

Programme Evaluation: Implementing the Incredible the Incredible Beginnings® Programme in Powys

Introduction

This brief paper presents an evaluation of the Incredible Beginnings® programme in Powys.

The Incredible Beginnings® programme was introduced as a new element to the very well established Incredible Years® (IY) strategy in Powys for delivery of evidence based programmes parents teachers and children. This involves delivery of a range of IY parenting programmes for parents of babies, toddlers and primary aged children alongside a specialist IY parent programme for parents of children with Autism. In addition most primary schools in Powys have staff trained in the IY Teacher Classroom Management programme and the IY Classroom Dina programme and a rolling programme of training takes place every year. There is a strong Incredible Years training and supervision structure.

The Incredible Beginnings® programme is aimed at staff working with children aged 1-5 years, prior to entering school. This programme uses the same collaborative methods and processes as the IY Teacher Classroom Management Programme and aims to provide staff with the skills to promote social, emotional and academic competence. The foundation of the programme focuses on the building of positive relationships with children using sensitive and responsive approaches. Staff go on to learn about the importance of nurturing child directed play interactions, social and emotion coaching skills as well as proactive teaching and positive behaviour management strategies. The programme tailors the methods used according to each child's developmental abilities, for example, through the use of visual prompts, body language, gestures and songs, imitation and repetition.

Programme Delivery

Since its introduction in 2017 three Incredible Beginnings® courses have been delivered to 31 childcare workers from 14 different childcare settings across Powys.

The programme has been delivered by Dr Sue Evans, Consultant Child Psychologist, an Incredible Years® trainer. Anne Breese, an Incredible Years® mentor in the Classroom Dina programme and peer coach in the parenting programmes, and Emma Peace (Community Advisory Teacher, Flying Start Lead).

The Incredible Beginnings® six-day training programme is typically delivered a day a month over 6 months, however childcare providers in Powys requested the programme be delivered in shorter sessions to work around staffing. Therefore, it was agreed that the programme would be delivered in 12 half day sessions over several months.

Outcomes

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, staff attending the training were asked to choose a child anonymously who was showing a high level of need in terms of the development of social and emotional skills and to complete a Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) measures prior to the course starting and after its completion.

In addition staff completed weekly evaluations of the course and a final evaluation questionnaire- Incredible Beginnings® Programme Workshop Satisfaction Questionnaire.

The SDQ was used to capture change in the child as perceived by the childcare worker and the programme evaluation questionnaire was used as a measure of staff's perception of the effectiveness of the programme.

In addition to these measures, staff who completed the programme were invited to attend a focus group, which explored their perceptions of the Incredible Beginnings® programme.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

The SDQ is a valid and reliable emotional and behavioural screening tool for children aged 2-17 years. The measure was completed by the childcare workers and scored based on a child of their choice within their early years setting. The measure provides five different scores across various subscales including emotional problems, hyperactivity, conduct problems, peer problems and prosocial behaviour. An overall "total difficulties" score is computed comprising the four problem scales; emotional problems, hyperactivity, conduct problems and peer problems. These scores are then categorised and compared against normative data.

Of the staff that completed both pre and post measures (n=21), there was a reduction in the total difficulties score and this reduction was significant using a paired samples t test, see Figure 1.

