

NSPCC
Learning¹

Evaluation of the NSPCC Speak out Stay safe programme

Summary

TESSE Research Team

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Introduction

The NSPCC's Speak out Stay safe (SOSS) programme for primary school children aims to increase children's awareness and understanding of abuse and harm and enable them to seek help from a trusted adult.¹ The Evaluation of Speak out Stay safe (TESSE) was commissioned by the NSPCC and undertaken by an independent team of researchers based in all four UK countries and led by Professor Nicky Stanley at the University of Central Lancashire. The evaluation aimed to examine programme impact on children's understanding of abuse and harm and their help-seeking behaviour. It also captured the experiences of children, teachers, volunteers and staff participating in the programme as well as barriers and facilitators of impact. Economic evaluation of costs and benefits of the SOSS programme was included in the study.

Delivered in primary schools across the UK, SOSS is a manualised programme consisting of a school assembly lasting 20 minutes for Key Stage 1 (KS1) children (aged 5–7 years) and 30 minutes for Key Stage 2 (KS2) children (aged 7–11 years)², followed by a one-hour workshop for KS2 pupils only. Different assembly presentations are delivered to KS1 and KS2 children by trained NSPCC staff or trained volunteers working in pairs.

1 <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/services/speak-out-stay-safe>

2 Different terminology is used to describe equivalent school years in Scotland. Throughout this report, the terms KS1 and KS2 are used to designate children aged 5–7 years and 7–11 years respectively.



Evaluation methods

The evaluation used a matched control design with integral process and economic evaluations. Forty intervention schools due to receive SOSS were recruited from all four UK countries with selection taking account of school characteristics including the proportion of children in receipt of free school meals (as a proxy for local economic deprivation); religious ethos of the school; and rural/urban school location. These intervention schools were matched with 34 comparison schools that had not received SOSS in the preceding two years. School recruitment and programme delivery were interrupted by COVID-19 restrictions in 2020, causing sample attrition: follow-up data was collected immediately post-programme in 38 intervention schools and six-months follow-up data was collected in 36 schools (19 intervention and 17 comparison schools). In total, 3,297 children completed a baseline survey, while 1,553 children completed a follow-up survey at six months. However, there were no statistically significant differences between key characteristics of the follow-up and baseline samples, giving confidence in the validity of comparing the progress of children in intervention and comparison schools. Only a small number of schools provided data on children's disclosures of abuse and harm, but the research team identified 35 safeguarding disclosures or wellbeing concerns in the course of the study, demonstrating the potential for SOSS to promote children's disclosures.

Data was collected via a number of means:

Survey: this was an attractively designed tablet-based survey measuring knowledge of different forms of abuse and readiness to seek help. This was piloted, and consequently KS2 children completed a longer survey that included both standardised and bespoke outcome measures, while KS1 children completed a shortened version of the bespoke measure. The survey was specially adapted for a small, nested study that captured the responses of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Interviews with Headteachers/Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs): 39 interviews (21 in intervention; 18 in comparison schools) were completed at six-months follow-up to provide qualitative data on outcomes.

Process Data: was collected in 13 intervention schools and included observation of programme delivery, interviews with 16 teachers, focus groups with 61 children and interviews with 15 programme facilitators.

Economic Evaluation: this was conducted from a societal perspective and from the perspective of the NSPCC as payer and provider of this intervention. Cost consequence analysis, which takes into account both costs and outcomes, was undertaken as recommended by NICE, and cost surveys were completed for 30 schools with further NSPCC cost data provided.



“I don’t even know what neglect was and I didn’t know it was a thing until they told me.”

KS2 Child, School I26

Key findings

Prior to the programme, the majority of children across both key stages were aware of different forms of abusive behaviour and understood that they should tell someone about an abusive or harmful incident. However, there was a sizeable minority of children in both age groups who lacked knowledge about how to discern harmful from non-harmful behaviour, and about whether to tell or not. At this baseline stage, KS2 children were less knowledgeable about neglect than other forms of harm and abuse and seemed less likely to be receiving other provision that addressed the topics of neglect and domestic abuse. Headteachers described teachers' skills and confidence as less developed in respect of delivering this material and confidence regarding teaching on sexual abuse also appeared low in schools.

“Everybody needs to know because it [can] happen to everybody.”

