

LifeSkills school programme ‘transforming outcomes’ for children

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Last Updated: Saturday, September 7, 2019, 02:29

A schools-based programme, operating in one of the most disadvantaged areas in the State, is teaching children to make good decisions, cope with stress and feel good about themselves.

LifeSkills, an early-intervention programme, is “transforming outcomes” for children in [Ballyfermot](#), west Dublin, according to its co-ordinator, [Bernie Lavery](#).

[Ms Lavery](#) runs Family Matters, the local area-based childhood (ABC) programme – part of a national network of ABC programmes to improve outcomes for children in disadvantaged areas.

LifeSkills, which was brought to Ballyfermot and [Cherry Orchard](#) in 2017 on the initiative of the local drugs task force working with Barnardos, is delivered by teachers and youth workers in the eight local primary schools, and secondary school, to children between the ages of 8 and 14. Its impact on attitudes, critical thinking and confidence is reinforced and cumulative.

Dr Gil Botvin, who developed the programme at New York’s [Cornell University](#) medical school more than 30 years ago, took a day out of a holiday on Friday to visit St Michael’s national school in Ballyfermot and talk to sixth-class children.

The 11 and 12 year olds enthusiastically described learning to “stop, think and decide” when faced with a difficult decision and to be confident about making the right choices for them.

‘Get into trouble’

Evan (11) said a friend had wanted him to go to a place with him he knew he shouldn’t go. “I stopped to think about it and I said, ‘No, because I don’t want to get into trouble.’” Asked if he was happy with his decision he smiled: “Yeah, because my ma came out two minutes later.”

Tristan (12) said the programme showed him there were ways of saying no without having to just refuse. “You can say, ‘I have to go home for my dinner’, or ‘My ma said I have to be home now’, because if you stop and think it might be something you’ll regret, it’s best to say ‘no’ and be calm.”

The children talked about being assertive, and recognising when their bodies were telling them they were anxious or stressed, whether it was good stress or bad stress. “You can get butterflies in your tummy, or you get nervous,” said one girl. And when asked how to respond they had several solutions.

“You can breathe slowly,” said one. “You can go and talk to someone you trust”; “Go somewhere quiet”; “Write about it”, “Close your eyes and think about something nice”, and, “Meditate” were suggestions.

Smoking

Initial research on LifeSkills’ impact in Ballyfermot’s primary schools, published by Barnardos, finds children’s attitudes to smoking, alcohol and risk-taking were improved by an average of 73 per cent compared with scores before participating.

“I learned if your friend smokes you don’t have to,” one child told researchers. “It’s okay to stand up for yourself,” said another.

Dr Botvin said he would like to see the programme in schools beyond Ballyfermot, describing the children he met there on Friday as “terrific”.