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ARTICLE



## Towards better child protection programmes: a qualitative evaluation of Youth Disseminating Life Skills Programme

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to assess the acceptability of a 12-week training programme, Youth Disseminating Life Skills Programme whose aims were to help university students acquire knowledge on and to increase sensitivity towards child abuse and neglect by adopting a qualitative methodology. The sample consisted of 13 university students who took part in the Youth Disseminating Life Skills Programme (10 female, 3 male: mean age 22 years; age range: 20–31). With the help of a general interview guide, the focus group meetings were held. Established conventions guided the analysis. Participants recounted feelings about and benefits of the Programme, and ways to improve the Programme. Feelings about the Programme included both positive (e.g. feeling hopeful) and negative feelings (e.g. feeling traumatised). Participants recounted a variety of benefits of the Programme (e.g. correcting some myths about child abuse). Participants proposed some ways whereby the Programme could be improved. Some findings could be interpreted in terms of existing literature/theory. Other findings extended the literature and could be viewed as targets for future child protection programmes.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Child abuse and neglect;  
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groups

## Introduction

Child protection can be promoted through peer-led programmes. Evidence has shown that these programmes are effective in preventing drug, alcohol and tobacco use, promoting health, and managing chronic disease (Lorig, Ritter, Villa, & Armas, 2009; Philis-Tsimikas, Fortmann, Lleva-Ocana, Walker, & Gallo, 2011; Sikkema et al., 2000; Stock et al., 2007). In Turkey, programmes targeting youth for raising awareness about child abuse is being developed in the recent years (Altan, 2015). A new programme developed in Istanbul, Turkey called ‘Youth Disseminating Life Skills’ was delivered to university students (Akduman, Krespi Boothby, Acarturk, Sahin, & Dagli, 2015). Therefore, the present study assessed the acceptability of this newly developed programme by adopting a qualitative methodology. It was envisaged that the participants’ views about the Programme could provide an evidence base for future programmes on child protection.

## Method

### *Participants*

The sampling method was typical sampling which selected participants who were typical of university students taking part in the Youth Disseminating Programme (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Patton, 1999). Specifically, a 'typical' university student who took part in the Programme is a university student, the area of study being psychology, child development, law, medicine, nursing and social work at the age of 18–34 who completed the 12-week programme and completed a project. The sample consisted of 13 university students who took part in the Programme (10 female, 3 male; mean age 22 years; age range: 20–31). Exclusion criteria included being deaf and unable to speak.

### *Data collection*

Three focus group meetings were undertaken. General interview guide approach was used. This included a set of topics determined before the beginning of the focus group meetings, but adjusted the sequence and the wording of the questions during the interview (Patton, 1999).

### *Procedure*

During focus group meetings that lasted for 60–90 min, participants were prompted about the aim of and expectations from the Programme, effects of, changes experienced, initiatives that can be developed and barriers to these initiatives. Participants recounted their views of child abuse. However, these findings have been reported elsewhere (Krespi, Akduman-Akin, Acarturk, Sahin Daglı, & Daglı, 2016).

### *Data analysis*

Grounded Theory provided a basis for the present study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather than aiming at developing a theory which was based on the views of the participants (Patton, 1999), the data strategies of this theory were used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These strategies describe in a stepwise manner the ways in which the data are analysed. Developing a theory was thought to be premature given the fact that there was little evidence on this area. This approach has been also used elsewhere (Krespi Boothby, 2011; Tankurt, Krespi Boothby, Acarli, Kalayoglu, Kanmaz & Yankol 2016). Reliability trustworthiness of the data was achieved by providing transcript material to illustrate the themes identified, and coherence, theoretical validity and catalytic validity formed the basis of validity trustworthiness of the analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Stiles, 1993). Identification numbers of participants are given next to the illustrative transcripts.

## Results

### *Feelings towards the Programme*

Participants recounted some positive feelings towards the Programme. As well as feeling happy, thankful and lucky, participants felt hopeful, healed and soothed. One

participant (6) recounted how she felt hopeful as follows: *Quite honestly this gave me hope*. There was also the feeling that one was compelled to disseminate knowledge. However, participants recounted negative feelings including feeling (10) *traumatised* as well as feeling (9) *uneasy*. Other participants experienced mixed feelings including (5) *hopeful and hopeless*.

