

Title Falkirk Educational Psychology Service

Improving health and wellbeing for children and young people who have experienced loss, change and bereavement.

What did we ask?

Is there an improvement in aspects of health and wellbeing as demonstrated by the Health and Wellbeing Scales, after the intervention of the Seasons for Growth programme for children and young people who have experienced loss, change or bereavement?

What impact has attending the group had for the children/young people in terms of home/school/playground?

How can loss, change and bereavement be supported at a systemic level within authorities at times of transition and longitudinally?

How can the research findings inform local authority policy?

What is the evidence base?

Dyregrov (2004) highlights that many children and young people are affected by loss and trauma. School performance may deteriorate, particularly in subjects that require high attentional demand (Streeck-Fischer & van der Kolk, 2000; Yule and Gold (1993)). A study of children and young people showed that around one in five of the classmates who experienced a student's sudden death in an accident experienced a high level of distress nine months following the loss (Dyregrov, Gjestad, Bie Wikander and Vigerust, 1999). Vaswani (2014) found that 91 per cent of a sample of young men sentenced to a Scottish young offender's institution had experienced bereavement and the rates of traumatic and multiple deaths were high. A higher level of post-traumatic stress and lower school performance are associated with a perception of lack of support from parents, classmates and teachers. Dyregrov (2004) recommends having clear procedures for helping children and young people with the psycho social consequences following trauma and loss and the educational challenges that such an event presents. He emphasises that educational strategies and programmes that assist

children and young people must be developed. Riley (2012) highlights that there is much evidence to support the use of educational peer support programmes within school settings (Barnard et al., 1999; Ribbens-McCarthy, 2007; Ross & Hayes 2004; Worden, 1996). These programmes provide an effective model of intervention by offering peer support in a safe familiar context with a group leader to explore young people's feelings in relation to grief. Riley critically evaluated the impact of the Seasons for Growth programme devised by Graham (1996) and found evidence that the intervention was well received and valued by participants. Newell and Moss (2011) conducted research across 334 children in 57 Seasons for Growth groups spread internationally, including Scotland, and found positive gains.

What did we do?

Pre- and post-test tools were devised by the researchers to measure the impact of the intervention of attending a Seasons for Growth group for young people who had experienced loss, change or bereavement. The tools corresponded with the Curriculum for Excellence health and wellbeing targets and consultation took place with class teachers to ensure they were relevant. Pupil, class teacher and parent questionnaires were devised. There were 75 pupil participants, 35 parent participants and 64 teacher participants in total from Inverclyde, Falkirk, West Dunbartonshire and Highland with full pre and post measures. Group size varied between 6-8 participants. Focus groups were conducted to explore impact in terms of classroom, playground and home experiences. Focus groups were conducted with children, parents/carers and Companions to explore how the programme was able to support children's health and wellbeing. Parents/carers were asked whether they felt their child's attendance at the group had any impact on relationships within the home and in what way. The focus groups were also asked how the programme helped children's learning at home and in school. They were also asked what else they would have found helpful in supporting the children during the group.

What have we found so far?

Paired sample t-tests were conducted: for pupil data with pre- and post-measures for 75 participants ($t(74) = -8.224, p < 0.001$); for parent data with pre- and post-measures for 35 participants ($t(34) = -6.774, p$

<0.001); and for teacher data with pre and post measures for 64 participants ($t(63) = -10.832, p < 0.001$) and all were found to be highly significant.

From the questionnaires, parents/carers, pupils and teachers indicated that gains were made in relation to: naming feelings when change happens; talking about their feelings; understanding how their feelings can impact on their behaviour; choosing how they behave when they feel angry or sad; managing their feelings; talking to people who can help them; and making good choices. Teachers also reported that the young people were able to concentrate more on their learning.