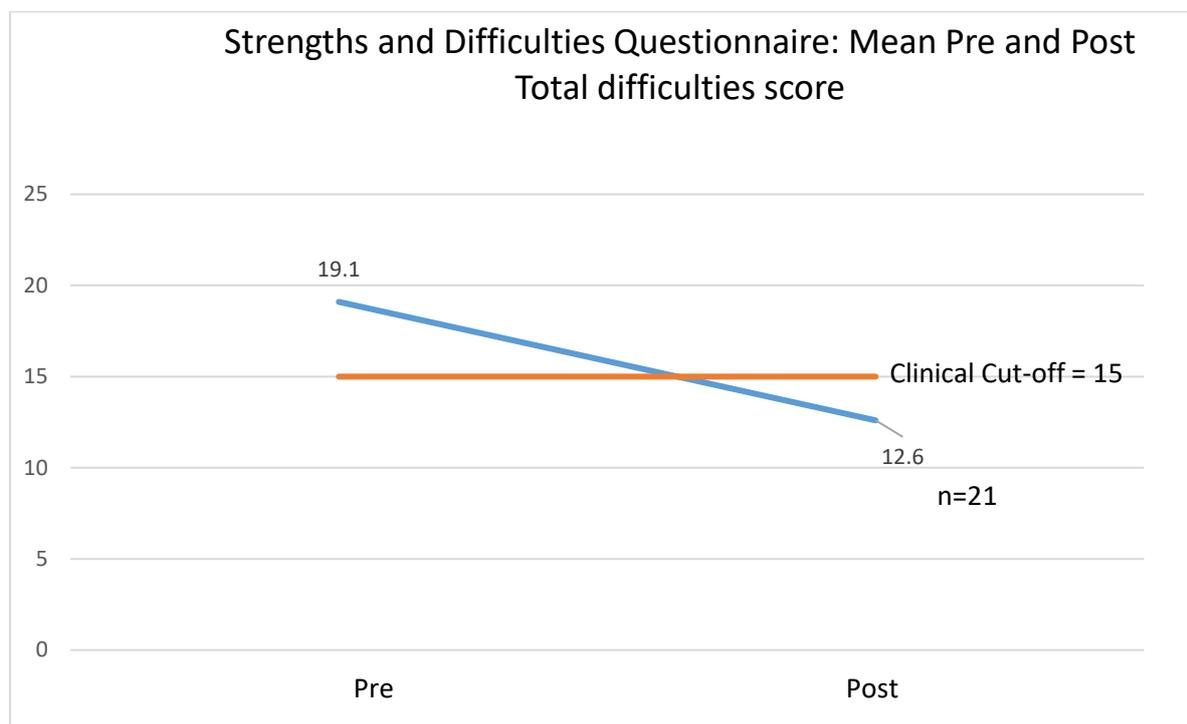


Figure 1. A line graph showing pre and post mean total difficulties score on the strengths and difficulties questionnaire.

Furthermore, there was a reduction in the percentage of scores in the clinical range (scoring 15 and above on the total difficulties scale) from 86% to 0%. This means that the majority of children were scoring in the clinical range at the start of the course and all moved to scoring within normal limits by the end of the course.

Prior to the course, the average total difficulties scores was within the clinical range, this decreased to outside the clinical range following the course. The overall reduction in scores on the SDQ gives some evidence that attending the Incredible Beginnings® programme helps to improve emotional and behavioural difficulties in children, as reported by childcare settings workers.

Looking at the subscale scores, improvements were reported on all subscales, see Figure 2.

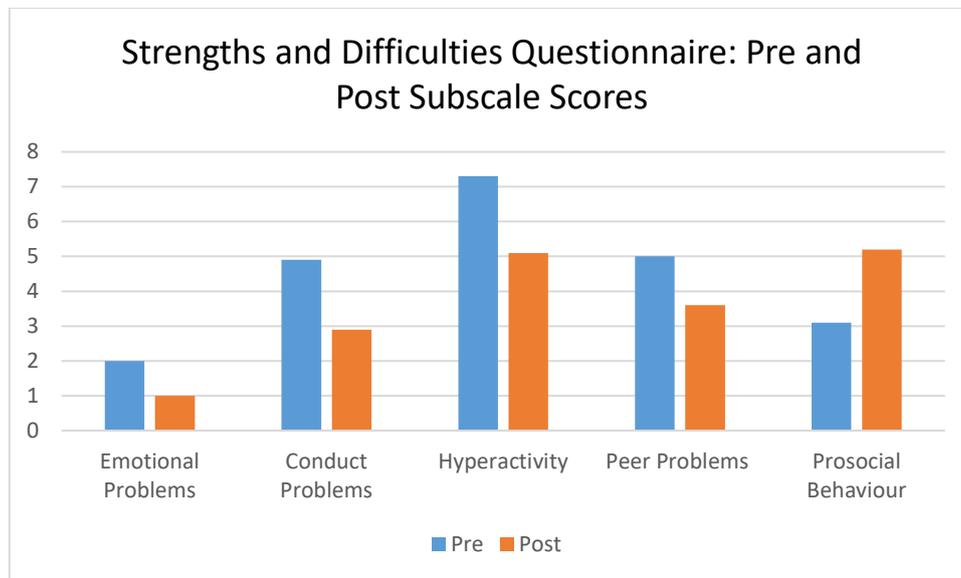


Figure 2. A bar chart showing mean pre and post score on SDQ subscales.

As seen in Figure 2, following the Incredible Beginnings® programme, there was a reduction in the scores on the four areas of difficulty; emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems. These findings suggest that following the programme, children’s emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems had all improved. Furthermore, there was an increase in the scores on the items measuring prosocial behaviour, suggesting the childcare workers felt that the course improved children’s prosocial behaviour.

