lot on my mind then. I would rather have done it at secondary school, because then you are older and can cope with it.*

The project usually finishes with the production of a magazine which contains the story that the pupils have made up about the fictional family. Their artwork and letters and top tips also go into it. Sometimes the pupils put on a drama production based on their story, and on one occasion they made a DVD. Questions were included about the magazine as this is the most common.

I am proud that our story/magazine can help young people.

83% agreed strongly with this statement with a further 11% a bit.

*I was very proud, because when you read it all it sounds really good and its amazing that children of 10 have done it.*

*All our work went into it and it is pretty good.*

*It was nice to see my ideas go into the magazine and you made it into a story and it would really help other people.*

*I've got a younger sister and I read it to her so that she wouldn't get upset.*

I understand other people who have been through family change better now.

94% were in agreement with this.

*I thought I was the only kid that this happened to and now I understand that other people have gone through it I feel better.*

*It helps you meet other people that have gone through the same thing as you and it helps you realise you are not the only one in the world that has gone through that stuff.*

I think that the magazine will help adults understand children who have been through family changes.

81% agreed, only 1 did not agree and 5 did not answer.

*I think the magazine helps adults understand what children are going through. I didn't want to tell my Mum because she would get upset.*

*Adults have more of an idea of what's going through our heads.*

*Adults can now realise how painful and stressful it is for children.*

I think the magazine has helped my family understand how it feels for young people to go through family change.

6 out of 10 pupils agreed with this statement, but some were not able to answer.

*My Mum and Dad sat down and read it and thought they had got to pay more attention and think about how we feel.*

*I showed it my Dad and he understood what was happening to me.*

*Since doing it I speak to my Mum about it much more.*

Some of the pupils who did a DVD drama also talked positively about it.

*The DVD helped my parents to know what I was feeling.*

*I think it would help adults quite a lot, because if the children don't want to talk to the family about it they can know what is happening through the DVD.*

The magazine has helped me talk to my parents about our family.

Over half the respondents agreed with this statement. 6% did not agree and 40% were not able to answer - this was because they were not in touch with both parents, or the father had never been part of the family.

*I was able to talk to my Mum and we have become a lot closer.*

*Since doing it I speak to my Mum about it much more.*

Many respondents also wanted to recommend the course to other children.

*I would advise someone to do it if they are struggling at school; it helps to put things into perspective.*

*I would recommend Changing Families because it only helps you with your life, but it's also fun at the same time.*

*I would recommend it because it will help children understand what's happening and how to cope in situations.*

*It helps you calm down and makes everything better.*

*It was good to be in a group whose parents are not together.*

## **Mentors**

Interviews were also conducted with sixthformers who were trained and then went on to work with pupils in primary schools. Most, but not all of these pupils had experience of family re-organisation. Some pupils, who wanted to work with children were able to undertake the training and working with others who had experience of family breakdown, deliver the project. Mentors were at all times supervised by a Changing Families Project Worker. The questionnaire was different for each group.

## **Educational Professionals**

Interviews were conducted with the staff member responsible for the Project in each school. The professional varied from Headteacher, Deputy Head, Senco, Parent Support Advisor and Head of Pastoral Care. It was not possible to get statistical information regarding the effects of the course on students, so a series of broad based questions was put to the staff.

### 1 What value has Changing Families Project brought to the school?

All the professionals felt that the project brought value to their schools.

*It's given us another resource to use because every year there will be a group of children who are affected by family breakdown.*

*There isn't anything else that's tailor-made for children where the structure of the family has changed.*

*It's been an invaluable part of the school's life for the past four years.*

*It's given the school the help and support that young people need.*

Comments were also made on the positive effect that the project has on individuals taking part.

*Its impact on the students that have done it has been huge...it's hard to evaluate scientifically, but I certainly know some individuals who have been changed, who seem more settled, more stable and happier in themselves.*

*It is so valuable, I didn't understand it at first, but the more I learn it's one of those potentially life-changing things.*

*Family conflict has been a massive change in their lives and the project provides an opportunity to cope with the things they have to deal with day by day or in their past.*

*The students that have done it have a real lift. I've checked their records, and there is not one of them who is showing any difficulty at college. They are making a good effort, their attendance is good.*

*Children benefit from something like this to get themselves sorted and enable them to learn.*

## 2 How does Changing Families fit into the curriculum?

The project fitted into primary schools under the the Personal Social and Health Education, Relationships title.