### **Benefits of the Programme**

Benefits included not only acquiring knowledge but also the notion that (11) *a good amount of deposit has occurred*, that helped towards (9) *categorisation*. Participants perceived child abuse as a humanity problem, illustrated by a participant (13) as follows: *I understood that this was the essential problem*. Participants recounted that child abuse could be coped with and prevented but also pondered as (8) *How can we prevent it?* There was also the perception that child abuse occurs in the family and different backgrounds, and necessitates not only the development of new values but also protection of the whole generation. One participant (9) described this process as: *When his/her relationship with his/her sibling today turns into her relationship with his/her child tomorrow, we can expect an improvement*. The Programme was also perceived as correcting some myths about child abuse especially getting rid of the view that (9) *he/she is only a child*.

Participants recounted that the Programme helped towards personal development. These included increasing awareness about existing voluntary services as well as the nature of child abuse, developing a sense of social responsibility, becoming more of an initiative taker, getting empathetic and considerate not only for the children but also for the abuser and feeling protected through fine tuning of one's perception as expressed by one participant (11) as *don't shut down your perceptions*.

The participants also perceived the Programme as fostering the view that (6) *There are many factors which can push a person towards violence*, and the abuser needed to be rehabilitated even to the point of being a victim of a (6) *social trauma*. The same participant pondered about solutions: *if we want to end this, I think we should include the abusers into our problem solving plan*.

The Programme was also perceived as helping the participants develop professionally including becoming more objective, feeling confident and feeling like an expert, in particular in relation to understanding the factors that can lead to child abuse. Participants also perceived the Programme as a vehicle for understanding the importance of the help of just (7) *one person*, and inspiring them in developing interventions or projects, providing support in particular emotional support, (5) *guiding people*, and informing others.

### **Ways to improve the Programme**

Participants wished for more theoretical knowledge (i.e. Holistic Approach to Care), in debt analysis of some topics such as child brides and (5) *case studies*. Participants suggested some changes (such as workshops, projects, seminars, longer interactive sessions) and recounted that the Programme could be organised in a way that would allow for research opportunities and (13) *practice*. In particular, participants thought that it would be useful to give seminars in, for example, (13) *primary schools* and (11) *high schools* as (13) *an alternative to writing a project*. Participants also recounted ways

to make the Programme more appealing and less (12) *boring*. They suggested the use of simulation techniques and more visuals such as (3) *a virtual baby*.

Participants not only suggested that the Programme should be delivered throughout Turkey but also to different professionals such as (11) *police officer candidates*. Participants recounted that participation in the Programme can be restricted to (12) *fewer people*.

## Discussion and conclusion

The present findings as an evidence base may guide professionals who are involved in designing and delivering programmes for youth, targeting child protection.

Feelings about the Programme were both positive and negative. The experience of positive feelings has the potential to instill a sense of hope and may motivate the participants to disseminate the acquired knowledge. That of negative feelings (feeling traumatised and uneasy) is not surprising and highlights the value of supervision incorporated in the Programme which aimed at increasing resilience and self-efficacy. Therefore, fostering the experience of positive feelings and ameliorating negative feelings may be targets of future programmes on child protection.

Participants recounted a variety of benefits of the Programme. The experience of benefits is consistent with literature on peer-led programmes in areas other than child protection (Gottfredson & Wilson, 2003; Lorig et al., 2009; Philis-Tsimikas et al., 2011; Sikkema et al., 2000; Stock et al., 2007) and highlights the value of using peer-to-peer interaction in promoting child protection. Benefits went beyond acquiring and depositing knowledge and included the understanding of child abuse as a humanity problem necessitating not only the development of new values but also protection of the whole generation. These benefits could be understood on the basis of the Systems Theory which postulates that child protection involves a dynamic process involving the interaction of the whole society (Stacey, 2000). There was also the view that the Programme corrected some myths about child abuse, in particular the view that ‘one is only a child’. This is important as child abuse is a major problem with long-term negative psychological effects (Piper, Garratt, & Taylor, 2013). Therefore, benefits may also be targets for future programmes targeting child protection.

Although professional development is expected, participants also recounted personal development such as getting empathetic and considerate for the victims following the completion of the Programme. There was also the view that the abuser was disadvantaged and needed to be rehabilitated even to the point of being part of a social trauma. This benefit also highlights the value of a systemic view of child abuse.

Participants proposed some ways to improve the Programme. These reflected the value of adopting different teaching modalities consistent with peer-led programmes in different areas such as drug prevention (Botvin, 1990) and indicated that future programmes on child protection need to adopt a multimodal and skills-based approach to training

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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