

LIFESKILLS

An early intervention and prevention programme to build resilience

Findings from the implementation
of Botvin LifeSkills within North Down
and Ards

**Believe in
children**
 **Barnardo's**

 Botvin
LifeSkills[®] Training

1. What is Botvin LifeSkills?

LifeSkills is a highly evidence based early intervention and prevention programme that improves children's emotional health and well-being in schools. LifeSkills promotes resilience through the development of emotional literacy, critical thinking, problem solving, healthy relationships and strategies to prevent risk taking behaviour.

More than 40 years of research have provided evidence of LifeSkills effectiveness under different conditions, with different providers and with different populations and age groups. The programme is effective with different groups of children and young people and the reductions in risk taking behaviours are long lasting. Studies testing its effectiveness have found that LifeSkills can reduce the prevalence of risk taking behaviours in children by up to 75% with effects lasting 12 years. LifeSkills is a universal programme, designed for whole-class in school delivery.

LifeSkills concentrates on a preventative approach which shares age appropriate information with children and young people providing them with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to make healthy choices. LifeSkills has three core components:

- Self-management skills which help children with problem solving, decision making, critical thinking and how to regulate emotions
- Social competence which involves teaching children how to communicate clearly, make friends and develop healthy relationships
- Resistance training to help children develop strategies for revisiting peer pressure

As well as preventing risk taking behaviours, it also leads to important improvements in other core skills which are key for healthy development amongst young people. These include self-esteem, emotional regulation, motivation, communication, social skills and the ability to cope with stress.

Why LifeSkills?

Strengths of LifeSkills include:

- Documented effectiveness through extensive evaluations
- Based on scientific evidence of what causes children to engage in risk taking behaviour
- Capacity builds to sustain the programme
- Emphasises proven training methods
- Proven to reduce risk taking behaviours
- Flexible delivery model
- Aligned to the national personal development curriculums across the UK and Ireland

How is it delivered?

The LifeSkills model trains teachers to ensure sustainability of the programme within the school setting. Teachers are equipped with the skills to facilitate the programme to a new cohort of children each year. Each session is designed to be implemented in 1 hour. The programme is flexible in its delivery with models to accommodate a variety of schedules- both intensive (2- 3 times per week) and extended (once per week).

Primary School LifeSkills:

There are three levels within the primary school programme. Typically level one is delivered in primary 5, level 2 in primary 6 and level 3 in primary 7. The second and third levels act as booster sessions so that key concepts and skills are reinforced and developed over time.

Programme content

LifeSkills is a dynamic and engaging programme that uses a variety of interactive teaching techniques and proven training methods to include facilitation, coaching, assessment and behavioural rehearsal. LifeSkills is a

structured, clearly defined, manualised programme. LifeSkills materials include a Teacher's Manual and Children's Workbook for each of the three levels of the programme. Manuals and Workbooks include extensive activities that focus on

changing behaviour.

Primary School LifeSkills has been aligned to the personal development curriculums across the UK and Ireland. LifeSkills has also been aligned to the five key aspects of social and emotional learning.









Evidence and outcomes

LifeSkills is a highly evidenced based programme. LifeSkills is rated as a Model Programme in the Blueprints for Violence Prevention (its highest rating). It has also been rated by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) as being Level 3. This means that LifeSkills has been independently assessed and shown to have the highest standards of evidence of effectiveness. Over 40 years of robust evaluations have shown LifeSkills to be consistently effective with different

groups of children across different locations. It has been successfully scaled up and has appropriate supports in place to ensure effectiveness is maintained when rolled out in new populations.

LifeSkills has consistently shown to reduce risk taking behaviours. Robust evaluations which have been undertaken include multiple Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) as well as other types of evaluation methodologies. Studies show that LifeSkills¹:

¹ Botvin, G. & Griffin, K. W (2014) 'LifeSkills training: Preventing substance misuse by enhancing individual and social competence', New directions for Youth Development, (141), pp. 57-65

-  Cuts tobacco, alcohol and cannabis use by up to **75%**
-  Cuts polydrug use by up to **66%**
-  Decreases use of inhalants, narcotics and hallucinogens
-  Effects last for at least **12 years**
-  Booster sessions maintain **prevention effects**
-  Is effective when taught by teachers, youth worker or health professionals

LifeSkills has been shown to deliver cross-cutting benefits beyond the behaviours it specifically targets. These include reductions in violence and delinquency, risky driving and risky sexual behaviours:

- ✓ It reduces young people's use of psychoactive substances and other unhealthy behaviours with attested long term benefits.
- ✓ By helping students to improve their social and emotional skills, while reducing their involvement in problem substance misuse, it increases the likelihood that children

and young people will attend school regularly and increase their attainment. The skills it teaches are also relevant to coping with stress and anxiety and avoiding emotional as well as behavioural difficulties.

