

# Safe Strong and Free Programme Evaluation

## Report produced for Safe Strong and Free Highland



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**All data in this report has been anonymised.**

## Executive Summary

This research was funded by Safe Strong and Free Highland. The Safe Strong and Free (SSF) project is an abuse prevention programme aimed at young children to reduce the vulnerability of young children to abuse and assault. The programme consists of a series of three workshops that are delivered to all pre-school children in all nurseries in the Highland area. The programme is partly funded by Highland Council. The workshops are interactive and include three topics: Bullying, Strangers and Secrets. In May 2017 SSF commissioned researchers at the Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection (CCWP) to evaluate its programme. The primary aim of this evaluation is to consider the extent to which key messages conveyed during the workshops are learned and applied by the children who take part in the programme.

This research was undertaken between January 2018 to June 2019. In order to gain an in depth understanding of the impact of the workshops from a range of perspectives, this research comprised of multiple methods. Workshops were observed at nine nurseries in a range of urban and rural locations. A total of 14 workshops were observed throughout the duration of the evaluation. Children from three of these nurseries participated in a follow-up activity with the researcher to explore the extent to which they remembered their key workshop messages. We also observed everyday life in two nurseries three months after participating in the SSF workshops to see to what extent children put into practice the messages learnt during the workshops. We found that in general, children engage well with the workshops. They particularly enjoy the interactive activities. It can be difficult to maintain the engagement of some children especially when groups are larger, or there are more distractions in the environment. The skills and qualities of SSF project workers are a valuable asset and for the most-part, they are able to keep children engaged, interested and focused. Children seem to mostly understand key messages, but some appear confusing to some children. Reinforcement, repetition and embedding the key messages into the culture and routines of nurseries and schools is beneficial. It is also necessary to consider accessibility and inclusion for children who have disabilities, additional support needs or who are not under the care of their parents or have parents who identify as LGBTQ+.

We also consulted with nursery staff and parents/carers. Nursery staff and parents/carers of children who participated in workshops were invited to complete a questionnaire or an online survey. Any parent/carer whose child participated in the workshops between 1997 to June 2018 were invited to complete the online survey. There were 90 respondents. Parents of all children who participated in a workshop throughout the duration of this evaluation, between January 2018 to June 2019 were invited to complete a questionnaire. There were 407 respondents. Parents whose child participated in a workshop that was observed during the first year of the evaluation were asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire. There were nine respondents. In addition, nursery staff completed a questionnaire. There were 134 respondents. We also interviewed 5 early years practitioners at two nurseries to explore their views regarding the SSF workshops in more depth. We found that the SSF workshops were highly valued by most respondents. Parents were grateful for the opportunity to discuss these topics with their children particularly topics they may find difficult to raise themselves. We found many examples of children putting into practice key messages, especially around bullying and strangers. Some children are confused by the secrets workshop, and some parents do not feel confident about talking about this with their children. For most children, most of the key messages seem to be understood well, though most participants felt

reinforcement and refresher workshops would be beneficial. Learning is therefore viewed as on-going and this is more possible if key messages are embedded into everyday lives of children. Parents and staff express a desire to be involved and help children learn. It is important that workshop materials and resources are accessible to nursery practitioners and parents in a way which suits them and is accessible to different abilities, including literacy and language needs.

After analysing data from the first year of this evaluation we found that one area for development was the inclusion of children with additional support needs in the workshops. SSF had piloted a workshop for children with additional support needs, and during the second year of this evaluation (September 2018 to June 2019) we evaluated the delivery of the pilot workshops at one school for children with additional support needs. To do this, we carried out observations of refresher workshops delivered to four children, and we interviewed parents of children (n=3) and school and SSF staff members (n=5). We found that most children were enthusiastic to participate in workshops and some remembered key messages and could repeat them. Visual and interactive resources were highly valued, as were the skills, qualities and flexibility of the SSF project worker. This work requires the project worker to adapt materials to each individual child, and communication needs are a central part of this. Parent and school involvement are key to embedding this learning, and the workshops acted as an opportunity for parents to increase their awareness through education about the vulnerabilities of their child. Whilst this was challenging for them, it was also appreciated.

## Introduction

The Safe Strong and Free Project (SSF) is a Primary Abuse Prevention Programme. It is a Highland-based charity which aims to reduce the vulnerability of young children to abuse and assault. Research has consistently identified that in the UK, year by year there are increased reports of child abuse<sup>1</sup>. Whilst an increase in reporting can be seen as concerning, it also suggests that some people are more able to speak out if they are concerned. However, Scottish policy and national guidelines identify that more needs to be done to protect children against abuse and prevent abuse occurring<sup>2,3</sup>. Young children are particularly vulnerable to abuse. For example, in Scotland the number of reported sexual offences against children aged 13 and younger was one of the highest age groups reported to experience sexual abuse, second to children aged 13-15<sup>1</sup>. Further, a UK-wide study identified that 90% of children who experience sexual abuse are abused by somebody they know<sup>4</sup>. However, national statistics are likely to underestimate the prevalence of child sexual abuse due to the shame and secrecy people experience around disclosure, and that national statistics will only capture what is reported to authorities<sup>4</sup>.

Childhood experiences of abuse can be a major predictor of difficulties in later childhood, adolescence and adulthood, impacting on physical health, mental health and wellbeing<sup>5,6</sup>. Therefore early intervention and abuse prevention is crucial for all children, particularly for children who are at risk<sup>1</sup>. National guidelines suggest further research must be done to understand more about the effectiveness of prevention interventions for child abuse and neglect<sup>3</sup>. Scotland's policy for protecting children and young people is underpinned by a prevention and child-centred framework<sup>7</sup>. However, little is known about school-based abuse prevention programmes and there are few programmes that are offered to younger children that specifically aim to prevent abuse. Programmes such as SSF tend to be offered to older children and they tend to target and prevent specific forms of abuse or assault (for instance, child sexual abuse<sup>8</sup> or bullying<sup>9</sup>). However, this does not address the vulnerabilities of younger children to abuse and assault.

Education authorities in Scotland have a responsibility to provide adequate support to all children, including children with additional needs. Children with additional learning needs are at significantly greater risk to abuse and assault than those who do not have additional needs, yet children who are disabled and/or have additional learning needs report less knowledge about how to keep themselves safe<sup>10</sup>. Children with additional learning needs are more likely to be abused by a family member or someone known to them<sup>11</sup>, more likely to be bullied<sup>12,13</sup> and are likely to turn to the support of a trusted adult if they have identified one<sup>10</sup>. However, very little is known about programmes for children with additional learning needs which aim to prevent abuse. The NSPCC have identified a need for programmes which aim to increase children's awareness and their ability to seek help<sup>10</sup>. The interim findings of the first year of this evaluation identified that this is an opportunity to develop knowledge and learn more about how workshops such as SSF may be meaningfully implemented and delivered to children with additional support needs.

The SSF programme consists of a series of three interactive workshops delivered to all children attending nursery in Inverness and the Highland area. The workshops address three topics: Bullying, Strangers and Secrets. A refresher workshop is delivered in P1, which aims to embed the key messages of all three

workshops again to ensure the key messages are repeated and children have a better opportunity to remember them and put them into practice. Workshops include:

- Education about each topic (what is a stranger, what is bullying, what is a secret);
- Interactive activities through the use of puppets, storytelling and games;
- Empowerment to learn and put into practice strategies if feeling unsafe;
- Support to identify safe adults (such as teachers or trusted adults at home);
- Children are given a storybook to take home, encouraging parents and carers to engage with the key messages at home.

In May 2017 SSF commissioned researchers at the Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection (CCWP) to evaluate its programme. The primary aim of this evaluation is to consider the extent to which key messages conveyed during the workshops are learned and applied by the children who take part in the programme.

## Evaluation Aims:

The primary aim of this evaluation is to consider the extent to which key messages conveyed during the workshops are learned and applied by the participating children. This research adopted a longitudinal approach to consider:

- a) children's and parents' overall satisfaction with the programme;
- b) key lessons learned;
- c) whether key messages from the workshops have been retained over time;
- d) how learning from the workshops may be used in practice.

## Method

A mixed-methods approach was used for this evaluation. Information was gathered through observations of the workshops, observations of everyday nursery life, follow-up activities with the children, questionnaires to parents and nursery staff and interviews with parents and nursery staff. We also carried out an evaluation of a pilot workshop delivered to children with additional support needs. This evaluation data was gathered through observations, interviews with parents and interviews with nursery and SSF staff.

### Workshop observations

Observations of the workshops were carried out at nine local authority run nurseries over the period of this evaluation. Observations were carried out by the researcher and notes were taken after the workshop. The content of the observation notes was analysed thematically.

*Table 1: Nurseries we observed workshop delivery at*

<b>Nursery</b>	<b>Workshop</b>	<b>Number of children</b>
<b>Nursery 1</b>	Workshop 1: Bullying Workshop 3: Secrets	27 children
<b>Nursery 2</b>	Workshop 2: Strangers Workshop 3: Secrets	7 children
<b>Nursery 3</b>	Workshop 2: Strangers Workshop 3: Secrets	12 children
<b>Nursery 4</b>	Workshop 3: Secrets	5 children
<b>Nursery 5</b>	Workshop 3: Secrets	8 children
<b>Nursery 6</b>	Workshop 3: Secrets Workshop 3: Secrets	18 children
<b>Nursery 7</b>	Refresher workshop (P1)	18 children
<b>Nursery 8</b>	Workshop 3: Secrets Workshop 3: Secrets	15 children
<b>Nursery 9</b>	Workshop 1: Bullying	7 children

## Follow up activities with children

In addition to observing workshops, during the first year of the evaluation (January to June 2018), six weeks after the delivery of the final workshop, the researcher went back to the nurseries (nursery 1, 2 and 3) for a follow up activity with the children. The aim was to explore with the children what messages, if any, they had retained from the workshops. The follow up session used a similar format to that adopted by the workshops focusing on the three key topics: bullying, strangers and secrets. A mixed approach was adopted including puppet play, role play, ‘quiz’ and rating activities.

## Observations of nurseries

To see whether the key messages from the SSF workshops were remembered and put into practice by the children, the researcher visited two nurseries (one city based and one rural location) 2-3 months after they had finished the final SSF workshop. Two days were spent at each nursery, during what was considered a ‘typical’ nursery day. The aim of these two-day visits was to observe every-day nursery life and see if children engage with, remember and put into practice any of the key learning from the workshops.

Observations were carried out by the researcher, and notes were taken after each day of observations, paying particular attention to any instances in which it was observed that children were putting into practice key messages from the SSF workshops or may have had an opportunity to put what they learnt into practice.



## Parent and carer feedback

Parents/carers of all children taking part in the SSF program between January 2018 and June 2019 were asked to complete a questionnaire following the delivery of the last workshop. We received questionnaire responses from 407 parents/carers. In addition, parents/carers of the children attending the three nurseries where observations took place in the first year of the evaluation (between January and June 2018) were asked to complete a follow up questionnaire six weeks following the delivery of the third and last workshop. We received nine completed questionnaires.

Between January and June 2018, parents whose children had taken part in the SSF programme in previous years were invited to complete an online questionnaire. There were 90 respondents.

## Nursery staff feedback

Between January 2018 and June 2019, nursery staff were invited to complete a short feedback form to inform the evaluation. We received 134 responses.

Additionally, staff from two nurseries (n=5) were invited to participate in an interview to explore their views about how the children engage with the SSF workshops, and how well the key messages are put into practice by the children. All staff were familiar with the SSF workshops and had been present during at least one of the workshops. Interviews were carried out at the nurseries. They were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically<sup>14</sup>. Both members of the research team independently coded interview data before identifying common themes.

*Table 2: Table of nursery staff participants who were interviewed*

Nursery	Number of staff interviewed
Nursery 1	2
Nursery 2	3

## Workshops for children with additional support needs

SSF have developed workshops for children with additional support needs. SSF spent considerable time (over 12 months) developing materials for these workshops. They worked with the head teacher of the school, specialists, and parents. They also spent time getting to know each individual child so that workshop materials could be tailored to individual child's needs. Additionally, some of the material developments have been useful to apply in mainstream schools too. SSF piloted these workshops in January 2017 at one school for children with additional support needs and delivered one-to-one follow up refresher workshops to four children (age 12-13) in March 2019. The primary purpose of the refresher workshop was for key messages to be revised with each individual child. The workshop materials had been developed over a 12 month period, in consultation with the school staff and parents. Key messages remain the same as they are for the mainstream nurseries. The main themes that are taught are:

- Respect;
- Assertiveness;
- Co-operation;

- Things that should not be kept secret;
- It is 'always right to tell'.

