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Meeting needs, making changes, improving outcomes

Using Evidence to inform Child and Family Services: Findings from an Independent Evaluation of a Pro-Social Programme in Tallaght West

Policy Brief

This policy brief reports on findings from an independent evaluation of the *Mate-Tricks* programme which was implemented by the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI), one of the three Prevention and Early Intervention Programme organisations. While *Mate-Tricks* was designed to promote pro-social behaviour among fourth class students, the evaluation found the programme was ineffective in promoting pro-social behaviour and had an adverse effect on social behaviour and authoritarian parenting. This brief outlines key recommendations for policy makers with regard to the choice and implementation of appropriate programmes and services for children and their families.



Key Points

- Promoting pro-social behaviour among children is recognised as important for improving later outcomes including: reducing conduct problems, increasing participation in school and positive engagement in society;
- Impacting positively on children's behaviour through after-school activities is very difficult. Independent research of similar initiatives has mirrored the *Mate-Tricks* findings, (Semeniuk, et al 2008; Gottredson et al, 2009);
- Respondents in the evaluation (including children, parents and teachers) were largely positive about the programme;
- Using gold standard research techniques, this programme was found to be ineffective in improving most outcomes and to impact negatively on children's social behaviour and on parenting style;
- The implementation and evaluation of this programme highlights key learning for Government Departments, including that after-school programmes focused on behavioural change should be rigorously piloted and evaluated before being rolled out;
- Disseminating negative findings to those invested in making change is extremely difficult, even in the face of 'hard' evidence;
- CDI recommends that all Government Departments commit to using evidence to inform planning and service delivery and that all services for children are evaluated;
- CDI also recommends that those services and models which have no demonstrable impact on outcomes for children are incrementally removed, and replaced with evidence based programmes;
- Finally, CDI recommends that managers in state funded organisations working with children receive training in logic modelling, utilising evidence to inform planning and assessing outcomes.

Background

Pro-social behaviour predicts future social adjustment (Crick, 1996) and research indicates that the development, maintenance, and enhancement of pro-social competence can protect children from, and strengthen them against, negative influences and assist them to reach their optimal potential (Bandura, 1990).

The *Mate-Tricks* Programme was designed to improve child social outcomes which would be in line with children's services policy and practice in Ireland. The programme was particularly relevant to the ideas and aspirations highlighted in the 'Guidelines on Countering Bullying Behaviour in Primary and Post-Primary Schools' which suggest that schools actively seek to promote habits of mutual respect, courtesy and an awareness of the inter-dependence of people in groups and the community "whilst seeking to promote qualities of social responsibility, tolerance and understanding among all its members in school and out of school", (Department of Education, 1993, p.11).

Careful attention when designing the *Mate-Tricks* Programme was given to the existing Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum (NCCA, 2008). Both approaches sought to develop and engender a sense of moral, social and personal responsibility in the child.

The *Mate-Tricks* Programme was independently evaluated and the findings of this evaluation are reported here along with their policy implications. In keeping with current policy outlined in the Public Service Reform Plan (2011) which commits to radically reducing costs through a focus on better value for money, the *Mate-Tricks* evaluation and CDI's work more widely, considers the factors which lead and support working in new ways, with a strong focus on implementation and delivery. CDI has commissioned independent evaluations of each of its services, including *Mate-Tricks*, to assess whether these services achieve their stated outcomes and offer value for money. Above all, the suite of evaluations point to the need for a strong evidence base for existing services, and a commitment to implementing services that have been rigorously and independently evaluated and are proven to work.

Mate-Tricks: Programme

Mate-Tricks was an after-school programme designed to promote pro-social behaviour in 4th class children (aged nine to ten years) in Tallaght West. *Mate-Tricks* combined elements of two existing pro-social behaviour programmes: The Strengthening Families Program (SFP) and Coping Power Program (CPP).

The programme was a one-year multi-session after-school programme and comprised 59 children-only sessions, six parent-only sessions and three family sessions, with each session lasting one and a half hours.

The intended outcomes of this programme were to enhance children's pro-social development, reduce children's anti-social behaviour, develop children's confidence and self-esteem, improve children's problem solving skills, improve child-peer interactions, develop reasoning and empathy skills, improve parenting skills, and improve parent-child interactions.