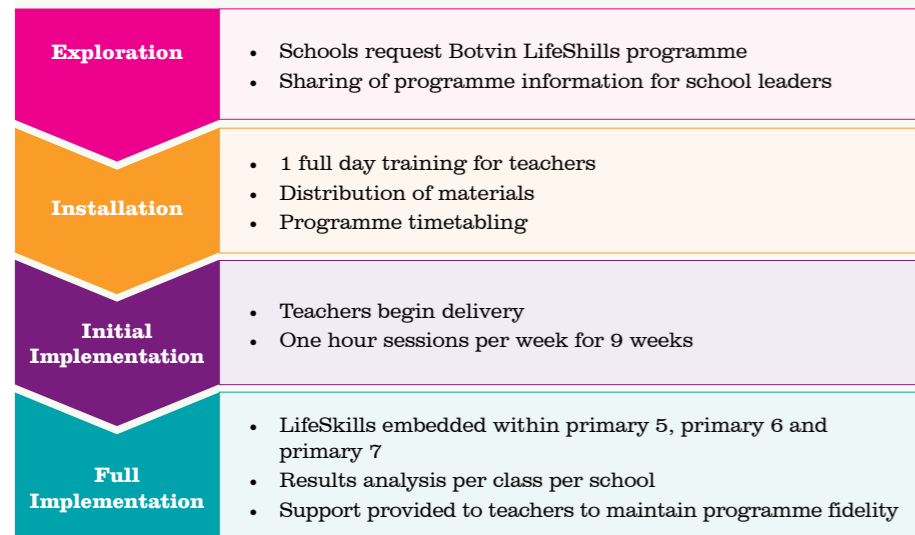
- ✓ LifeSkills has been proven to empower young people and improve core resiliencies that help them to engage in education.
- ✓ LifeSkills has been shown to improve young people's relationships with their peers, families and broader social networks. LifeSkills has been proven to improve young people's health and

well-being by reducing substance misuse, risk taking (including risky sexual behaviour), improved decision making and coping strategies.

This is a cost effective way to improve outcomes across a variety of domains (related to general well-being) for all young people. Rate on return of investment as calculated by the Social Research Unit is 72%². Investing in and effectively implementing this programme will improve skills, knowledge and resilience, this will help children and young people have healthier and more enjoyable lives.

Barnardo's Implementation

Barnardo's is committed to high quality training and support to ensure fidelity to the programme. Following good implementation practice the programme is introduced in the following ways:



The core topics are relevant and the programme can be delivered consistently and with fidelity. Barnardo's provides three components of the programme:

1. LifeSkills training
2. Adapted resources
3. Technical assistance (to include data analysis and depending on scale staff support)

Focus on Impact

Barnardo's have provided a comprehensive collection of data in the SEHSCT to capture the impact of the programme. This includes:

- Pre and post Botvin questionnaire collection in school
- Qualitative data from teachers and children
- Fidelity monitoring checklists
- Technical assistance package

2. Results: Delivery of Programme in the SEHSCT

The Essential LifeSkills programme has been delivered in the school setting by teachers based within the North Down and Ards area of the SEHSCT between September 2018 and June 2019. Qualitative and quantitative data for the Level one is presented in this section.