*It fits into our PHSE curriculum and we are trying to do PHSE activities every day throughout the curriculum as it crops up and it supports our Every Child Matters agenda.*

Primary schools valued the help the project gave to pupils to the extent that they allowed it to take priority over core subjects for a short while.

*It is special and we value it by knocking out the curriculum for those children for 12 weeks. We found it difficult, because of them missing literacy and numeracy .... but after explaining it to the teachers some of them were able to say that for a child to learn, they need to have this bit sorted and if this project helps then they can do it.*

Secondary schools who were doing the SEAL strategy (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) found it most helpful.

*It is kept separate from the main curriculum partly for confidentiality reasons but it is totally consistent with all the things that we try to do with social skills, emotional intelligence and all those pro-active things you try to do. In a school like ours there is a huge need there, so it's totally consistent with our mainstream aims. To be able to cope with some of the issues they are dealing with has helped them to integrate and reapply to the curriculum overall.*

*It fits into the citizenship programme which we use for the development of young people. It's a big part of our sixth form volunteering project now.*

There was also recognition that for some pupils who were struggling at school, the project helped them to apply themselves, having sorted out their emotional difficulties

*It supported students to reintegrate into their curriculum. I think that family conflict and family break up is an unrespected area of a student's life where the confusions in their lives has affected their application to the curriculum.*

3 What additional benefits does it bring to pupils who go on to train and become mentors?

Benefits to mentors included self confidence, new skills learned and volunteering experience.

*It gives them an understanding of themselves. It gives them a definite self-confidence to work with other students; they have the tools to offer to other students and their own self confidence has been strengthened.*

*That's massive... and the idea that they can turn their negative experience into a huge positive for other people you can see the pride and satisfaction there.*

Recognition of the value of using mentors is noted in Primary schools.

*There is something about the way Changing Families works and anything that involved Peer Tutoring ... I think they hear better from people who have been through it.*

4. Does the school mention Changing Families in the Ofsted Inspection?

All professionals interviewed noted the importance of the project and included it in the Self Evaluation Form completed prior to Ofsted Inspections.

*It helps to show that we have the pastoral needs of our children at the forefront and in the Every Child Matters agenda.*

5. Would you recommend Changing Families to other schools?

There was universal endorsement of this.

*I would recommend it as a valuable necessary resource for all schools, because we all have children who inside are suffering and damaged by marital or relationship breakdown. Its been great to have Changing Families in the School.*

*We would like to have Changing Families as part of the school for ever. They are worth every penny.*

*All schools need this and they need more of it. It does so much for the kids.*

There was also acknowledgement of the uniqueness of the project.

*Definitely. There isn't anything else to provide for these children.*

6. Other Comments

The importance of group work was stressed by several professionals.

*When the children meet the others in the group and discover there are other children just like them it actually makes them feel great. They suddenly realise they are not the only one in the school.*

*Anything that gives children group work and give them skills to manage to cope is really important and anything that is done through the arts is even better.*

*They certainly bonded and made a friendship group that I would hope has gone out to the playground and the classroom.*

*You can see they are definitely more confident. They have a bond within the group and from that point of view it raises their self esteem.*

They also noted other benefits to individuals who have taken part.

*There are some astounding results with the self esteem work which is part of this project.*

*It's something they can put into their cvs. It gives a lot to a young person, the listening skills, having to work in maybe challenging circumstances or an upsetting time. It's really beneficial to them.*

### *Appendix*

Schools taking part in the survey:

Notre Dame Roman Catholic School  
Lipson Community College  
Tamarside Community College  
West Park Primary  
Chaucer Way Primary  
St Paul's Primary  
Victoria Road Primary  
College Road Primary  
Drake Primary  
Oakwood Primary  
Beechwood Primar