The workshops are delivered in a series of four workshops: Safety Network, Bullying, Strangers and Secrets. Children are supported to create their 'Safety Network' – adults they trust to keep them safe, and they are supported to identify what is safe and unsafe, and how they might be able to know if they do not feel safe (e.g. if they have a funny tummy or wobbly knees). Their safety network is reinforced throughout the series of workshops and associated activities. For the pilot workshops for children with additional support needs, activities and communication style are intended to accommodate for children's varied needs, differences and abilities.

To evaluate the pilot workshops, we carried out observations of refresher workshops, interviews with school staff, and interviews with the SSF practitioner and parents.

### **Observations**

To evaluate the pilot workshop, refresher workshops were observed in order to see how children engaged with the activities and remembered any of the key messages. These were delivered to individual children (n=4) aged 12-13.

### **Interviews with parents/carers**

Parents/carers of children who had participated in the workshops were invited to be interviewed. Three parents were interviewed. Interviews took place at the school or on the phone. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically<sup>14</sup>.

### **Interviews with staff**

Nursery staff and the SSF workshop facilitator were interviewed. Four staff in total were interviewed. Interviews took place at the school. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically<sup>14</sup>.

## **Ethics**

This research received ethical approval from the University of Stirling's General University Ethics Panel (GUEP). All participants were under no obligation to take part in the research, and participation was voluntary.

Before participation in all data collection activities, we gave out participant information sheets to all staff who participated in the evaluation, and to parents/carers of children attending the nurseries that we observed. We gave prospective participants opportunities to discuss what their participation would involve and allowed time to answer any questions. Parents were required to provide their consent for their child to participate in any research related activity. Children were informed about the purpose of the research (such as observations), and they provided verbal consent for the researcher to observe them after being given the opportunity to ask any questions.

Participants who were interviewed gave permission for the interview to be audio recorded and were aware of what they needed to do if they later decided to withdraw their data. Participants were provided with information about the purpose of the interview, that their participation was voluntary, they were not obliged to answer questions they did not want to, and information regarding who to contact for further information.

All data from this project was stored securely on the University of Stirling research drive, in line with the University policies and in accordance with the General Data Protection guidelines. We have taken care to ensure that none of the participants can be identified in this report. All names and identifiable details have been changed.

## Findings

### Observations of SSF workshops

The SSF Programme consists of three workshops: Bullying, Strangers and Secrets. Observations were carried out at nine nurseries. A total of 14 workshops were observed, including one P1 refresher workshop, and at least one of each topic. Children engaged generally well with the workshops. They engaged best when activities required their active engagement (e.g. playing with puppets or practising the SSF movements), rather than passive learning (e.g. watching a video). Whilst children appeared to enjoy activities (for instance, playing with puppets), it was clear that sometimes the purpose of the activity was unclear to some children. Therefore, it might be worthwhile to consider how some activities could be used to reinforce the key messages from the workshops.

Children who had previous knowledge of the topics engaged more fully with the workshops and had better recall of the key messages. However, even where the children did not seem to engage with the workshops, at least some of the messages had been retained. One of the key messages children retained, including at the refresher workshop, was that they should always tell a parent if there was anything worrying them. Parents were often identified by the children as their trusted adults, although it is worth noting that all children were supported to identify other trusted adults in their lives (e.g. parent, adult sibling, grandparent, teacher). Whilst a parent being viewed as a trusted adult was a message many parents welcomed, some care needs to be taken during the workshops to avoid an assumption being made that all children live with their parents and that all parents are able to keep children safe.

At the beginning of each workshop, children were introduced to the new topic (Bullying, Strangers or Secrets). At the second and third workshops they were also reminded about the key lessons from the previous week. Most children remembered what had been discussed during previous weeks – mainly that they should say ‘No!’ in a firm voice and put their hands out to stop unwanted behaviour. Some children also remembered that they should tell a trusted grown up if someone had been unkind to them. However, the variety of topics covered during the workshops could be a source of confusion for some children, particularly at Workshop 3. At this point, most children mixed the messages from Workshops 1 and 2 so that when asked, for example, what to do if a stranger approached them they responded that they should say No! (a key anti-bullying strategy taught to children in Workshop 1). Additionally, new ideas about body ownership seemed to confuse some children. For example, one of the key messages from this workshop is ‘My body belongs to me’ and that no one else can enter their ‘invisible bubble’ without prior consent.

However, some children became confused about who their body belongs to. When asked, they said it belonged to God, or to their mummy or to their friend. Nonetheless, some children evidenced attempts at understanding the concept of consent and their 'invisible bubble' by asking questions, to which the SSF project worker was able to answer.

Children still evidenced their enjoyment in relation to playing with the puppets, doing the SSF movements, and most children took away the message that they should always tell a trusted adult if something was bothering them or someone had been unkind or hurtful to them.

By the time Workshop 3 was delivered, children were familiar with the worker delivering the session and were clearly more comfortable in their presence and more responsive to their instructions. Likewise, the workers had gained a better understanding of the children's needs and were therefore better able to modify the sessions to respond to these needs and to respond to the group size. One of the children who had additional learning needs, and who had found it quite difficult to engage with previous sessions, was in this final week much more able and willing to engage with the worker thus highlighting the importance of building relationships before delivering sessions to children. However, there were a couple of instances where children with additional needs were taken out of the workshop because they were not able to engage or they were seen as distracting the other children, or they did not wish to join in.

Whilst most children evidenced enjoyment particularly when the puppets were used, not all children wanted to engage with the workshops, and if given the choice some might decide they would rather not take part at all. From a children's rights perspective children should be given the opportunity to decide whether they wanted to participate or not, rather than consent being assumed<sup>15</sup>. In practice, however, that would be difficult to implement within the nursery/school environment where they are not often given a choice as whether to participate or not in the activities that are provided. To make the workshops the best possible experience for children further consideration should be given with regards the number of children in any one group, the composition of the groups and the set-up of the rooms where the sessions are delivered. Children who attended a workshop as part of a small group (4 to 8 children) could more easily engage with the activities as there was more opportunity for the worker delivering the session to engage with them and less distractions in the room. The environment also makes a difference. Some workshops were delivered in nursery cloakrooms or corridors. These are busy spaces and do not often facilitate children's engagement as there are many distractions. Children were better able to focus in quiet, private rooms.

In addition, the storybooks were a source of excitement for some children. Some children even asked for the book before it was distributed by the project worker and expressed great interest and enthusiasm for taking it home and sharing it with family.

### Follow up activities with children

The aim of the follow up was to explore with the children what key lessons from the workshop they remembered. With some encouragement most remembered what to do if someone was not nice to them (say No! and put your hands out; tell a grown up). Some children remembered that 'a stranger is someone

you don't know'. Some were unsure what to do if approached by a stranger – with many volunteering that they should say No! and put their hands out). A few remembered that they should run away from a stranger and, in some cases, kick the stranger; and a few volunteered that they should 'yell and tell' too. Whilst the messages from Workshop 3 seemed to be the least well understood by the children most knew at the follow up that their bodies belonged to them and that they should never keep secrets from their parents.

The key messages children seemed to have taken away from the workshops were that they should say "No!", run away and tell a trusted adult if something troubled them. Children who had engaged well at the workshops were the ones that could recall the most during the follow up session suggesting that the workshops were most effective when children have previous knowledge of the topics being explored. There was some evidence that other children also benefited from the workshops – for example, some children who did not seem to engage well during the workshops demonstrated at the follow up session that they had retained some of the key lessons such as 'say No!' when someone is not nice to them. Nursery staff often commented at the end of the session that they were surprised by how much the children remembered from the Workshops. Staff also commented on the importance of running these sessions again at primary school.

### Observations of nurseries

Three months after participating in the SSF workshops, we observed everyday life in two nurseries. The researcher visited the nursery and spent two consecutive days (8:30am-1pm) at each nursery. The researcher observed morning drop offs, morning activities, lunch time, and after lunch pick-ups. The purpose of the observations was to see to what extent children put into practice the lessons learnt from the SSF workshops in their usual nursery days. A range of activities were observed, including having student volunteers visit, the dental nurse visit, fire alarm drills, and usual lessons and play time. This provided some useful opportunities to learn how, in different situations, children may put into practice lessons learnt from SSF.

Many children were seen putting their hand up and using the word 'No' to stop unwanted behaviour towards them, such as another child taking a toy from them. Whilst children did this often, this was not always successful and some still became upset. They did not appear to enlist the help of other children (something that is taught in workshops) but they frequently sought the help of an adult in class (a teacher or myself) to help them to resolve the situation. Seeking the help of a trusted adult is something the children are encouraged to do, if they find themselves in a situation getting bullied and where their own attempts at stopping the bully have not been successful.

Generally, children appeared to behave in a respectful way towards each other. When a situation happened that upset them, most children actively made decisions to tell an adult what was bothering them, in the hopes that the adult would help them to sort it out. The adult did not always help them; rather, sometimes the adult (usually teacher) encouraged the child to be kind and share, even though they had not, for example, finished reading the book that the other child had tried to take from them. For example, one child had taken something that belonged to one of the other children. The other child

became upset and told the teacher and asked for help in retrieving her toy. The teacher did not help a lot, so the child then asked me to help. Another situation was during lunchtime when one child became upset that others did not stop looking in her lunchbox and making her feel uncomfortable. Similarly, she went to a teacher to help her to sort it out. The teacher did not help a lot, but this teacher might have been a trusted adult learnt from the SSF workshops. Nursery staff would often encourage the child to 'use their words' to the other child to help to resolve what was upsetting the child, thus, potentially reinforcing the SSF message to be empowered to say 'No' to bullying behaviour.

In the nursery environment, practitioners regularly hold children on their knee, and some children can be quite affectionate, for example, by hugging teachers/other adults in class, and by holding hands. Sometimes this was initiated by teachers and sometimes by the children. These may have been good opportunities to practice key messages about consent and the 'invisible bubble' (i.e. the need for others to ask before they come close to us or touch us). However, these activities seem usual and it is difficult to know in this setting, what key messages children take from the Secrets workshop.

During one of the observation days, the children had a dental nurse visit, to show about the importance of health teeth and how to brush teeth. This was a good opportunity to look at whether keeping their teeth clean was something children identified as keeping strong and healthy bodies, as taught in the SSF workshop. Children did not seem to make this link, but they were not resistant to the idea that keeping teeth clean is healthy. During another of the observation days, children were visited by student volunteers who come regularly to help work with the children. There were therefore many more adults in nursery on this day, and children seemed mostly happy about this, using it as an opportunity to play with the adults, me included. This may have been an opportunity to be mindful about strangers or unknown adults. However, the visitors appeared to be familiar to the children, and they had visited several times before. Thus, the children did not appear to be cautious about them.

It is hard to know what is as a result of the SSF workshops and what is not. It is difficult to observe children's knowledge and understanding of some of the key messages in a nursery setting, particularly around strangers and secrets. Nursery staff appeared generally positive about the workshops, and they commented that refresher workshops might help, because talking about risk and abuse is difficult with such young children and they might forget. Most notably, children were able to deal with bullying behaviour by noticing it made them feel sad or uncomfortable, and asserting themselves by telling a teacher or trying to assert themselves before seeking the help of an adult.

It should be noted that some teachers and nursery practitioners did not know what happened in workshops because they were not present in the workshops. Thus, they could not, even if they wanted to, implement any messages in the classrooms or during nursery day, unless they had engaged substantially with the SSF resources. It might be that some repeated workshops and greater teacher involvement would be beneficial. However, teachers are already resource tight and do not have spare time. It is also worth noting that whilst some children in nursery participate in the workshops, others may not. Therefore, embedding key messages into everyday nursery life might be more of a challenge. In order

to put into practice what is learnt, particularly about bullying, this may require all children to understand about respect, consent and appropriate prosocial behaviour.

#### **What did we learn from the observations and activities with children?**

- Children particularly engage well with interactive activities such as role plays, puppets and storybooks.
- Group size is an important consideration. In smaller groups, children appear more engaged on the workshop content. In larger groups children are more likely to disengage
- It takes time for children to build a sense of familiarity with the SSF project worker. Friendliness and approachability of the project worker help.
- The environment that the workshop is delivered in matters. Rooms that are quiet, private and not too busy have minimal distractions and children are better able to focus.
- Many children name their parents as safe adults. It is important to support children to identify other safe adults too, and explicitly encourage this. SSF do important work with children doing fire and police service visits to help children to learn that there are some strangers (e.g. fire and police people) who are safe and can be trusted. This could be highlighted more in workshops, for instance, through the role plays. Additionally, it is important to consider the Inclusivity of messages about families. There exists a diverse range of families (e.g. single parent, parents who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, children who are not looked after by their parents). Therefore, considering the inclusion of a diverse range of families in the role-plays, storybooks and messages given to the children is important.
- Some children are able to practice pro-social behaviour such as sharing and being kind to each other in everyday nursery life. Specifically, many children used the word 'No' to stop unwanted behaviour, and they found an adult to help them if they needed.
- Children with additional support needs or learning disabilities tended to struggle to engage. It is important to consider how to better reach these children.
- It is worth considering how the key messages from workshops can be more embedded into the culture and routines of nurseries and how to support nursery staff best.