Focus groups indicated that there was an increased sense of belonging and connectedness as reflected in their relationships with their peers and companions in school. There was an acknowledgement of “recognition,” that is the power of listening to the young people, their ability to problem solve and adopt appropriate strategies. There were also benefits in terms of ‘normalisation’ for instance sharing, listening to others’ stories, realising that they were not alone and making connections. They valued having permission to talk about their story, feelings and ways of coping. The young people highlighted increased emotional literacy in terms of naming and understanding their feelings and dealing with them and learning from each other different ways to behave. They reported that participating in the group impacted positively on their concentration, confidence and relationships. They also described participating as fun and they felt that it should be offered universally in school and not as a targeted intervention. Focus groups with the Companions highlighted an increase in pupils opening up more, becoming more confident, and helping parents/carers and young people talk together. Parental comments included: “my child can identify and talk to people;” “I feel my child is able to deal with change now and all the loss that has happened – we just say change happens.” They also mentioned the opportunity to build trust with other children and adults. Parents/carers also commented that their children were less angry, a lot calmer and happier at home. They commented that they were making

more effort with homework, concentrating more and able to think more about making choices. Parents were keen to find out more about the Seasons for Growth adult programme. Companion focus groups highlighted improvements in the children's confidence, ability to focus and relationships in the classroom. In the playground, it was reported that there was a decrease in anger and emotional outbursts and an increase in settled behaviour and alternative strategies. It was also reported that pupils could verbalise the different choices they could make in the playground and were more confident in being able to share feelings without fear of being judged. Companions reported an increase in empathy for the children. Companions also reported that the Seasons for Growth training helped them prepare to run a group. The importance of time for planning and debriefing was emphasised. The support of a head teacher was critical as was the network of support from other trained Companions and trainers. It also helped knowing that Seasons for Growth has a strong evidence-base and is an effective programme.

What do we plan to do next?

While many schools across Scotland run Seasons for Growth groups, the programme in West Dunbartonshire is a particular example of good practice. It is led strategically, is well embedded in primary and secondary schools, and is delivered in other settings. This was viewed as a model of outstanding and sustainable practice by the Care Inspectorate. The Care Inspectorate recognised the significant impact on the wellbeing of children and young people who participated in a Seasons group. There has also been dedicated funding to Seasons for the past ten years, and this has been a key factor in developing an authority-wide, sustainable model of service delivery. The funding enables those in need to have journals free of charge for all groups. It also employs a small time allocation from a senior educational psychologist to train and support Companions, maintain fidelity to the programme, and chair an action group which oversees ongoing development. In addition, the Care Inspectorate identified the support of strategic leaders through the mental health and wellbeing strategy group as critical factors in the success. The Care Inspectorate report

expressed the view that further research into the impact of Seasons on raising attainment was merited, as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Another example of good practice at an authority level is that Highland Educational Psychology Service are working with a transitions co-ordinator on a project evaluating the impact of Seasons for Growth to support transition. Capacity is being built by having the transitions coordinator train as a Seasons for Growth Trainer. The transitions coordinator has spoken at the Northern Alliance conference about Seasons for Growth and transitions. The Educational Psychology Service in Highland also lead an authority working group looking at change, loss and bereavement and the outcomes from this group are to be put in the ASN Improvement Plan. The group is a multiagency group with representatives from the third sector, social work and education. The group have also developed training to raise awareness of the impact of loss, change, and bereavement for probationer teachers, and there are plans to deliver to different agencies and senior managers. Inverclyde will continue with their programme of evaluation in relation to the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Seasons for Growth Scotland will support Seasons for Growth Australia with the development of their international evaluation. Inverclyde Educational Psychology Service have uploaded their Health and Wellbeing Scales to their website (<https://www.inverclyde.gov.uk/education-and-learning/inverclyde-educational-psychology-service>). Findings will be disseminated at the Seasons for Growth Scotland conference 2018. All the services involved will explore longer term tracking and monitoring of the impact on outcomes for children and young people. It is hoped that this research will be used to help local authorities and schools to explore the benefits to running Seasons for Growth groups and explore ways to embed the running of groups in schools, provide training and re-connectors for supporting staff and their partners in our schools and local authorities. It is hoped that it will help local authorities develop clear procedures for helping children and young people following adverse childhood experiences such as trauma, loss, change and bereavement.

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