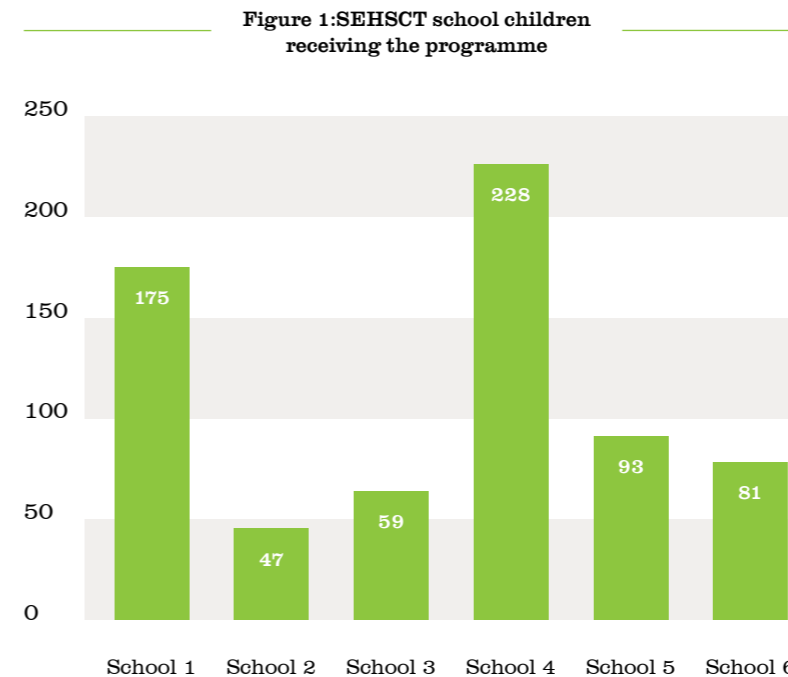
Design

A simple pre-post repeated measures design was used for the evaluation utilising information which was already being routinely collected as part of service delivery. The evaluation aims to explore the following questions about the outcomes of Primary School LifeSkills within the SEHSCT:

- Did LifeSkills show improvements in outcomes for children across knowledge, attitudes and skills on completion of level 1?
- What was teacher and children's experience of the programme?

Participants

Across the SEHSCT, LifeSkills was delivered in 6 schools to the following children:



Programme implementation included:

There are three levels within the primary school programme. Typically level one is delivered in primary 5, level 2 in primary 6 and level 3 in primary 7. The second and third levels act as booster sessions so that key concepts and skills are reinforced and developed over time.



24 teachers completed the LifeSkills training



683 children received the programme



496 of those children completed pre and post questionnaires



73% children were used in the results

² Investing in Children (2013) LifeSkills training: Blueprints approved, Available at: <http://investinginchildren.eu/interventions/life-skills-training> (Accessed: August 2019)

Changes in Outcomes for Children

LifeSkills has three distinct areas that it measures against 'Knowledge', 'Attitude' and 'Life skills'. These are the three components necessary to change children's behaviour.

Changes in Knowledge scores

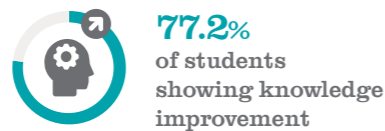
Children improved their knowledge by the end of the programme illustrating that the children participating know significantly more about risk taking behaviour. They also know more about positive coping and strategies to improve their lives at the end of the programme compared to the start.

The knowledge scale in the LST questionnaire examines knowledge of some of the key areas covered in the programme such as substances, decision making, advertising, anxiety, social skills and coping with stress. There are 34 statements that the student responds true or false to. Some examples of the statements are reported below:

- ☞ "There is nothing you can do about peer pressure except go along with it"
- ☞ "You should always let other people influence your decisions"
- ☞ "When we feel bad about ourselves, it affects how we do in school, sports or other activities"
- ☞ "Most adults smoke cigarettes"

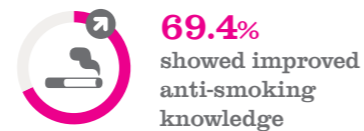
An overall knowledge score is calculated alongside two subscales: anti-smoking knowledge and life skills knowledge. The overall knowledge score is a proportion of the total number of knowledge questions that

have been correctly answered. Results across the schools for Level 1 illustrate:



There was an improvement in knowledge scores throughout Level 1 of the programme. This shows that children know significantly more about the harmful effects of substance use at the end of Level 1 of the programme. They also know