KS2 Child, School I28

Immediately following SOSS, knowledge of the Childline number and ability to identify a trusted adult increased statistically significantly for both KS1 children and KS2 children. Furthermore, immediately following programme delivery, KS2 children's recognition of the five types of abuse showed statistically significant improvement, as did their knowledge of sexual abuse (on a validated measure of children's knowledge of sexual abuse and bullying).³ At that same timepoint, KS2 children's readiness to tell had risen in a statistically significant way (although KS1 children did not show a similar improvement).

At six-months follow-up, knowledge of different forms of harm and abuse improved for KS2 children in receipt of SOSS and their knowledge of neglect, in particular, can be attributed to the SOSS programme since it showed an improvement that was statistically significantly greater than that of children in comparison schools. Both KS2 and KS1 children retained the improvements made regarding their knowledge of the Childline number, with the improvement being statistically significant relative to that made by children in comparison schools, and so possible to attribute to the SOSS programme.

KS2 children in intervention schools who received the longer, enhanced version of SOSS were also more likely than they were six months earlier to be able to identify a trusted adult who they would tell about abuse or harm and made significantly greater gains than children in comparison schools in this respect. Again, this is a shift that can most likely be attributed to the programme. However, there was no improvement in their willingness to confide in a trusted adult, and the improvement seen immediately after attending the programme in their readiness to speak out was not sustained.

³ Tutty, L. M. (1995) The Revised Children's Knowledge of Abuse Questionnaire: Development of a measure of children's understanding of sexual abuse prevention concepts. *Social Work Research*, 19(2), 112–120.

While KS2 children in intervention schools showed significant improvements on their knowledge of sexual abuse (on the validated CKAQ-R measure) at six months, this improvement cannot be attributed to SOSS, as the difference on this measure between children in intervention and comparison schools was not statistically significant.

KS1 children, who only receive SOSS as a 20-minute assembly with no subsequent workshop, did not appear to have other improvements in knowledge and readiness to seek help that could be attributed to SOSS at six-months follow-up; this could be explained by their limited exposure to the programme, described as low programme ‘dosage’.

At six-months follow-up, readiness to seek help improved on some measures for a substantial minority of children across KS1 and KS2 who had particularly low knowledge and help-seeking prior to the programme. Around a third of KS1 children and a quarter of KS2 children with low scores at baseline saw gains in their ability to identify a trusted adult and their knowledge of the Childline number. KS1 children were most likely to make this sort of improvement. Some improvements, such as the increased willingness of low-scoring KS1 children to confide in a trusted adult, could be attributed to the SOSS programme since they were statistically significant relative to those of the comparison group.

“..lots of teachers say it’s really good for someone else to come in and deliver messages, they’re important because the, the children hear us, the same voice all the time, and something like this that’s so important for the children to know...children are listening and take it all in and, and remember those messages.”

NSPCC staff



The evaluation sought to understand who was most likely to benefit from SOSS. Higher scores on the school climate questionnaire⁴, which measured children's attitudes to school and whether they felt supported there, were significantly related to higher scores across all survey measures at follow-up, indicating that school culture is closely associated with the impact of SOSS. Children in schools serving areas with higher levels of economic deprivation appeared to benefit more from SOSS on some measures. Girls (including those with lower knowledge and help-seeking at the outset) appeared to benefit more from SOSS and were more likely to retain this benefit than boys.

The evaluation included a nested sample of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and the survey was adapted for this group of children. However, data collection was disrupted by the pandemic, resulting in a lack of outcome data in respect of children with SEND. However, teachers suggested that SEND children benefited from the programme and highlighted the importance of preparation in advance for this group.

Children and school staff participating in focus groups and interviews described the SOSS programme as important and relevant. As one KS2 child commented, "*...everybody needs to know because it [can] happen to everybody*". Children and teachers found the programme's visual and interactive approach engaging. However, some KS2 children identified gaps in coverage of sexual abuse and neglect, described the programme as "*babyish*" or thought that explanations lacked depth. School staff interviewed agreed that SOSS could increase teachers' skills and confidence in teaching on abuse and harm but suggested that providing more follow-up materials would enable programme messages to be sustained.

The evaluation found that, despite NSPCC facilitators providing schools with pre-programme information, classroom staff were generally unprepared for SOSS. In terms of programme delivery, observation of SOSS showed that delivery was consistent with the manual for assemblies where the proportion of visual and digital content was high. Material on sexual abuse was less fully covered in the KS2 workshops and children reported that some facilitators lacked confidence and clarity in delivering this material. Facilitators, both paid and volunteer, may need more training to deliver this content.

