

Written evidence submitted by the Pyramid Project at the University of West London

The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

Submission from the Pyramid Project at the University of West London

Background to the Pyramid project

Pyramid clubs (www.uwl.ac.uk/pyramid) are an evidence-based intervention, validated by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) and included in the EIF Guidebook as a suitable intervention to support the social and emotional development of children. The clubs are also recommended on the Anna Freud Mentally Healthy Schools website for primary schools. The clubs are delivered in schools to groups of children aged 7 to 14 who have been identified by their teachers as being shy, quiet, withdrawn, anxious and struggling with friendships. The reasons behind these difficulties are many: some have special educational needs or disabilities, diagnosed or as yet undiagnosed; some are recent arrivals from another country or another part of the UK; some have English as an additional language; some have suffered abuse or some other sort of major trauma; some may have been bullied in school or elsewhere; some have had school absences due to illness; some may be living in poverty or in a home where a family member is ill, either physically or mentally; some are just a bit quirky or different and so can be excluded by peers; and some have a personality that means they internalise their difficulties and find it very difficult to work with their peers or ask for help. The aim of the groups is to help them to develop better coping skills for whatever is troubling them, and to support them to make better friendships.

The Pyramid model has been around since the 1980s and can be delivered by either paid staff or volunteers. As the intervention runs once a week for 10 weeks it offers an ideal placement opportunity for university students who are studying Psychology, Education or related courses. Having expanded hugely when there was dedicated funding to support early intervention (e.g. under Children's Fund or the Targeted Mental Health in Schools programme), the number of areas running Pyramid clubs has substantially reduced but they still cling on in areas of England including London, Manchester, Lancashire and Gloucestershire, and in Northern Ireland and some areas of Wales. The University of West London (UWL) either directly runs clubs in schools, or it licenses other organisations (charities, local authority Education Psychology departments etc.) to run the intervention.

The impact of COVID-19 disrupting delivery of Pyramid clubs

Clearly, if the schools are closed, the clubs cannot run. We cannot speak for those running clubs under licence elsewhere, although the impact is likely to be the same, but UWL had

just completed one club for Year 7 pupils in a school in the London borough of Ealing and had three more clubs running there and five clubs running in Surrey. The impact has been:

1. The children we work with are vulnerable children and an intervention that could have done so much to support them is no longer available to them. Some had just reached a point where their feelings and behaviours were starting to change, and now the rug has been pulled out from under their feet. For some, that disappointment and loss will set them back even further, combined with the increased anxiety that COVID-19 will be causing them. These children need interventions like Pyramid clubs now more than ever.
2. As we provide a service to schools rather than directly to the children and their families, we have no way to maintain contact during the closure period.
3. Children have not been able to complete their 10 sessions, so have not been able to benefit from an intervention where evidence shows that attendance at a minimum of 7 sessions provides optimum benefit.
4. If the children do not return to school until the middle/end of June at the earliest, it will not be possible to complete the clubs that had started because there simply will not be time to reorganise them, exacerbated by other priorities in school, and the loss of the club leaders who will have moved on to other work.
5. Student Pyramid club leaders have been unable to complete the placement hours required of them.
6. Students have also lost the opportunity to witness the benefit that a manualised intervention can provide to children, which is a hugely influential part of their learning that they take with them into their professional lives.
7. Schools have not had the full benefit of an intervention that they felt their pupils needed
8. For some children, e.g. those who were attending Pyramid Transition Clubs to help them with the move from primary to secondary schools, this is an opportunity that is completely lost to them. Those who will remain in the same school may be offered a second chance in the new academic year.
9. As the Pyramid theory of change relies heavily on the benefits of group work, it is not possible to deliver the clubs except where a group of people is co-located. It would not be possible to use video technology to deliver games, group art and craft etc. in a meaningful way.
10. The use of group development theory (Tuckman and Jensen) also means that any changes to the group in terms of members (children or leaders) effectively constitutes a new group, so the intervention will effectively have to start all over again (forming stage). Trying to bring the group back together after a long hiatus would have the same impact.
11. Those schools who paid to buy in the intervention will feel they have lost out financially, but UWL will also lose out if it has to offer replacement clubs for free in the next academic year.
12. Normally at this point in the year UWL would be canvassing schools to take up the intervention for the autumn term, but with schools closed it is very unlikely that this will be a priority for schools, so the project will suffer financially into next year and fewer children are likely to get the benefit of attending a Pyramid club.

Key message

Schools, and potentially the Education Committee, will be focussing on the impact on children's learning due to the closures. Some attention has been paid to children's mental health, but those of us delivering interventions like this to schools will worry that academic progress will take precedence when the schools do reopen. However, for many children, their vulnerability comes from the state of their mental health and failure to meet their needs in this area could have a much longer-lasting impact on their future health and careers. We need to make sure we do everything we can to make sure we pay full attention to their other needs during this very worrying time.

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www.uwl.ac.uk/pyramid

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