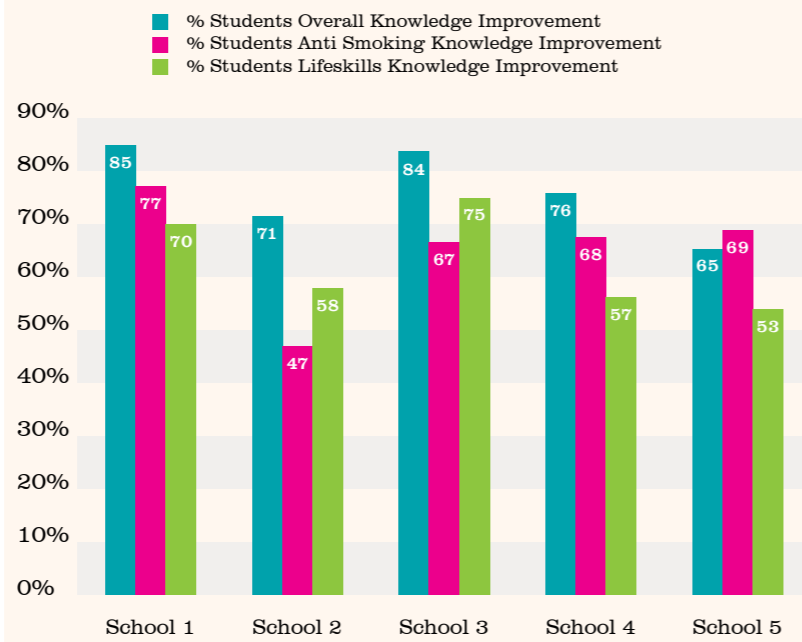
more about different coping strategies and life skills. Of these students:



Knowledge improvement scores ranged from **64.7%** to **85.0%** across the schools.

Figure 2: Graph to show SEHSCT schools average improvement in knowledge scores

Changes in scores can be attributed to the varying levels of fidelity.



The following results are based on those schools who completed pre and post questionnaires during delivery.

Changes in Knowledge Attitude

A series of questions in the LSTQ-ES examine children's attitudes towards alcohol use and smoking. At the end of the programme children had healthier attitudes towards smoking and drinking compared to the start. This means they are more likely by the end of the programme to see smoking as unappealing and not a fun, grown up, sociable or healthy activity to take part in.

A number of questions in the LST-Q examine children and young people's attitudes towards smoking and alcohol use. Students respond to 8 statements on a 3 point Likert

scale (disagree, not sure, agree).

Some examples of the statements are below:

- ☞ "Since a lot of people drink alcohol it can't be that bad for you"
- ☞ "Kids who smoke cigarettes have more fun than non-smokers"
- ☞ "Kids who drink alcohol have more friends than non-drinkers"

The attitude scale is between 1 and 5 with higher scores on this subscale indicating

healthier attitudes towards smoking and alcohol use.

The average percentage of students showing improvement in attitudes scores for LifeSkills Level 1 were as follows:

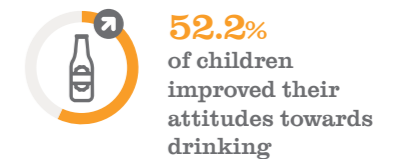
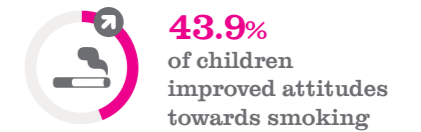
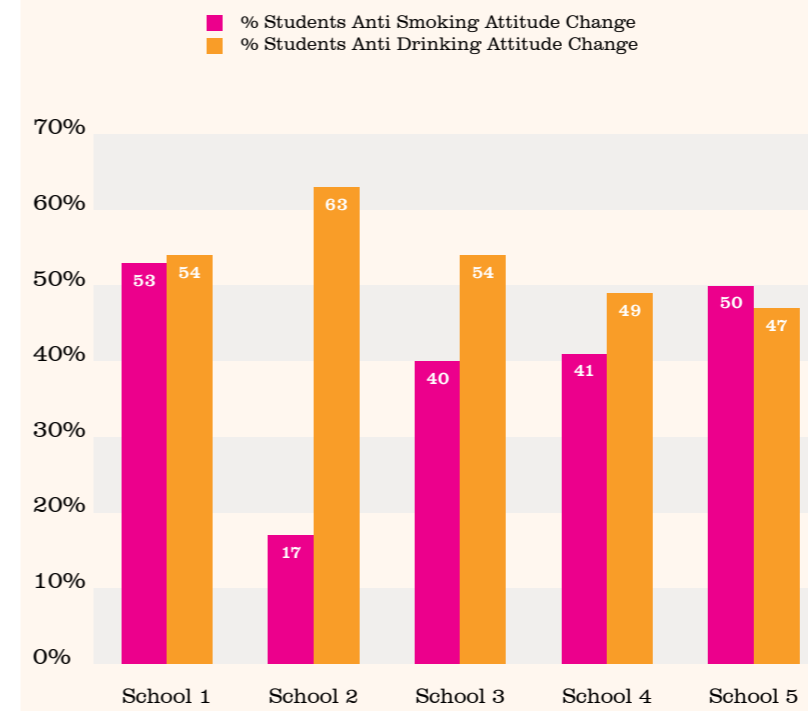


Figure 3: Graph to show SEHSCT schools average improvement in attitude scores



These results show that children and young people had healthier attitudes towards smoking and drinking compared to the start.