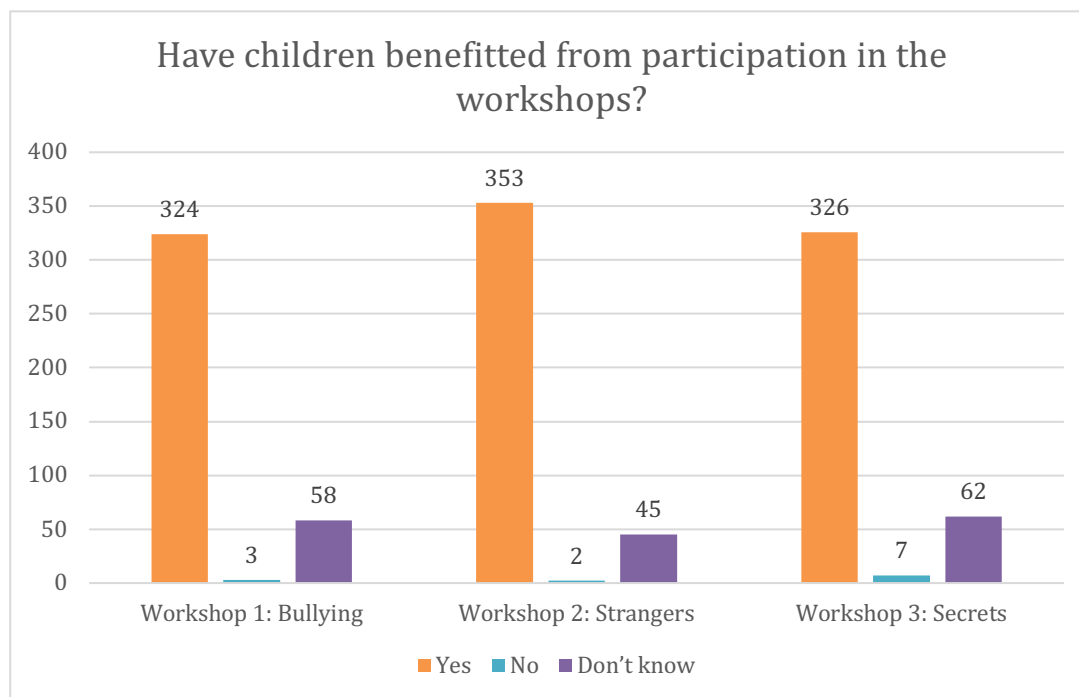
#### **Feedback from parents and carers**

All parents whose children participated in the SSF workshops between January and June 2019 have been invited to complete a short questionnaire following completion of the programme. A total of 407 questionnaires were returned. Most children (n=297) were 4 years of age when they attended the workshops and most attended all three workshops.

#### **Benefits of taking part in the program**

Most parents agreed that participation in the workshops had been beneficial to children. That is particularly the case for Workshop 2: Strangers where 353 parents agreed that their children had benefited from participating.

Figure 1: Parents' views on whether their children benefitted from participating in the SSF workshops



Parents were asked to indicate what were the benefits resulting from participation in the workshops. A key benefit to children was that they demonstrated increased knowledge about all the three topics and confidence about what to do if faced with the situations explored in the workshops.

*'She has told me about the workshops and has also told me several times she has since used the [say no to] bullying technique whilst at the nursery'*

*'I have 4 children that have gone through the workshops, this child has remembered the most info and she taught us all three workshops over dinner and was spot on'*

*'It [the workshops] has made him confident in knowing what to do, I.e. 'I would just say NO in a big loud voice mummy!' and 'It's ok for you to see me naked mummy because you're my mummy!'*

Another key benefit of the workshops was that they encouraged discussion at home. Some parents were particularly grateful for this opportunity. Some commented that the workshops and storybooks had helped them to talk about difficult topics with their children; topics that they might have found difficult to know how to talk about themselves.

*'I probably wouldn't have raised these issues with my child. The workshop and books helped to open up a discussion on topics I wouldn't readily introduce. My child enjoyed the sessions and told me about them without prompting - this is unusual for him'*



*'it has been a starting point for conversations within the family. It has raised awareness for the child. He has reiterated the messages from each workshop'*

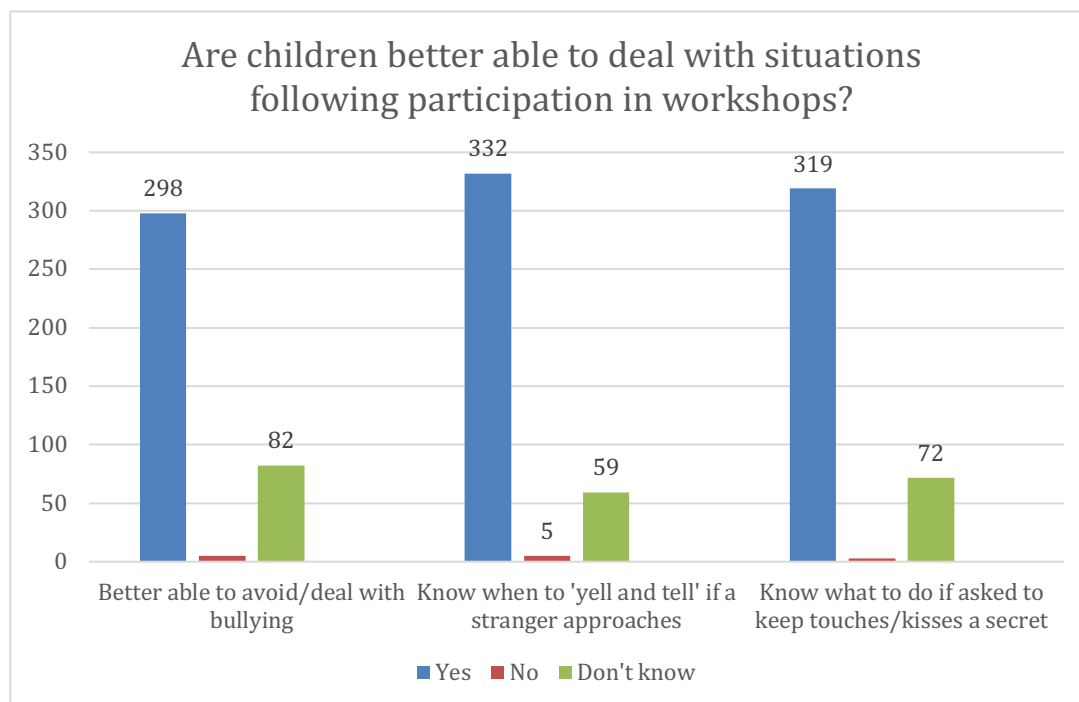
Some parents told us that the workshops reinforced messages that they were already teaching their children at home, and that the workshops and storybooks had created an opportunity for further discussion, which had been very valued.

*'We talk about these subjects at home but these workshops reinforced the importance of these subjects which aren't always easy to talk about'*

## Lessons learned

Parents were asked to indicate whether following participation in the SSF programme children were better able to deal with the situations discussed in the workshops. As Figure 2 shows most parents agreed that their children had learnt the key lessons from each workshop and were, consequently, better able to avoid and deal with bullying (n=298), knew what to do if approached by a stranger (n=332) and what to do if asked to keep a kiss, cuddle or touch a secret (n=319).

Figure 2: Are children better able to deal with situations following participation in the SSF workshops?



Parents were asked to indicate what were the key lessons children had taken away from the workshops. One key lesson from all workshops was that children should always tell a parent or a teacher about anything that troubled them – be that bullying that they have experienced or witnessed, unwanted attention from a stranger, or the request to keep something a secret. As aforementioned, many parents noted that this was a message that they promoted at home and they were grateful to the programme for reinforcing it.

Parents noted that following participation in Workshop 1 children had learned that bullying is wrong, they should treat each other kindly and with respect, and that bullying should not be tolerated. Parents noted that the workshop had given children the confidence to stand up for themselves, ask for help if required and to intervene when they see another child being bullied. Many parents also noted that the workshop had highlighted to children the importance of being kind to one another.

*'You can stand up to someone being mean, and have a friend help if it's scary'*

*'To tell someone if she is or sees someone being bullied'*

*'To be more kind and look out for others'*

Following participation in Workshop 2, children had learned that 'a stranger is someone you don't know' and that they should not speak to or go with a stranger. Children had also learned that they should 'run, yell and tell' when approached by a stranger. Children were taught that it is OK to hit or kick a stranger if they are being taken, and that they should use their 'special yell' to attract attention if needed.

Parents felt that the key message children took away from Workshop 3 was that they should not keep secrets from their parents. Several parents highlighted that this particularly applies to secrets that make them feel unsafe, uncomfortable, or that involved kisses, cuddles and touches. Some parents also highlighted that a key message their children remembered from the workshop is that their body belongs to them, and that they have an 'invisible bubble' that no one can go in without their prior consent.

*He knows not to keep secrets and always tell mum and dad if someone asks him to keep anything secret'*

*'no kiss or hug is a secret, listen and walk away to tell mum or adult you know'*

A few parents noted that their children had been more reticent about the messages from Workshop 3 leading some parents to conclude that the content of this workshop was not as clear to their children as the messages from the previous two Workshops.

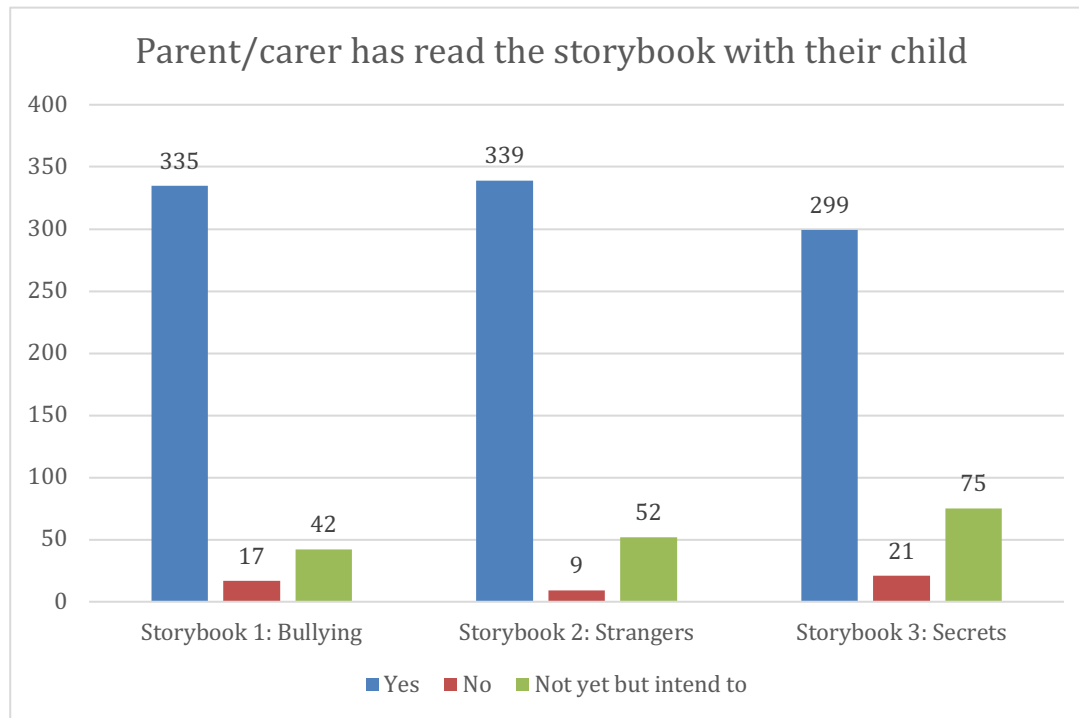
*'Not said much about this one, not sure if he understood it as much'*