Incredible Beginnings® Programme Workshop Satisfaction Questionnaire

The satisfaction questionnaire comprises 36 questions which asks staff to rate their overall evaluation of the programme, its usefulness in relation to types of teaching strategies and techniques, and the group leaders leadership style, preparation, knowledge and enthusiasm for the programme.

Of the twenty staff that completed the questionnaires, all of them rated the programme as improving children’s behaviour and children’s developmental issues. For example one individual said, “I’ve learnt how to deal with negative behaviours and understand it better” (A, 2018).

Furthermore, all staff reported that the teaching strategies and the techniques they developed had been somewhat useful, useful or extremely useful. Emotion coaching, in particular came up as a strategy that staff found helpful, “Emotional coaching [...] an amazing technique I now use every day” (J, 2018) and;

“Emotion coaching (...) we have used this the most in the setting with two year olds, they are talking more about how they are feeling and dealing with different emotions in a calmer way now.” (L, 2019)

Staff reported the variety of teaching strategies were useful, for example, “I found the whole course very helpful. Group discussions were very helpful, group leaders knowledge and info was very useful” (L, 2019).

All staff reported that they would recommend or strongly recommend the programme to other teachers or childcare providers, with 95% of staff saying they would strongly recommend the programme.

In terms of how the programme could have been improved several staff reported that the sessions could have longer and delivered over fewer days, “ I would have preferred it to have been longer sessions each time so it didn’t have to go on for as many weeks” (C, 2019).

A Focus Group Exploring Staffs Perceptions of the Incredible Beginnings Programme

Staff who completed the Incredible Beginnings workshop in 2019 were invited to attend a focus group exploring their perceptions of the programme. The focus group was facilitated by Dr Jessica Crumpton (Clinical Child Psychologist). Dr Jessica Crumpton was not involved in the delivery of the programme which limited the risk of potential biasing of staff views. Furthermore, attendance at this focus group was optional and all staff were invited to be open and honest about their experiences of the programme.

Eleven staff attended the focus group in July 2019. Staff agreed that Incredible Years® enabled them to implement a more consistent approach for both the children attending the setting and the staff working there. One member of staff described the impact in her setting;

“It’s definitely a lot calmer... it was...I started in October and no member of staff wanted to work in that room, it was...the age...its quite a difficult age, and there was no consistency amongst the team, so then when I started it was pretty much a blank canvas, it was really difficult so I asked if I could go on this course and most of it has been implemented in the room and it’s so much better.” (J, 2019)

Staff felt the consistency and structure helped improve behaviour as the children knew what was expected of them, “routine has helped children know what is expected of them” (K, 2019) which in turn led to the children feeling more content, safe and secure, “the children come in a lot happier and leave a lot happier” (J, 2019). Furthermore, they described a calmer atmosphere in their settings which led to an increase in job satisfaction for staff,

“the staff are much more calmer, and other staff are much happier to come in and cover other staff” (L, 2019)

There was discussion around the elements of the programme they enjoyed with staff agreeing the Incredible Years strategies and group discussions were particularly beneficial to their practice;

“As well as all the things we’ve learnt, just being to talk with other settings about what work and what doesn’t, I’ve found that really helpful. That combined with all the Incredible Years® principles has really helped me.” (K, 2019)

Staff felt it was beneficial to be able to share ideas with one another to get ideas of things that work well;

“When we come here we think, “oh yeah I could do that, I could try that”...we bounce ideas of one another” (G, 2019)

All staff agreed that they would recommend other childcare providers to attend the training and felt that it should be a core part of Early Years training, “I would definitely recommend this to other staff working with children in settings. I think the training should be essential for childcare providers to attend” (S, 2019).

Summary and Recommendations

The outcomes reported provide very encouraging findings for the impact of the Incredible Beginnings® course on children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties and childcare workers’ practice in Powys.

Staff reported high levels of satisfaction with the programme, there were statistically significant reductions in the total number difficulties children were showing as reported by staff using the SDQ and good evidence of targeted children moving from clinical levels of difficulty to functioning in the normal range by the end of the course. Qualitative feedback indicated overwhelmingly positive experiences of the programme. Feedback indicates that it would be preferable for the programme to be delivered in fewer sessions that are longer in length.

It is worth noting that the successful implementation of the programme has benefitted from strategic commitment within Powys; childcare providers are supported to attend the training and the training is offered at no cost to childcare providers. It is recommended that in order for the success of the programme to be sustained, the Incredible Beginnings® programme form part of strategic planning and that childcare providers are continued to be supported to attend the training; their time be protected for the duration of the programme and appropriate cover provided.

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