Improvement in student attitudes towards smoking percentages ranged from **17.4%** to **52.9%** across the schools. Improvement in student their attitudes towards drinking ranged from **46.9%** to **62.5%** across the SEHSCT. Variations in these scores can be attributed to varying levels of fidelity.

Changes in Coping and Other Life Skills


The final section of the LSTQ-ES consists of 8 questions that examine children and young people's reactions to how they would handle various situations. The children rate each statement on a 3 point Likert scale (some are rated: never, sometimes or most of the time; others are rated: not likely, somewhat likely or very likely). There are subscales for drug refusal skills, assertiveness skills, relaxation skills and self-control skills. Examples of the statements are as follows:

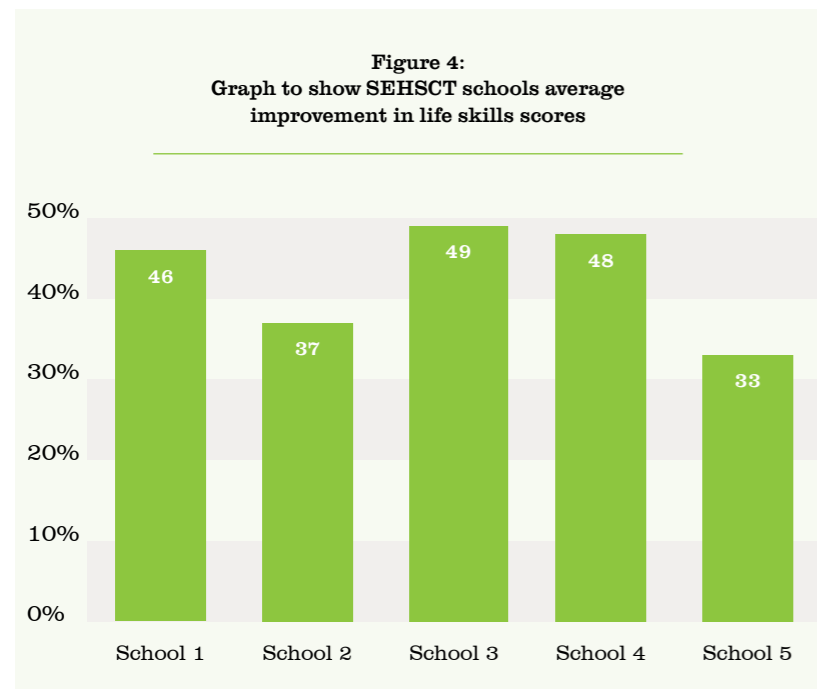
☞ "How often do you ask questions when you don't understand something?"

☞ "When you need to make a decision, how often do you think about your choices and what will happen?"

☞ "How likely would you be to tell someone to move if they cut ahead of you in a line?"


Across schools, children showed improvement in their life skills by the end of the programme as follows:


 **44.2%** of children showed improvements in their 'Life Skills'





They showed increased use of skills such as relaxation techniques, decision making, communication and assertiveness. Children's improvement in their 'Life Skills' ranged across the schools from **32.9% to 49.1%**. Variations in these scores can, again, be attributed to varying levels of fidelity.

Level 1 Results Average Summary

 **77.2%** of students showing knowledge improvement

 **43.9%** of children improved attitudes towards smoking

 **52.2%** of children improved their attitudes towards drinking

 **44.2%** of children showed improvements in their 'Life Skills'

Across the schools for Level 1, the results show that from 496 students who completed pre and post questionnaires, an average of **77.2%** of students showed knowledge improvement, an average of **43.9%** of children improved their attitudes towards smoking, an average of **52.2%** of children improved their attitudes towards drinking and an average of **44.2%** of children showed improvements in their 'Life Skills'.

SEHSCT Children's Experience of the Programme at LifeSkills Level



Children were asked to complete 3 short open ended questions at the end of delivery of the programme. They were asked:

- "What did you like most?"
- "What did you like least?"
- "What did you learn?"