*'he asked a lot of questions on this and I struggled to give him the answers'*

## Storybooks

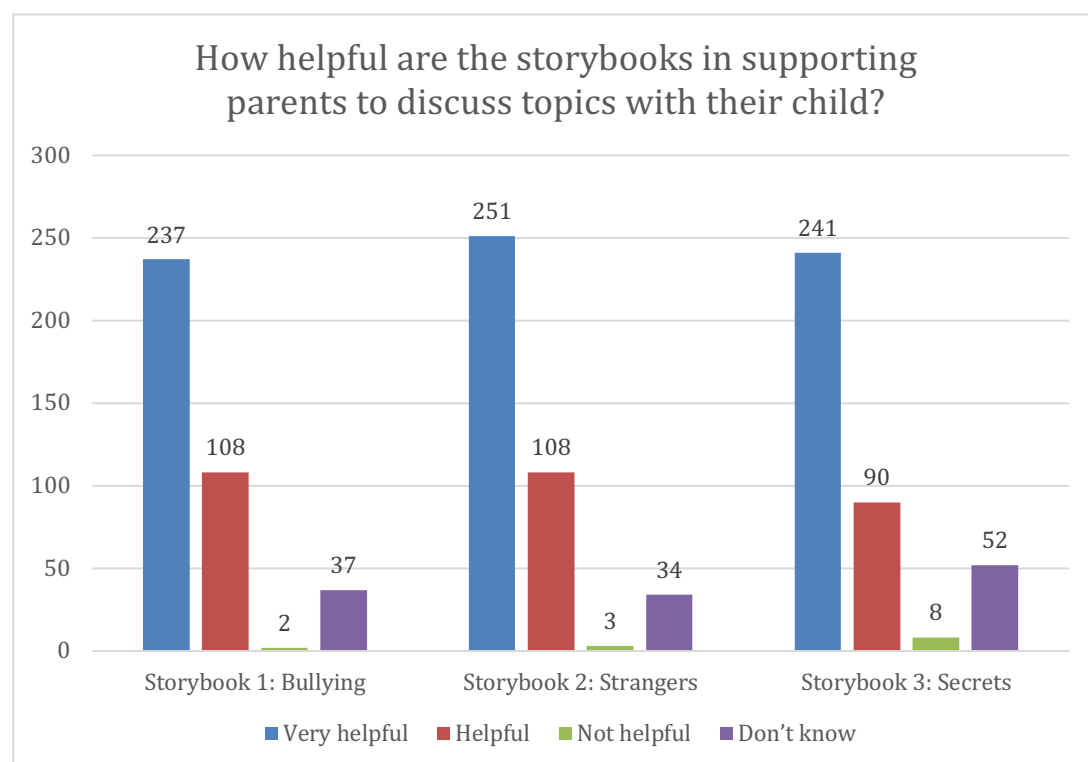
At the end of each workshop the children receive a storybook on the topic explored on that session. The storybooks are an opportunity for parents to a) find out more about what their children have learned; and b) reinforce the messages of the workshops by reading the stories with their children. Most parents had read the storybooks with their children or were planning to do so in the near future.

Figure 3: Read the storybooks with children



As figure 3 illustrates, most parents had read the storybooks at home or intended to. Less parents had read the Secrets storybook (n=299) and some commented that this was the most difficult topic to talk about with their children, suggesting that they felt their child was too young for some of the messages in this workshop and they did not feel it was appropriate or they did not feel comfortable talking about secrets about kisses and touches at this point. This being said, most parents were extremely grateful for the opportunity to approach important topics with their child and welcomed the opportunity to discuss the workshop content at home. Most expressed that their child was keen to talk about the workshops, and some had even read the storybooks to their siblings, initiating whole family discussions. Most parents were of the view that the storybooks were very helpful, or helpful, in supporting further discussion about the workshops' key messages at home.

Figure 4: How helpful are the storybooks in supporting parents to further discuss issues with their child?



*'Storybooks are very useful to parents to find out more about the messages the children are given'*

*'The storybooks were great for me as a parent to see how the content was delivered to my child. They also helped reinforce the messages of how to stay safe'*

Several parents also noted how the storybooks were 'a hit' with their children and how the children had requested the book to be read several times.

### Information provided to parents

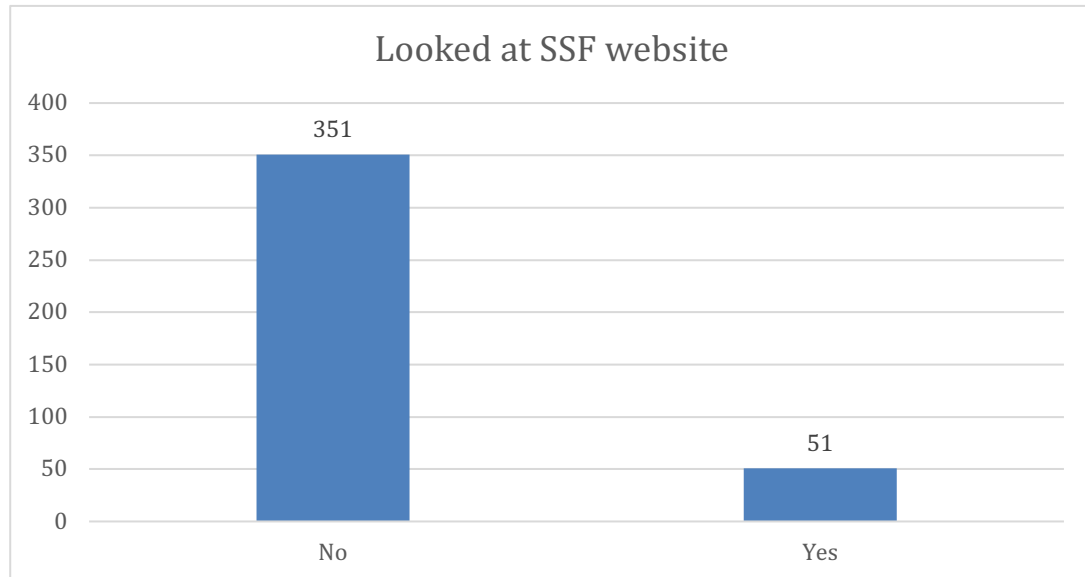
Parents were asked to indicate whether they found the information they received about the programme before the workshops were delivered at the nurseries useful and clear. Most parents felt that information about the programme had been explained clearly. 389 felt that the aims of the programme had been explained well, and 374 felt the format of the programme had been explained well. Only nine parents felt that the information provided did not clearly explain the aims of the programme; and 21 felt that the information they received did not clearly explain the format of the programme.

Parents tended not to comment about the information they received but stated that they did receive it. However, a few parents commented that they either did not receive information (though suggested it was because the nursery received it late). Also, some commented that they would have liked to have had more information about the workshops before they were delivered in the nurseries.

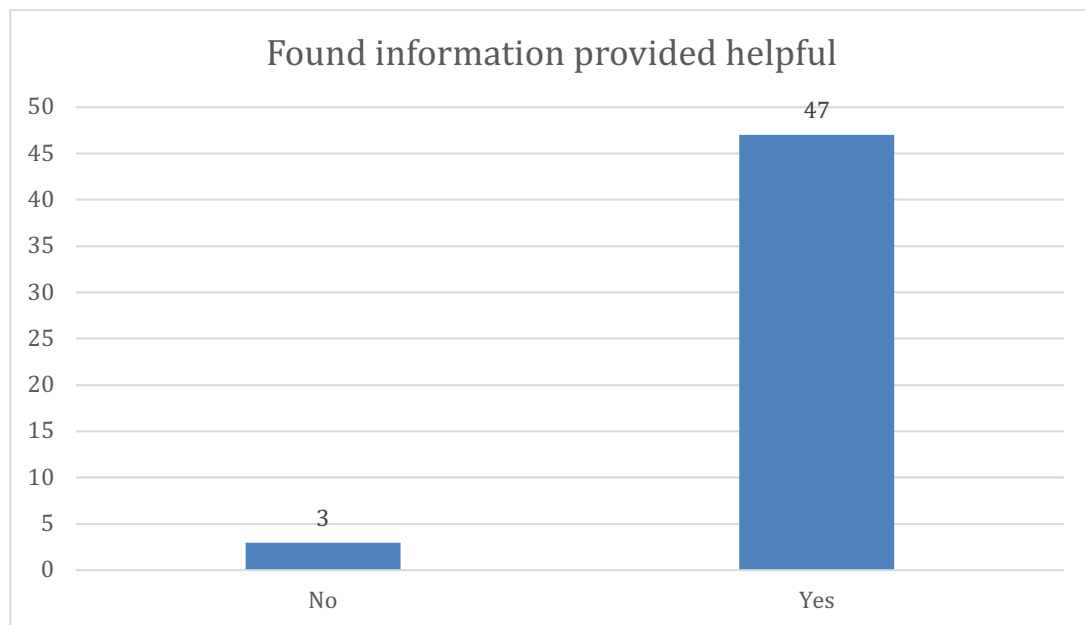
*‘The leaflet is useful, but I would have liked to have seen the resources in advance and had dialogue about how this was going to be delivered’*

In their initial correspondence to parents SSF indicates that further information about the workshops can be found on their website. Only 51 parents had looked at the website – 47 of which found the information accessed helpful.

*Figure 5: Number of parents who looked at the SSF website*



*Figure 6: Did parents who looked at the SSF website find the information provided helpful?*



### Follow up Questionnaire for parents and carers

Parents of the children attending the three nurseries observed during the first year of the evaluation were asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire six to eight weeks following completion of the programme.

The aim of this follow-up questionnaire was to consider whether the children retained the information they learnt; and whether they may have put this learning into practice. Nine parents returned this second questionnaire. Of these nine, only one looked at the SSF's website to obtain more information about the content of the programme and to support further discussions about the topics with their child.

The nine children had attended all three workshops. All parents agreed that participation in Workshop 1: Bullying and Workshop 3: Secrets had been beneficial to their child. With regards to Workshop 2: Strangers, two parents were not sure whether participation had been beneficial to their child.

Parents noted that with regards to bullying, their child had gained a better understanding of what bullying is, what to do if they or someone else were being bullied (i.e. tell a teacher or parent) and the negative impact of bullying. Parents tended to comment that their child had learnt that:

*'Bullying is wrong and to always tell a grown up to help friends'*

Most respondents felt that, following participation their children were better able to avoid and deal with bullying. One parent commented that:

*'He has told us what he would do if someone bullies him or if he sees someone being bullied'*

The key lessons parents felt children took away from Workshop 2: Strangers, were an understanding of who a stranger is ('A stranger is someone you don't know') and that they should not speak to, or go with, strangers. Seven parents agreed that children would know when to 'yell and tell' if a stranger approached them, one disagreed and another was not sure. One parent noted that following this workshop their child had gained a new confidence in speaking to people she did not know, but that was due to developing a more sophisticated understanding about when it might be safe to engage with strangers (i.e. when the parents are close by).

*'Didn't use to speak to strangers but now tries speaking to everyone because 'it's ok when with an adult'*

As parents noted in the first questionnaire, the key message children seem to take away from Workshop 3: Secrets, is that they should never keep secrets from their parents.

*'Daughter told me it is not nice to keep secrets from your parents'*

The nine parents who completed the follow up questionnaire agreed that their children would know what to do if asked to keep a cuddle, a kiss or a touch a secret.

*'My son knows what is right about secrets and to tell me if someone tells him to keep a secret from me'*

Parents noted that as well as learning the key messages about the workshops one of the benefits of attending the programme was that the issues were approached in a fun, child-friendly way, thus enhancing children’s learning, and making potentially difficult topics, easier to talk about in a developmentally appropriate way.

One parent noted that their child had already been able to put that learning into practice.

*‘(Child has) used the information regarding bullying to tell a child to stop what they were doing and informed teacher’*

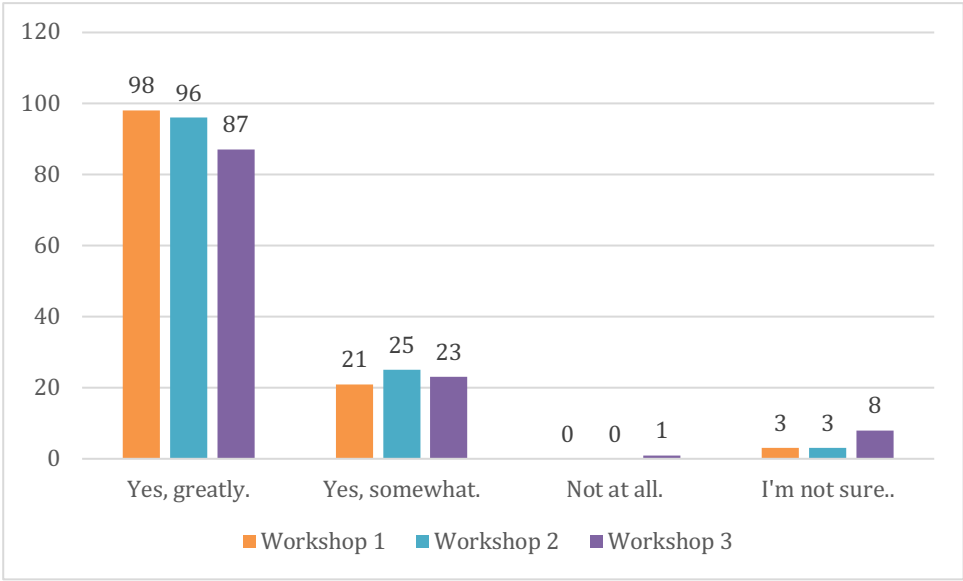
Online Questionnaire for parents and carers

Ninety people completed the online questionnaire providing information about 122 children that had attended the workshops between 1997 (n=3) and 2018 (n=25). Of the 122 children all but two had attended Workshop 1: Bullying, all had attended Workshop 2: Strangers; and all but four had attended Workshop 3: Secrets.