The economic evaluation found that the use of trained volunteer facilitators made the programme highly cost-effective and concluded that SOSS is an extremely low-cost programme with large reach, delivering socially desirable, statistically significant benefits to older primary school children.

⁴ School climate was measured using a shortened version of Cornell's Authoritative School Climate Survey, which was completed by KS2 children only (Cornell, D. 2016, The Authoritative School Climate Survey and the School Climate Bullying Survey: Research summary. <http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/AuthoritativeSchoolClimateSurveyResearchSummaryJanuary2016.pdf>).



“This is just supporting what we’re doing in class with the children becoming informed so they know what to do, if anything is happening, and feeling that confidence that they can talk to someone.”

KS1 Teacher, School I16

Developing the SOSS programme

The evaluation findings suggest a number of avenues of development for the SOSS programme:

- As a trusted organisation with a strong reputation, the NSPCC is in an excellent position to provide a stimulus and model for schools in their ongoing tasks of delivering Relationships Education and responding positively to children who do ‘speak out’ about abuse and harm.
- The NSPCC’s explanation of how the programme works (the SOSS theory of change) could be revisited to take more account of a school’s culture, which affects how the programme is received. Engaging more fully with school culture would require a focus on school readiness for SOSS and entail additional preparation with schools prior to delivery. This might achieve better informed staff who were more able to prepare children, including children with special educational needs and disabilities who may require additional preparation for the programme, and reassure parents.
- The NSPCC could engage teachers more fully in programme delivery – perhaps as joint facilitators alongside NSPCC staff or volunteers – and provide more follow-up material, maybe in digital format, aimed at embedding SOSS messages.
- Gender differences in programme impact could be addressed by targeting SOSS more precisely. Recruiting more male facilitators could assist in increasing boys’ learning. Programme content and format could also be reviewed and its appeal for boys scrutinised, perhaps with the help of boys themselves.
- Given the increasing availability of resources and provision for Relationships Education, the NSPCC could consider targeting SOSS on schools in areas with higher levels of economic deprivation where we found children made relatively greater gains in knowledge or delivering the programme more frequently in such areas.
- For KS1 children, the SOSS programme may be most valuable as a primer preparing children for other provision in Relationships Education, including delivery of SOSS in KS2. It may also be a useful vehicle for communicating the skills, messaging and language required for delivery of this material to younger children by school staff.
- The gains made by children with particularly low levels of knowledge prior to the programme reinforce the argument for continuing to deliver SOSS to KS1 children, given its relatively low cost. Alternatively, the NSPCC could increase the ‘dose’ received by KS1 children by delivering a KS1 workshop as is currently provided for KS2 children. Delivering this jointly with class teachers might reduce the need for additional resources and prove beneficial for embedding learning.
- Volunteers’ input ensures that SOSS is highly cost-effective and the NSPCC benefits from their commitment and enthusiasm. However, both volunteers and staff need to be carefully selected, well trained and supported in delivering material that is sensitive and, in some schools and communities, potentially controversial. Well trained facilitators are likely to ensure that messages are clear and that children are confident about the relevance and suitability of what they are learning.



“I thought the assemblies were really good and they got the message across really well for the children, it’s just a shame they didn’t have some kind of follow up after...maybe if we’d had more to do in class, then that would have reinforced it even more.”

Designated Safeguarding Lead,
School I19

Messages for primary school abuse prevention programmes and for further research

- Integrated programmes, such as SOSS, which address a range of different forms of harm and abuse can achieve sustained impact for older children in primary schools, especially in relation to their knowledge of neglect and their ability to identify a trusted adult who they would tell about abuse or harm.
- While most children in primary schools show good understanding of abuse and harm and readiness to seek help at baseline, there is a minority that do not do so and universally delivered programmes can reach some children in this group and boost their knowledge.
- There are also indications that targeting interventions on boys and on children in schools in economically deprived areas could be beneficial and the effectiveness of such approaches should be researched.
- School culture was closely associated with impact and interventions need to acknowledge and engage with the specific school context in which a programme is delivered to achieve school readiness and to embed programme messages.
- The length or dosage of a programme seems likely to influence impact and further research could usefully explore the appropriate dosage for primary school prevention programmes.
- The evaluation was undertaken in a diverse sample of UK schools and demonstrated that children under 11 can enjoy participating in mixed methods research on sensitive topics and can do so safely.
- The small, nested study undertaken with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) showed that they were able to complete a survey on harm and abuse when appropriate adaptations were made. Future evaluations of prevention programmes in schools should aim to include children with SEND.

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