Student feedback included:



On assertiveness:

☞ "I learnt to, when you have peer pressure put on you, not to be afraid to speak out and say no."

☞ "I learned that standing up for yourself is a good thing."



On decision making:

☞ "I learnt how to socialise better, deal with stress and how to keep your self-esteem high. I learnt that with some decisions you have to take your time."

☞ "I learned how to make my own decisions and a lot about how to be a good person. I learned how to deal with emotions and I learned life skills. I learnt lots of stuff I did not know."



On self-esteem:

☞ "I enjoyed the self-esteem session because it made me feel good about myself."

☞ "I learned that we have people who care about us. We are all different."



On stress:

☞ "I learned a lot of different life skills like how to deal with stress and anxiety, how to relax and how to speak in different ways."

☞ "I liked doing stress because if someone annoys me or something I will listen to relaxation music and calm down. I liked the coping with stress session because I was getting stressed all the time and I felt a little calmer after using the exercises."



On social skills:

☞ "I liked friendship skills the most because it helped me be a better friend."

"I learned that we have people who care about us. We are all different."



SEHSCT Teacher Experience of the Programme at LifeSkills Level

Content analysis of teacher feedback was undertaken on these to identify any recurrent themes at Level 1.

Key themes of the feedback included that the programme was most beneficial and impactful for self-esteem, decision making, social skills, and stress. Teachers felt that the programme helped to raise issues on difficulties faced in primary school and through the period of school transitioning. Teachers also found that the sessions were excellent as a PDMU programme.

Teacher feedback included:



On self-esteem:

“The children gained a great deal from the self-esteem session namely how to boost their own self esteem as well as someone else’s. The children realised that at vulnerable times they can support one another and/or recognise their own vulnerability and seek help and reassurance from others.”



On decision making:

“We got our playground buddies to implement the decision making strategy STOP, THINK, GO from the programme. They encourage younger children to use this strategy when playing and socialising with peers.”

“I would highly recommend this programme. I thoroughly enjoyed rolling out this programme in class. It was a fresh approach to issues that children face and I feel that it helped make my pupils more understanding of the world they live in and the choices that they have in it.”



On social skills:

“The pupils are a challenging bunch that face many difficulties in terms of socialising, home life, school work and a range of additional needs. They have really enjoyed a more hands on approach and an honest view of the types of situations that they will possibly deal with in the next few years and the ways in which they can make good choices.”

“The children really related to all of the sessions on friendship as there had been a new mix of children this year and it took a while for friendships to settle. The skills learned helped to provide the language they could use in different situations.”



On stress:

“The children were able to demonstrate ‘de-stressing’ techniques during their practice of AQE papers. The children also used some of the decision making session to problem solve in the classroom, as well as in the playground.”

“We regularly use breathing techniques in the classroom. A few of the children have been going through difficult situations and it was a good reminder that the feelings they were experiencing were normal. Many playground issues were discussed and resolved.”



As a PDMU programme:

“Excellent as a PDMU programme. Highly recommend! Thank you for providing teachers with a programme that gives a framework for this area of the curriculum.”

“The training and resources were really valuable. The teacher powerpoints were excellent and the children loved the high quality workbooks to use and keep.”

3. Conclusion



The findings from this study show that Primary School LifeSkills can be implemented effectively in SEHSCT schools. Key themes have emerged:

» **Effectiveness**
Botvin LifeSkills is an effective early intervention and prevention programme that improves children’s knowledge, changes attitudes and equips children with strategies that enables them to manage challenging situations.

» **Cumulative**
Botvin LifeSkills has been aligned by Barnardo’s NI to compliment personal development curriculums across the UK and Ireland. Staff commented on the relevance of topics to include self-esteem, dealing with stress and social skills and reported on its

‘fit’ within the statutory personal development curriculum.

» **Technical assistance**
This study has emphasised the importance of implementing the programme effectively. Children’s scores improved when teachers adhered to the fidelity of the programme. Schools felt reassured receiving class impact reports detailing the children’s improvements.

» **Flexibility**
LifeSkills is flexible in its delivery. There is potential for development within the education sector.

In conclusion LifeSkills has successfully been implemented in SEHSCT schools. Evidence shows that LifeSkills is an effective early intervention programme to prevent children and young people from engaging in risk taking behaviours as well as supporting other healthy development.

Acknowledgements

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Lauren Spiers

Children's Services Manager,

Lauren.spiers@barnardos.org.uk

Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos.
216250 and SC037605