Benefits of taking part in the program

Most parents agreed that their children had greatly benefited from attending the SSF workshops.

Figure 7: Child benefited from attending the workshops



The key benefits of participation in the workshops were that children had gained increased knowledge about the topics in a way that was age appropriate and as a result they were more confident in dealing with situations if/when they arise.

*‘They are confident in knowing what to do in situations and can make independent decisions based on what they have learnt on the course’*

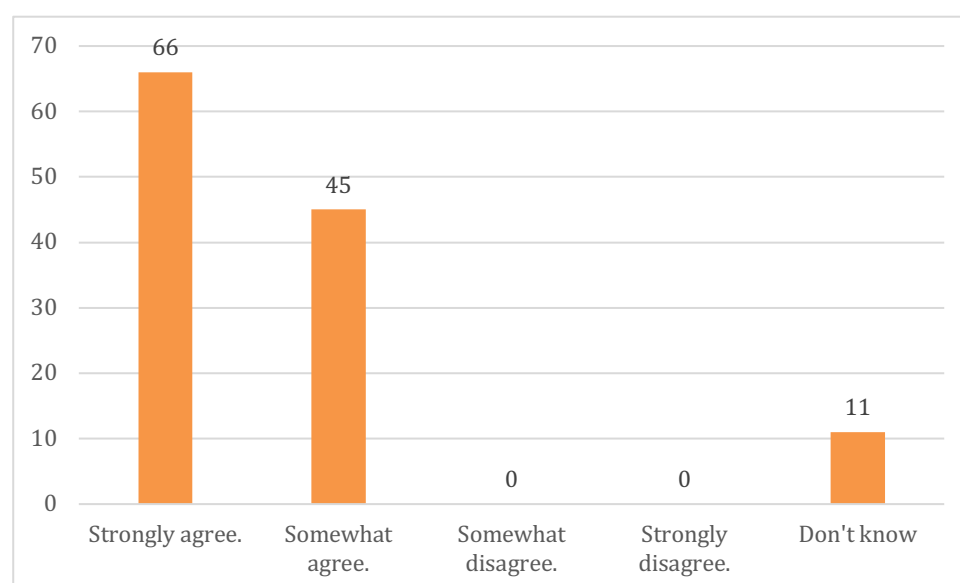
In addition, the workshops had provided an opportunity for further discussion of these topics at home.

*‘Open up discussions about subjects which are hard to broach without scaring young children’*

## Lessons learned

Parents were asked to indicate whether they believed that their children were better equipped to deal with a variety of situations as a result of their participation in the workshops. As **Error! Reference source not found.**6 illustrates almost all parents (n=111) agreed that their child was better able to avoid and deal with bullying as a result of their participation in Workshop 1.

*Figure 8: Bullying*



When asked to comment on what were the key lessons that children had taken away from Workshop 1 most parents noted that their children learned that bullying is wrong, that they should stand up for themselves and their friends by saying ‘no’ to the bully and that they should tell a grown up whenever they have been bullied or when they see other children being bullied.

*‘He has gained confidence to identify bullying and confront people when he feels bullied - he even declares to us now that we should stop bullying him when we say no to something...’*

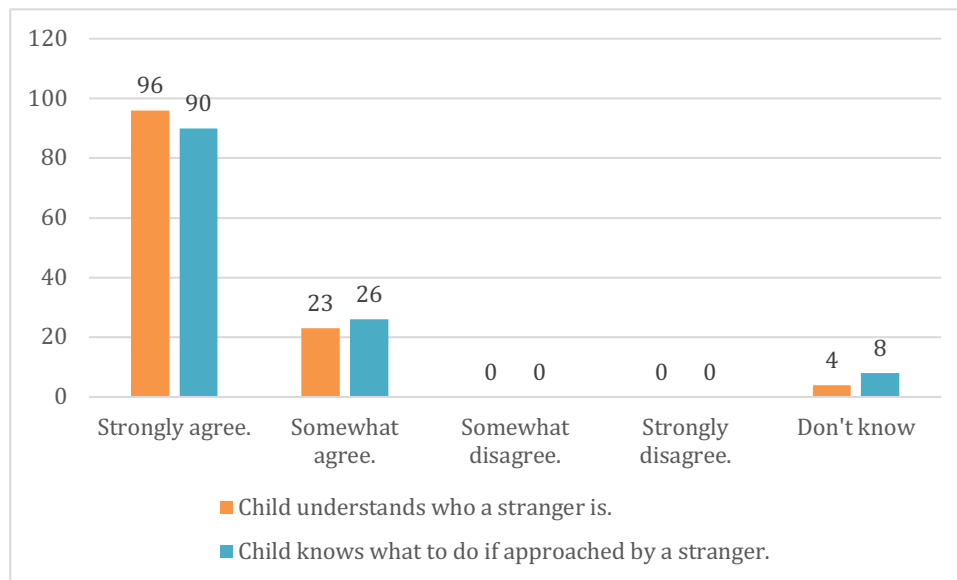
Some parents also noted that children understood the impact bullying has on the person being bullied.

*‘That bullying is unkind and hurts people’s feelings and makes them feel lonely’*

Most parents agreed that following participation in Workshop 2 their children understood who a stranger is and what to do when approached by a stranger.



Figure 9: Strangers



According to parents, the key lesson children took away from Workshop 2 was that they should not talk to strangers.

*‘Never speak to strangers even if they have a puppy or sweet’*

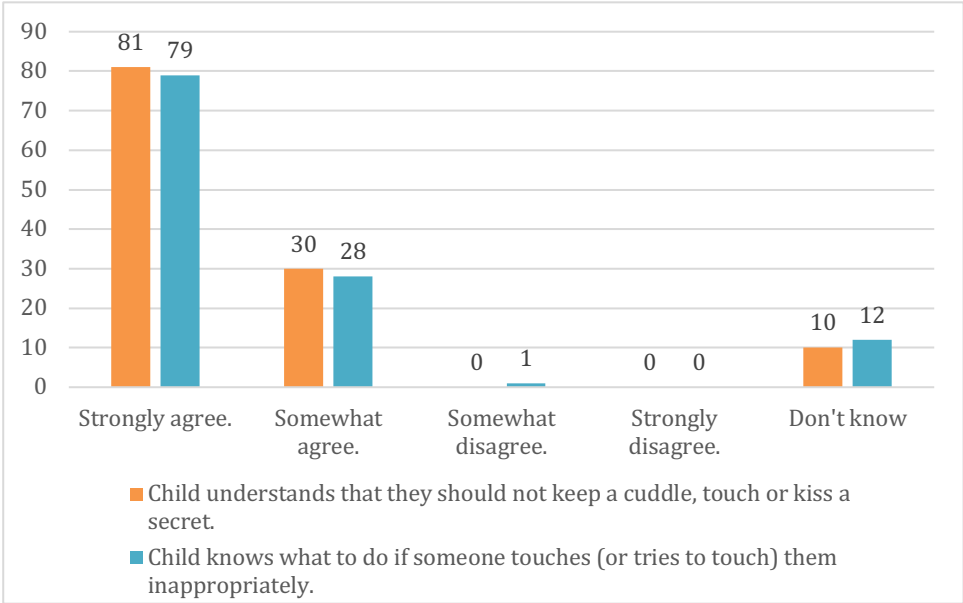
Some parents noted that children had understood that if they were accompanied by an adult that it was ok to engage in conversation with a stranger.

*‘Not everyone is a nice person. As long as mum or dad are with us it’s OK to speak to new people. Never go anywhere with anyone unless mum and dad say it’s OK’*

A few parents also mentioned that children were aware that they should never go away with a stranger.

As Figure 8 illustrates, most parents agreed that following participation in Workshop 3 their children understood that they should not keep a cuddle, touch or kiss a secret (n=111) and they knew what to do with someone touched, or tried to touch, them inappropriately (n=107)

Figure 10: Secrets/Inappropriate touch



According to parents, the key lesson children took away from Workshop 3 was that they should never keep secrets from their parents.

*‘Tell your parents everything and don’t be afraid’*

Some parents also noted that their children had learned that their body belongs to them and understood that certain parts of their body are private and thus should not be seen or touched without their prior consent.

*‘It’s your body and you decide what happens to it. Don’t keep secrets you are not happy with’*

*‘To tell about any kind of touching which is in private areas or makes them feel scared or uncomfortable’*

A few parents have noted that they felt their children had not fully engaged with this workshop or had not quite fully understood the messages.

*‘He responded little to this last session and hardly ever mentioned issues in relation to secrets’*

*‘She has taken this literally and so won’t keep secrets about birthday presents...!’*

**Storybooks**

As Figures 9 and 10 illustrate, most parents had read the storybooks with their children at least once and had found these very helpful or helpful.

Figure 11: Read the storybooks with child

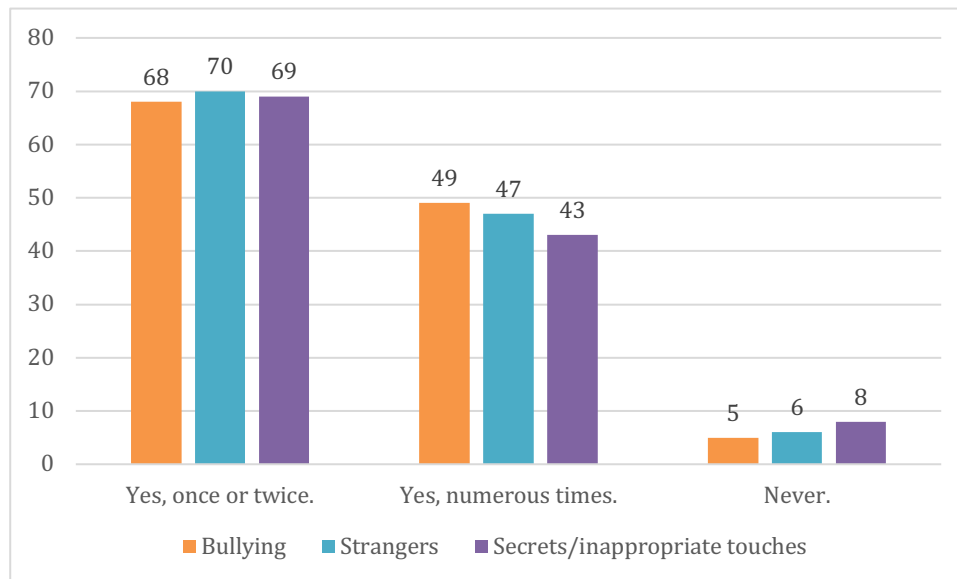
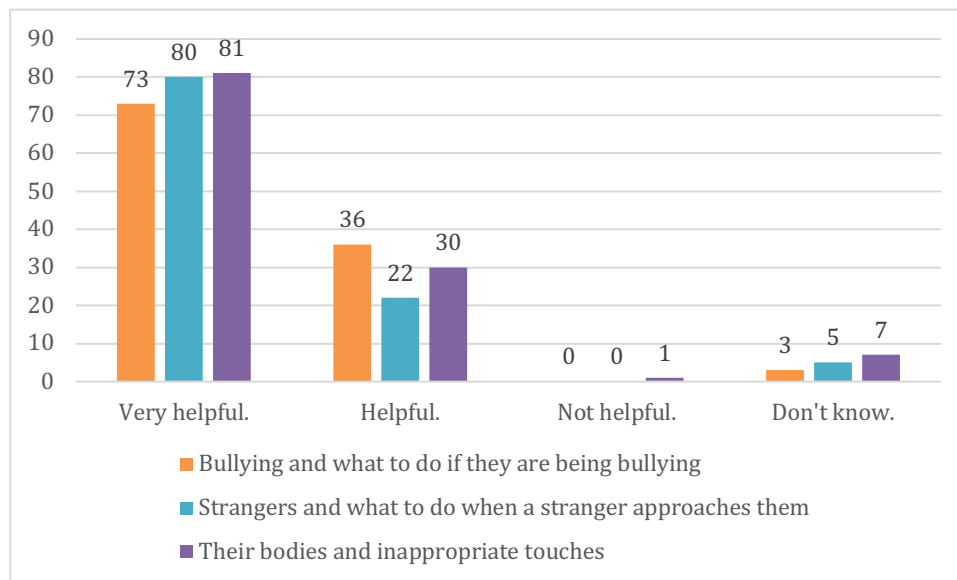


Figure 12: How helpful were the storybooks



Parents found the books very helpful both as a starting point in which to talk about difficult topics and as a way in which to reinforce messages previously discussed at home in a fun and age appropriate way.