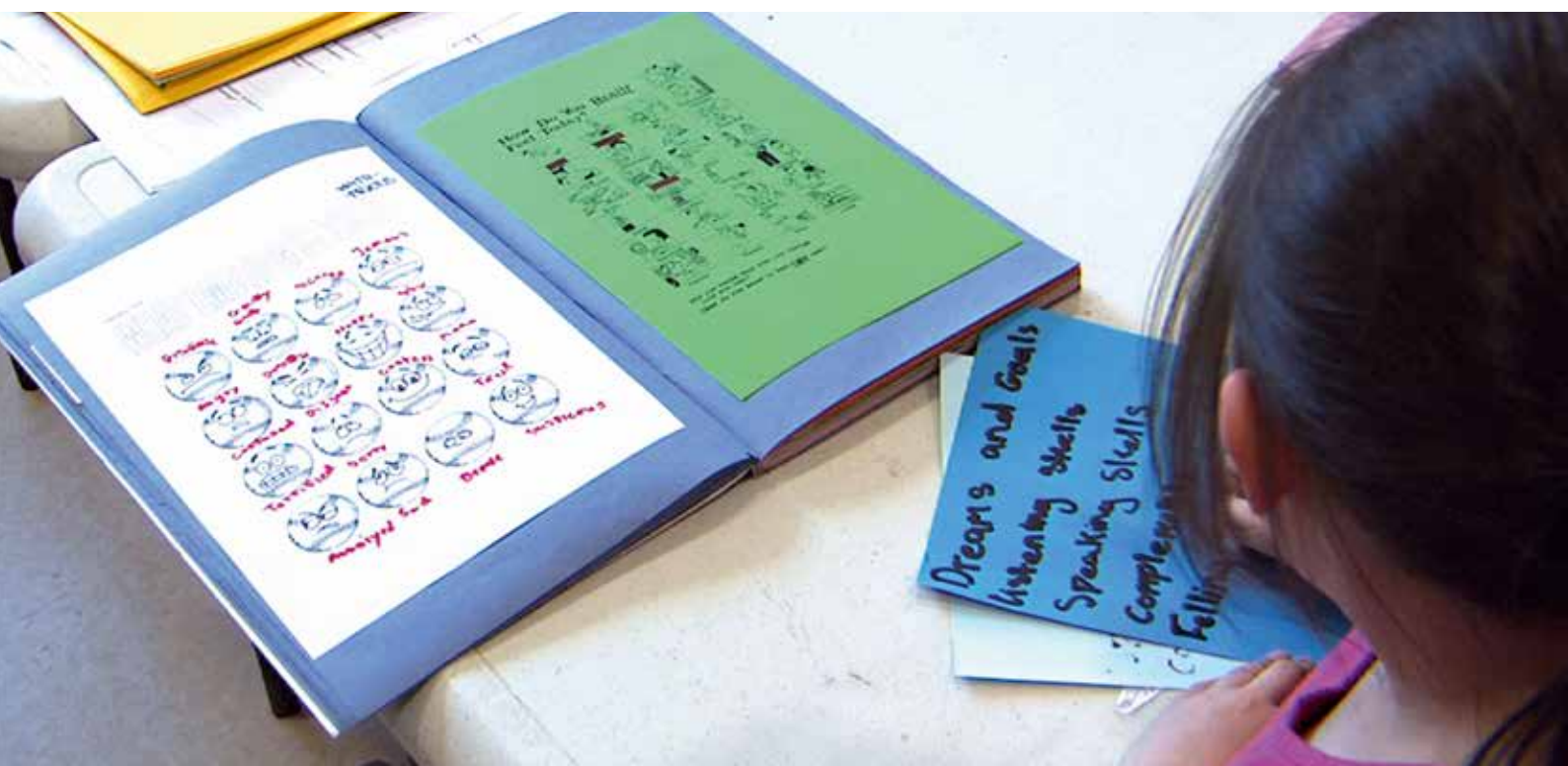
The cost of programme delivery for one year was €1,029 per child.

Mate-Tricks: Evaluation

A rigorous evaluation of the programme was completed by the Centre for Effective Education at Queen's University Belfast, which included a randomised controlled trial to measure the effects of the programme on child outcomes and a process evaluation that investigated its implementation.

347 children and 122 parents completed both pre- and post-test questionnaires. The following findings were identified:

- There were no significant differences between the children who attended *Mate-Tricks* and the control group on most outcomes, and there was a significant increase in child-reported anti-social behaviour and authoritarian parenting;
- Primary and secondary outcomes were influenced by both parent and child engagement;
- Recent evidence would suggest that this type of programme may not be a useful or cost-effective service in areas of particular social and economic disadvantage;
- It is recommended that the choice of any after-school programme focused on changing child behaviour is considered very carefully and should be made in the light of available evidence;
- The programme was implemented with quality and fidelity and the poor outcomes were not the result of delivery issues, but possibly due to the model of change underpinning it.





Recommendations

There is a significant body of research evidence highlighting the difficulties of impacting on child behaviour through after-school programmes. Thus these programmes should be implemented with a high degree of caution, particularly in areas of social and economic disadvantage. The fact that the programme was largely considered positively by those involved in it highlights the need for integrity and rigour. When it comes to identifying “what works”, instinct is not enough.

CDI recommends that:

- 1.** After-school programmes focused on behavioural change should be rigorously piloted and evaluated before being rolled out since they do not necessarily produce positive effects and have the potential to produce negative effects;
- 2.** All services for children are evaluated, and those services and models which have no demonstrable impact on outcomes for children are incrementally removed, and replaced with evidence based programmes;
- 3.** That such a change management programme is undertaken with care and skill, as accepting that practice is not achieving desired outcomes can be a difficult process;
- 4.** All Government Departments commit to using evidence to inform planning and service delivery;
- 5.** A commitment is given to serious consideration of the implications of this evaluation for professional training, service planning and service integration;
- 6.** Managers in all state funded organisations working with children receive training in logic modelling, utilising evidence to inform planning and assessing outcomes.

For the full report of the evaluation findings please see: O’Hare, L., Kerr, K., Biggart, A. and Connolly, P. (2012) *Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Childhood Development Initiative’s Mate-Tricks Pro-Social Behaviour After-School Programme*. Dublin: Childhood Development Initiative (CDI).

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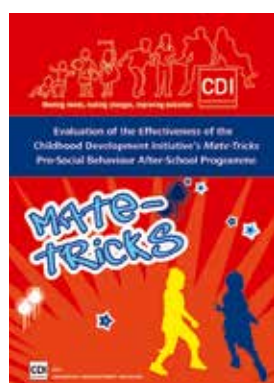
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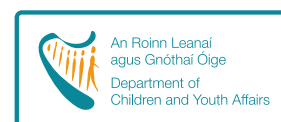
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