*'The books are a great way of reinforcing the message in a non-threatening way'*

*'The books the kids got home gave us ideas to begin chatting to them about the topics covered where before I didn't know how to broach each subject or begin a chat about them. They gave us the building blocks to chat about subjects in a way my child understood without feeling frightened or worried. [...] I feel confidence they would know what to do if they ever had to'*

### Long term impact

One of the key aims of the online questionnaire was to explore the long-term impact of the workshops and several parents volunteered stories about how their children had put the learning from the workshops into practice, and how that learning had been evidence throughout the years.

*'At age 13 my daughter still uses the key messages learnt all those years ago'*

*'My daughter is starting to ask questions about the bodily changes [...] and I think openly talking about SSF issues has helped us to keep an open line of communication where she feels she can talk to me about these things. I love the SSF it has helped my family'*

*'As a nursery teacher myself, I have found this to be an invaluable resource for children and have seen how it has stayed with children throughout their lives, my son is nearly 8 and my daughter is 10 and they still talk about bullying, strangers and inappropriateness, so the strategies that they have learned have impacted their whole school lives'*

Whilst the feedback was mostly positive some parents commented that some children had not fully understood the messages of the workshops.

*'I think this workshop needs repeated to be fully understood. Some reports from other parents that they children were very confused. One child told his mother she was no longer able to kiss him goodnight. There seems to be some confusion for the children'*

The need to have these messages revisited at later stages was a point made by several respondents.

*'I would love to see it repeated with children in mid primary and P7'*

*'I think it's a great programme. It's just a shame it isn't revisited throughout the school years'*

### What can we learn from parent/carer feedback?

- Most parents felt the workshops are beneficial to their children. Workshops provide knowledge to children, and better prepare them for what to do if they are in an unsafe situation. Only a small number of parents were not sure about whether their children had taken on board the key messages.
- Children have put into practice what they have learnt in the workshops, particularly lessons about bullying, being kind to other people what a stranger is and what to do if approached by a stranger.
- Information provided before the workshops is helpful to most parents. Very few parents looked at the SSF website, suggesting there may be alternative ways of engaging parents and providing information and resources to them.
- Storybooks are highly valued. Children enjoy reading them at home and many children request for books to be read several times.
- Most parents were grateful for the opportunity to discuss these topics at home, as these are difficult topics to talk about. The workshops had opened up opportunities to discuss important and sensitive topics. Most parents felt the workshops delivered sensitive information in a child-appropriate and friendly way.
- Workshop 3: Secrets, might be the most confusing to children and the most difficult for parents to talk about.
- Repetition of key messages is key. It is worth considering delivering further workshops throughout primary school and considering the extent to which nurseries and schools embed the key messages into their own culture and routines.
- Accessibility is important. As aforementioned, not all children live with their parents or are looked after by their parents. And not all parents are able to keep children safe. Also, the majority of parents noted that more information about the workshops would be useful to them, yet they had not looked at the SSF website. It is worth considering how information is provided to parents, given that some parents do not have a lot of time available to them, and others may not find the website accessible.

### Questionnaire feedback from nursery staff

All nursery staff where the workshops were delivered between January 2018 and June 2019 were invited to complete a short questionnaire. A total of 134 early years professionals completed the questionnaire. Seven questionnaires were excluded from the final analysis because, having not taken part of the workshops, the respondents felt unable to comment on the programme other than to say that, in their view, the information provided to nurseries about the programme was clear and they were aware of the program's aims and objectives.

Of the 127 early learning professionals that completed the questionnaire and whose data is included, 70 had worked in early learning and care (ELC) settings for 10 or more years, 28 had 1-5 years' experience, 21 had 5-10 years' experience, and a further 3 had one year or less experience working in ELC settings.

Most respondents (n=90) had heard about the SSF programme several years ago with only 18 having only heard about the program this year, and 19 having heard about the programme a few years ago. Most had taken part in the workshops several times.

*Figure 13: How often professionals have taken part in the SSF workshops*



Respondents were asked to reflect on the most recent time when they took part in one of the SSF workshops and to indicate whether they agreed with a series of statements. Almost all agreed that in general terms:

- the workshops were well delivered (n=124);
- the children enjoyed the workshops (n=120);
- the workshops' key messages were well understood by the children (n=117);
- the children have talked about what they have learnt after the workshops (n=105);
- the children will be able to put into practice the lessons learned at the workshop (n=105).

In addition, several respondents (n=58) had seen the children putting these lessons into practice. This included hearing the children talking about the workshops, making drawings relating to the workshop topics, using 'no' to stop unwanted behaviour, children reminding each other about their personal space, and role playing the situations enacted in the workshops by the puppets.

Several respondents also noted that they had seen the children using the learning from the bullying workshop:

*'Bullying to stop unwanted behaviour towards them or others'*

*'saying 'no' when other children were upsetting them'*

*'They tell other children to stop [unwanted behaviour] in a more positive way'*

Professionals were also asked to indicate whether they had had feedback from parents about their children putting into practice the learning from the workshops and thirteen indicated that they had received some feedback from parents. Most of the feedback staff received from parents related to the children talking about the workshops' topics following their participation.

*'[One] parent at 'stay and play' overheard a conversation between a sister and older brother who had attended SSF 2 years ago discussing what they would do if a stranger approached them'*

*'A couple of parents fed-back to me that their child had spoken about strangers and what they would do'*

Nursery staff were asked whether they had found the workshops and the materials provided by SSF helpful to their practice. As Figures 14 – 16 illustrate, almost all staff agreed that the workshops and materials had afforded them an opportunity to discuss bullying, strangers and secrets with the children and they found that the materials provided by SSF were helpful.

Figure 14: Workshop 1: Opportunities to discuss bullying and helpful tools to discuss bullying

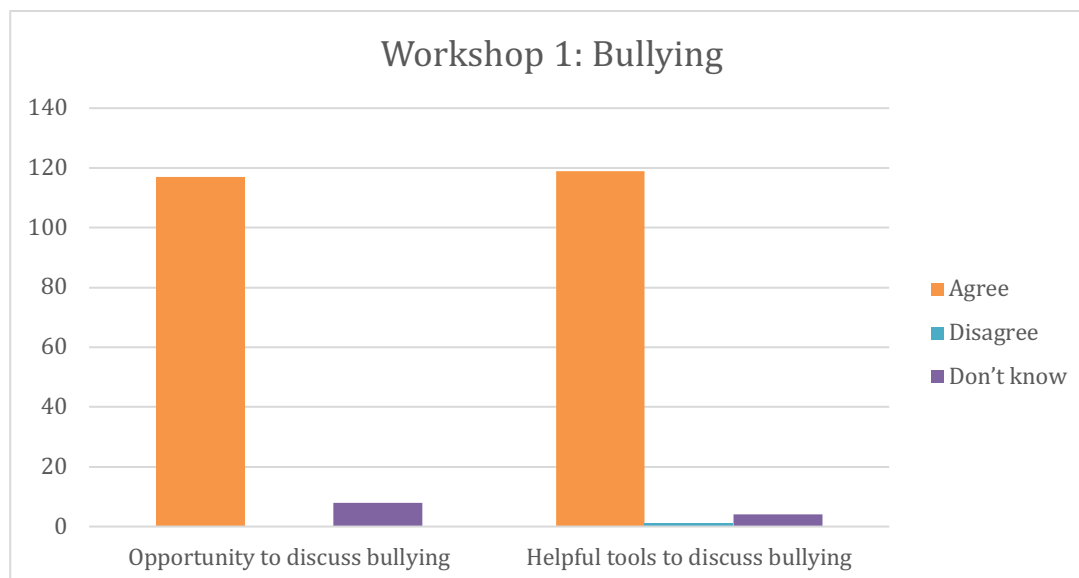


Figure 15: Workshop 2: Strangers: Opportunities to discuss strangers and helpful tools to discuss keeping safe/strangers

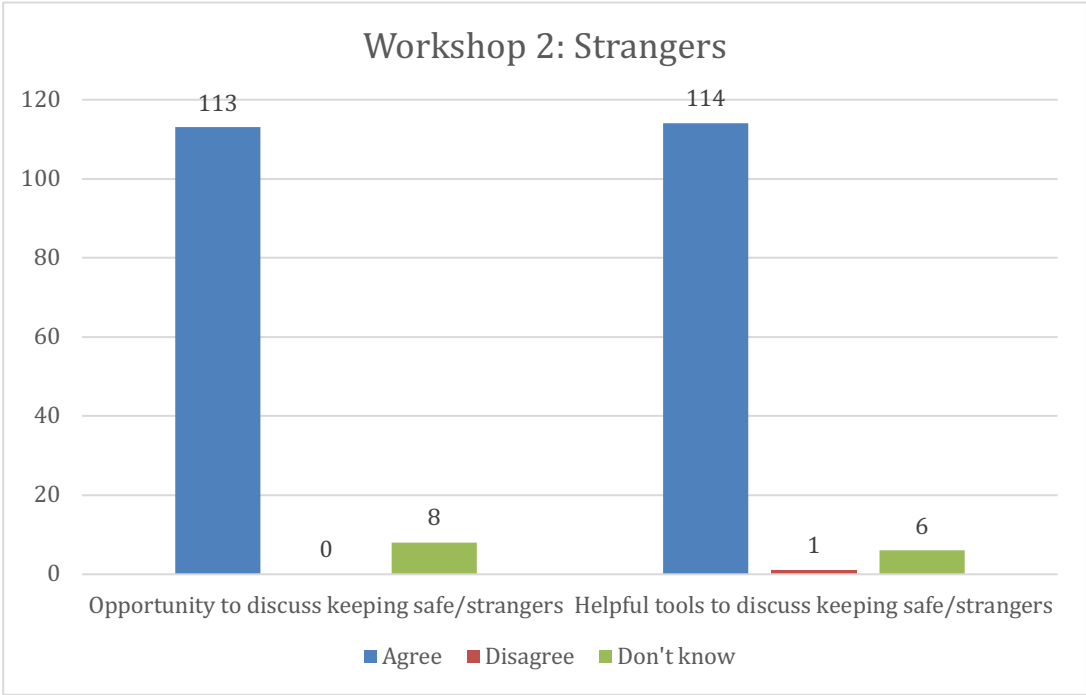
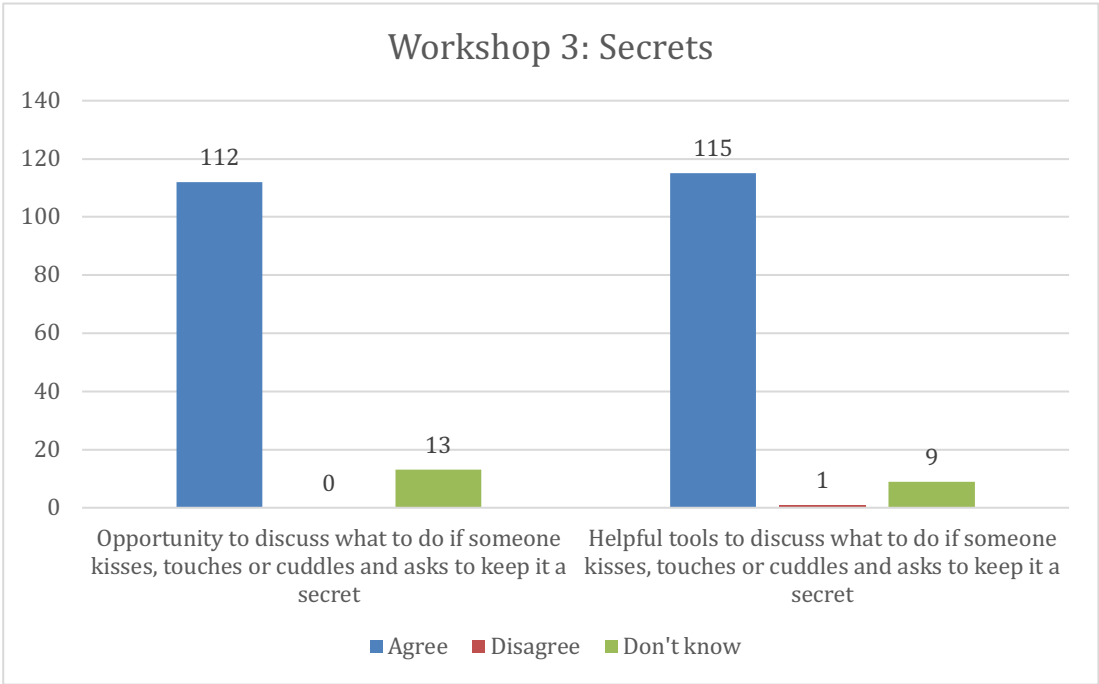


Figure 16: Workshop 3: Secrets: Opportunities to discuss secrets and helpful tools to discuss what to do if someone touches, kisses or cuddles without the child's permission and asks to keep it a secret



Nursery staff provided several positive comments about the program. Some commented on the skills and qualities of the SSF practitioner, the age-appropriate and interactive nature of the workshops, and how the workshops have supported further discussion about the topics.

*‘We have always found SSF to be an excellent learning tool to help keep our children safe and to give them confidence and courage’*



*'Excellent workshops. Very helpful. Children always engaged lots of discussion takes place after them'*

*'Great programme, very well delivered, getting the messages across to the children in a child friendly manner with the use of puppets'*

*'[It is] nice to see slightly updated programme which includes internet safety in line with current times. Fun workshops which convey messages effectively'*

There was also some constructive criticism of the program. A few respondents felt unsure about whether some children would remember key messages, and there were some concerns about how one of the key messages promoted by the programme may impact on children who are not looked after by their parents.

*'We don't feel a one session support the children's understanding'*

*'Sensitivity required for looked after children. Child friendly language/understanding of needs. Taking cues from adults who know children'*

Overall nursery staff provided positive feedback about the SSF workshops, highlighting that workshops are well delivered and providing many examples of children putting into practice what they have learnt. Nursery staff noted the developments in programme delivery such as the inclusion of internet safety, and felt workshops delivered important messages in child-appropriate ways. Many nursery staff commented that workshops are valuable and should be repeated more so that learning can be reinforced, suggesting that one series of workshops may not be enough.

### Interviews with nursery staff

Early years practitioners (n=5) at two nurseries were interviewed about their views and experiences of the SSF workshops being delivered to the children at their nurseries. We identified that clear and simple messages using interactive learning are viewed as a key positive about the workshop delivery. Staff we interviewed felt most children understand key messages but that learning is on-going and therefore learning should be reinforced. They felt parents and carers are well positioned to help reinforce key messages, and that there are some barriers to participation that could be considered.

### Clear and simple messages

Most participants reflected that one of the strengths of the workshops were that they deliver messages in a clear, simple and effective way. One participant commented that:

*'the key messages were simple but effective'*

Additionally, participants felt that delivery of the key messages was age-appropriate. Particularly, they noted that the approach of project workers was valuable. For example, project workers were generally viewed as approachable, friendly and attentive. One participant told us that the project

worker kept the children engaged and interested by demonstrating that what the children had to say was important, and others commented that the project workers were able to encourage children's participation, including ones who are more reserved and may be less likely to speak out in groups.

*'they make sure that every child gets the chance to be involved and encouraged to be involved'*

*'letting them know that they're listened to, which I think the whole point of the Safe Strong and Free is to reassure children that they are listened to'*

### Interactive learning

Participants were invited to tell us what they felt were the best features of the workshops and what helped children to engage with them. All participants said that the interactive learning approach of the workshops was a key feature that the children enjoyed and engaged mostly well with. For example, the puppets were frequently given as an example of something the children enjoyed and even looked forward to.

*'the minute the puppets come out, they all sit up straight, and they lean forward, and they, they're very focussed. It draws them in'*

Further, participants provided other examples. They said that toys, role plays, chants and movements (for instance, 'A stranger is someone you don't know', and the Safe Strong and Free movements), storybooks and visual material all help to keep children interested and engaged in their learning.

*'the resources that they've got now are great with the picture books, the video, the puppets, all of that helps them as well, not just sitting and listening. I think it take...it gets them...their imagination going'*

Whilst participants highlighted that children in general are keen to learn, some participants noted that engaging children in the workshops can be a challenge at times. Therefore, smaller groups and paying attention to the environment, for example a quiet space with minimal distractions, can help.

### Children's understanding of the key messages

Participants were asked about the extent to which they felt children understood the key messages of the workshops. Mostly, participants felt that children demonstrated a good understanding of the key messages. Participants provided some examples of when they had seen children put into practice their learning. These involved lessons about bullying and strangers.

*'when we've been out and about and an adult has spoken to us as we've been walking, the child will say, 'you shouldn't have spoken to them, that's a stranger.'"*

Many participants provided examples of children using pro-social behaviour, and that principles of kindness and sharing are in line with lessons that are already taught in nursery. Some participants noted that there was some confusion, particularly about secrets and strangers, and on-going reinforcement and refreshers in future years would be beneficial.

*'her mum was trying to reassure her that 'I'm here'. I think that's a wee bit of a message that needs to get over a bit more, you know, when you've got your own adult, you don't need to scream at strangers'*

Staff we interviewed felt that there was mostly some confusion about the secrets workshop, and that, whilst the nursery already teaches children about bullying and being kind to one another and about stranger danger, some nurseries do not talk with children about topics raised in the secrets workshop (such as consent, keeping private parts private, and that secrets about kisses, cuddles and touches are not OK).

### On-going learning

All nursery practitioners highlighted that learning does not take place only during the SSF workshops, but it is an on-going process that takes place at home, in nurseries and in future years too. They noted that refresher workshops in P1 and further up in school would be beneficial in order to reinforce key messages and support children as their understanding becomes more sophisticated.

*'I definitely think as well it should be reinforced for Primaries 1 to 3, definitely, just to reinforce the messages with them, you know?'*

*'I guess, just repeating them, isn't it? Using repetition of those key messages at home and in nursery, you know'*

One staff member felt repetition would be particularly important in P1 after children had transitioned to primary school; reminding them of what they had learnt and that they have safe adults whom they can turn to if something is worrying them.

Staff members at one nursery noted that they kept copies of the storybooks and puppets at the nursery and regularly reinforced the messages with children and committed to embracing the workshop messages and materials in their everyday activities.

*'we're here with both the storybooks here. We reinforce that. We'll say to them at the end of the session, what have we learned today at Safe Strong and Free; what's a stranger? And we clap it with them, strangers and when you're going home, just reinforcing it the whole time with them. All the workshops we try to talk about it with them'*

Reinforcement of key messages in nursery and at home was viewed as a crucial part of supporting children to embed their learning and empowering them to develop knowledge, refresh their memory and know what to do if in an unsafe situation. Staff members at this nursery viewed part of their role as keeping children safe. This kind of staff involvement was not observed in all participating staff members. Some suggested that whilst the storybooks and materials were useful, they already have existing rules about bullying (being kind to one another), but they do not usually talk about keeping safe and secrets and they did not talk about keeping storybooks at nursery and engaging children in the learning post-workshop participation.

### **Involvement of parents/carers**

Parents and carers can help to reinforce the key messages of the workshops. SSF provide storybooks for children to take home, and information on the website for parents to engage with. Staff we interviewed felt that parental involvement was key to the learning of children and the success of the SSF workshops.

*‘it's important, I think...we've tried to encourage as many parents as possible to come to the workshop before the children participate in it’*

Staff felt that most parents were keen to engage with the storybooks and that nursery practitioners can play a crucial role in supporting parental engagement by offering opportunities for parents to talk and ask questions. Particularly, a couple of participants felt that the Secrets workshop was most challenging for some parents to engage with and talk about with their children. They felt additional help with this might increase parents' confidence and make a potentially scary topic more speakable and less daunting to discuss with their child.

*‘maybe keeping the secrets one, because they wouldn't know how to word it to their children without scaring their children off as much because they probably say it a lot different than you guys would’*

Increasing access to workshop materials, resources and information for parents was viewed as important. However, as explored below, some parents may face additional barriers to accessing workshop material and resources.

### **Accessibility and inclusion**

Participants were asked whether they felt there were any barriers to participation for children and their parents. Nursery practitioners highlighted two key barriers to participation. Firstly, staff highlighted that children with disabilities, additional support needs or those with communication difficulties or developmental delays struggle to engage with the workshops.

*‘anybody with learning difficulties. You know, if they can't communicate themselves how are they going to communicate their message that they've learnt’*

Additionally, nursery practitioners felt that children who do not use English as their first language also struggle to engage, and their families risk exclusion if they struggle to engage with the resources and materials available to them, such as the storybooks children bring home.

*'There are a few who English isn't their first language, so getting them, you know, there's so many different languages now in the highlands. They get the gist of it, but maybe not as in depth as other children'*

Further, participants highlighted that not all parents have time available to them to support their children's learning through reading storybooks at home. And additionally, some parents struggle with literacy skills and may not be able to read. Therefore, these parents may also struggle to engage with the storybooks and other resources available to parents to support their children's learning outside of the workshop. Additionally, one staff member commented that parents who struggle with literacy skills are more likely to experience shame and stigma about this and may be less likely to seek additional help.

*'really you could incorporate that in every night, but then maybe some parents can't read'*

### **What can we learn from nursery staff feedback?**

- Most nursery staff highly value the SSF workshops. Messages are communicated in a clear, simple and effective way. Many noted the skills and approachability of SSF project workers.
- Interactive learning is viewed as crucial to children's engagement in the SSF workshops. Particularly, visual material, puppets and storybooks were highlighted.
- Generally, nursery practitioners felt that children understand most of the key messages. Children have demonstrated pro-social behaviour in nursery such as kindness and respect for others and they regularly find a trusted adult to help stop bullying behaviour if needed.
- Children have also demonstrated their understanding of what a stranger is. They have shared their learning with others, and know to 'run, yell and tell' if they are unsafe.
- Secrets seemed to be the most confusing workshop for children, according to nursery staff members. Children might be confused about when they should or should not keep a secret. Additionally, some parents may not feel confident approaching this topic with their children.
- Learning is viewed as an on-going process, and the involvement of parents and nursery staff in supporting and embedding this learning was viewed as crucial. Embedding key messages into routine and regular discussion in nurseries is a useful way of reinforcing the key messages to children.
- Many staff suggested reinforcement was key, and this could be done by regular refresher workshops as children get older.
- Accessibility is key. Children who have disabilities or additional support needs struggle more in mainstream nurseries. Additionally, children who do not have English as their first language, children whose parents do not have English as their first language, or who struggle with literacy skills, are more likely to experience challenges accessing workshop material and resources. These parents/carers may be more likely to struggle to support their child to embed the learning. They may be more likely to experience shame or stigma, preventing them from reaching out for additional support. Nursery and school staff may be placed well to identify where there is additional need and work with SSF project workers to provide appropriate support to these families.

## **Workshops for children with additional support needs**

### **Refresher workshop observations**

Refresher workshops were delivered to four children in a one-to-one setting at a school for children with additional support needs. The refresher workshop was approximately 15-20 minutes long and it was delivered by the same SSF staff member who delivered the first workshops. It was clear that the children remembered the staff member and were familiar with her; some remembered her name and expressed enthusiasm that she was there. The activities aimed to help reinforce the key messages of the workshops.

In the refresher workshop, children were invited to:

- Identify situations that are safe and situations that are unsafe (prompted by picture cards);
- Reflect on how to recognise signs that they feel unsafe (e.g. shaky knees, funny tummy, tearful eyes) again prompted by picture cards;
- Remind themselves which safe adults are in their circle of trust. Each child had a personalised card with a picture of themselves in the middle, and they were invited to select adults who they trust to place in their circle. These included teachers and family members.

Children appeared keen to participate in the activities, and most appeared to remember what had been discussed before, and they could complete activities without difficulty and without much additional help. Short activities (rather than activities that required more sustained engagement) seemed to be more successful in keeping children engaged. In addition, the children were familiar with the SSF staff member as they had delivered the workshop before and had visited the school several times. This familiarity helped to establish a sense of trust and children seemed to feel comfortable with them on their own without a pupil support assistant present. Only one child had their pupil support assistant with them for some of the session.

With no pupil support assistant present, the children were able to communicate, demonstrate and understanding. For example, children were able to select pictures of safe and unsafe situations, label them safe and unsafe, and explain why. It is therefore important not to assume children cannot participate in activities without additional support; stepping back and enabling them to independently participate first, at least for the workshops observed, children were able to confidently participate with minimal additional support.

Children enjoyed the circle of trust activity. Children were presented with a series of images, including some images of people they know (i.e. photographs of family members), or a generic image labelled 'mummy' or 'grannie'. Children were particularly excited to see pictures of people they knew. They seemed to intentionally select images of safe adults to place in their circle of trust. It could be possible that children chose images simply because they recognised that person, rather than suggesting that this is an adult they trust. However, children did appear to reflect on who they had chosen and why they were a safe person.

The children had varying communication needs. One child was non-verbal, and the pupil support assistant did not join him in the workshop, which would be usual in most school activities. The SSF staff member was able to communicate using some limited British Sign Language (BSL) and the workshop did appear successful and the child appeared engaged and able to identify the correct responses. However, this raised some important issues about communication and accessibility.

Additionally, it was observed that SSF had established a sense of trust and a positive working relationship with the school. However, we learnt that building trust takes time. This includes trust between the school, children, parents/carers and the worker who delivers the workshop. This school was open and welcoming, and willing to provide time and space to the workshops and children's learning. This seemed fundamental to the successful pilot and running of the workshops.

### Interviews with staff and parents/carers

School staff and SSF staff (n=4) and parents/carers whose child participated in the workshops and refresher workshop (n=3) were interviewed and asked their views regarding the workshops for children with additional support needs. The school were keen to see that all children are safeguarded, and there was a clear recognition by the school that this is important, particularly given the increased vulnerability of children with additional needs. We identified the following themes:

- Communication and building trust
- Parent/carers involvement
- Flexible and tailored to the individual child
- Children's understanding of the key messages
- Implementing key messages at home and at school
- Delivery of the workshops
- Developments and potential barriers to participation

#### *Communication and building trust*

All staff and parents spoke about the importance of communication and trust. Particularly for parents, maintaining communication and knowing what is happening at school and in the workshops, helps to maintain a sense of trust. This is particularly important when discussing potentially sensitive or difficult topics, and when children are in the care of somebody new or different.

*'you have to very much trust whoever is looking after your child at that time'* (Parent)

*'as parents we only have certain people that are with our children'* (Parent)

Likewise, staff spoke about the positive working relationship between SSF and the school, highlighting that this ongoing communication had helped the workshop materials to be developed and delivered in a tailored and child-centred way.

*'I think the most influential was actually working closely with the parents and the teacher, the headteacher, having that close relationship worked well and enabled us before we went in to actually understand the needs of the child so we could tailor it to them'* (Staff)

Some school staff members also suggested that 'something like a package of information before the meetings take place' might help teachers or support assistants to go over the materials with the children beforehand and then revise it after the workshops, thus, helping to reinforce the key messages and embed learning.



### *Parent/carer involvement*

Parents and staff told us that opportunities for sharing information with parents, and inviting parent involvement before and after the workshops, are useful.

*'even to see what they're doing and how they're participating with it. You know, it is informative; it's letting you see what's going on or hear about what's going on' (Parent)*

*'my son is non-verbal. He's profoundly deaf so...do you know what I mean. For him to turn around and tell me anything about his workshop is difficult for him' (Parent)*

Likewise, some staff highlighted that increasing opportunities for parents to be involved and increase their knowledge about the workshops could be a useful development and could facilitate better parent engagement and could help parents to reinforce key messages at home. Parents highlighted that whilst they felt it was important to have access to information about the workshops, they had not looked at the SSF website and they had also experienced access difficulties, for instance, some parents work and are therefore not able to make parent and school meetings due to work commitments.

*'I didn't go along to the thing before because I was working. But obviously, we were provided with photos, things like that' (Parent)*

Opportunities to communicate with parents about the workshop were also viewed by parents as a form of education and awareness-raising. Some parents we interviewed explained that they felt their child's participation in the workshops had increased their own awareness of the potential vulnerabilities of their child.

*'all that was sort of brought to our attention; you just don't know because I'm a very trusting human being as it were and you don't think about...And then they pointed out that people like our son are more likely to be...I mean, they're prime target, you know, because they're not...they don't know any different, you know' (Parent)*

*'it was pointed out to me, you know, things that can happen to people like him, because he will become a vulnerable adult when he grows up, and how he needs to be aware of, you know, things that are appropriate and aren't appropriate' (Parent)*

### *Flexible and tailored to the individual child*

Overall, staff felt that the children engaged very well with the workshops. Staff and parent participants highlighted that a 'one off fix-all approach' would not work for this group of children, and they valued the tailored and individualised approach taken by SSF. They highlighted that each child is individual, therefore the workshops need to be flexible, project workers can adapt. This was viewed as a strength of the workshops.

*'I think it's got to be very tailored to an individual child and maybe to their needs and history' (Parent)*

*'all the pupils are so individual that they would all need their own set up. You can't really just have a one-off kind of fix-all' (Staff)*

Staff also highlighted that the diverse range of needs amongst the children in this school meant that different communication needs needed to be taken into consideration, requiring flexibility and adaptiveness of staff delivering the workshop. They felt this was done very well by SSF.

*'The two other boys that I was with have autism, they are autistic, so their level of being able to comprehend somebody new and somebody giving information is quite difficult for them. But I think the methods that were employed and used did work' (Staff)*

Whilst parents and staff valued the way the workshops were flexible and tailored to individual children, all parents also spoke about their growing awareness that as their child grows older, their understanding, awareness, and needs might change.

*she's certainly changed, she's twelve and a half now, so things are...she's going into young adolescence almost, she's coming out of this being a little girl now (Parent)*

*more so the older the children start to get, it's very...in the back of your mind all the time, that's her becoming to be a teenager soon (Parent)*

### *Children's understanding of the key messages*

Parents and staff were asked to what extent they felt the children understood the key messages of the workshops. Staff and parents had a mixed response. Mostly, staff felt that children did engage well and seemed to understand some of the key messages.

*'they were emboldened and given a bit of confidence to be able to say, 'no, don't do that', in a situation that they weren't happy with' (Staff)*

*'three of them had different abilities and needs. So, they responded differently. I think they responded positively, they understood the message' (Staff)*

Some staff commented that children seemed to understand the content of the workshops 'more quickly than anticipated'. Indeed, during our observations of refresher workshops, most children appeared to be familiar with key messages and for the most-part, they did not require a lot of additional prompts.

Parents and staff also expressed some hesitancy about whether they felt the children had understood the workshops' key messages, highlighting that it is difficult to know exactly what the children take from the workshops. One staff member suggested it is difficult to know how much the child they support would

have taken from the workshops, particularly the ability of the child to take the key learning and apply it to other situations.

*‘it’s very difficult to know exactly what they take out of, this is a stranger, you mustn’t approach them’ (Staff)*

Some staff highlighted that they felt the children needed less additional help than they anticipated, and that they demonstrated better understanding and engagement than anticipated.

*‘I think if you give them the chance or the opportunity to do things often, they can just rise to the occasion’ (Staff)*

*‘we always try to work on not over supporting pupils, on waiting and are giving the children plenty of time to process and to respond and that was all really nicely modelled in these sessions’ (Staff)*

All parents and staff felt that reinforcing the key messages through repeating, re-visiting and revising the key messages, would be beneficial and would help to embed learning. For example, some suggested that this could be done by providing refresher workshops when they are older, and that this might mean that key messages have a better chance of being understood and applied.

#### *Implementing key messages at home and school*

One of the aims of the SSF workshops is that the children can implement the key messages at home and at school. Participants were asked about whether they felt the workshops had prepared children to be able to do this. Mostly, participants felt this was difficult to comment on. Some staff members felt children were more confident and equipped to say ‘no’ to situations that make them feel unsafe or uncomfortable, and more empowered to be able to apply these skills in different settings. Other staff members felt that the school could do more to help to reinforce the key messages. They suggested that training staff members up in school could be one way of doing this. But they acknowledged that ‘time is always a real issue’. Therefore, this would have to be timed well and close to the delivery of the workshops.

In addition, parents commented that they felt better educated themselves about how to talk about the topics at home, for instance, how to talk about secrets.

*‘no more secrets even if ‘innocent’ – [we can] educate ourselves about terminologies and things that we should and shouldn’t say and do’ (Parent)*

These lessons, one parent explained, had also been extended to other family members too. For instance, talking to grandparents about not keeping secrets and being aware of language used.

SSF provide storybooks for children to take home. These books were not used by all parents, and parents sometimes explained they find it hard to engage their child in discussions that take place at school, thus,

making it harder to learn more about the content of the workshops and support their child to implement key messages at home.

*'He took [the book] home with him but it wasn't ever sort of lifted up again and looked through again, do you know what I mean; it wasn't a big deal with him. Sometimes if a book's too busy he won't take it in' (Parent)*

*'It's difficult to say because she doesn't come home and discuss things after school' (Parent)*

Parents we interviewed also highlighted the specific contextual factors that come with living in rural village communities, particularly with regards to the strangers workshop. Parents felt it was very important that children are educated about what a stranger is and empowered about what to do if they find themselves in an unsafe situation with a stranger. However, parents felt that living in a rural village community means that reinforcing the message that 'a stranger is someone you don't know' and that you must not talk to strangers, is a difficult message to reinforce and model in communities where 'everybody knows everybody else'.

*'we live in a small village where everybody knows everybody else and that... With my older children I can say, you know, just to be polite you'll say hello in the passing but you don't want your children speaking to them' (Parent)*

### *Delivery of the workshops*

Participants, particularly staff, were very positive about the flexibility and adaptiveness of the workshop materials and the SSF staff member delivering the workshops. Staff provided examples of what they felt the children particularly engaged well with, such as photos, visual material, interactive activities and the puppets. Small group size was commented on as a strength. Also, the openness, skills and approachability of the SSF project worker was very much appreciated and viewed as a strength.

*'the staff were welcoming, they were well trained, and you know, related very well to the pupils and made them feel valued and engaged' (Staff)*

*'that kind of flexibility and adaptability was really useful' (Staff)*

Staff commented on the visual materials, particularly the photographs of family members to help build a circle of trust. They felt children particularly engaged well with photographs and the puppets.

*'The photographs for definite. I think all of the children enjoyed seeing their own family and it put it into perspective for them a lot easier. It helped their understanding' (Staff)*

*'I felt that the pace, I felt that, I suppose it was about their family, because they did have photos there, which was quite nice' (Staff)*

One member of staff explained that pace and communication style of the SSF project worker was a strength of the delivery of the workshops. This included facial expression, working at the child's pace, and a slow and clear way of speaking. Some staff also explained that the environment is important to consider. For instance, minimal distractions on the walls, and familiarity with the room. Additionally, another staff member also told us that routine and structure was important for the successful running of the workshops. Changes in routine particularly with unfamiliar people can be an additional challenge for children who have autism, and this staff member's view was that the presence of familiar person during workshops was useful.

*'one of the things with autism is that the pupils are always unsure of new people, and new things and new settings; and a change to the timetable and a different thing to do on a Friday morning, like they did last Friday morning. So, there's challenges like that, just that come with the nature of the pupils'* (Staff)

Overall, most participants were very appreciative of the increased awareness they developed for their own teaching, support or parenting practice. They highlighted that the workshops emphasised the need for robust safeguarding mechanisms for children with additional support needs, even though it can be uncomfortable and difficult to think about the increased vulnerability of these children. They were very positive about the delivery of the workshops and the materials and resources used, highlighting that the visual materials and interactive, short activities were most beneficial in engaging children.

### **What can we learn from this data?**

- Most children are keen to participate in workshops and remember what had been discussed in prior workshops.
- Familiarity between children and the SSF project worker is crucial. The project worker was able to respond to children's individual needs in an adaptive, flexible and child-led way. This requires specific skills.
- Maintaining positive working relationships between SSF, school staff and parents is important. This enables more effective workshop delivery, and parents are reassured knowing who is with their child.
- Interactive and visual learning, as well as appropriate communication style is key. Children particularly engaged well with photos, visual material, interactive activities and the puppets. A short timeframe seemed to work best to maintain engagement.
- Some children may not need as much additional assistance as anticipated. Adopting a child-led approach can be useful. It is important to consider the role of support staff during workshops and to establish clear role expectations from the start.
- Children with additional support needs have very individual needs, requiring a tailored and flexible approach. This flexibility was viewed as a strength of the workshops. However, it also took substantial time for SSF to develop appropriate and tailored resources.
- Education for parents is beneficial. The introduction of the workshop content helped some parents to increase their own awareness and educate themselves about the vulnerabilities of their children. Whilst this can be challenging learning for parents, it was very appreciated.
- Some children have limited communication abilities, and some are non-verbal. Considering communication abilities is crucial. Basic BSL skills help, but other language programmes such as Makaton may be beneficial.
- Information for teachers, pupil support workers and parents before and after workshops is useful. It is also worth considering how parent involvement can be improved, for instance by sharing and increasing access for parents to workshop materials and resources.
- There are specific contextual factors that come with living in rural village communities. These impact how children are able to put into practice key messages such as what to do if a stranger is nearby, and how to identify a stranger.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The aim of this evaluation was to consider the extent to which key messages conveyed during the workshops are learned and applied by the participating children. We considered children's and parents' overall satisfaction with the programme; key lessons learned; whether key messages from the workshops have been retained over time; and, how learning from the workshops may be used in practice. We found that the SSF workshops are highly valued. Most people feel that the workshops provide crucial knowledge to children about keeping safe and that the workshops equip children with the confidence and skills needed to know what to do if they are in an unsafe situation. In general, most children appear to

remember key messages learnt and they are able to put them into practice, particularly messages about being kind to others, bullying, and strangers.

The simple and effective delivery of the workshops is a strength. The workshops are interactive and age-appropriate. The interactive activities such as puppets, role-plays and storybooks are some of their most highly rated features. Interactive activities facilitate children's engagement and can prevent distractions, boredom or disinterest. Thus, helping children to engage with the key messages and increasing the likelihood that they will (a) enjoy the workshop, and (b) remember and put into practice what they learnt. SSF project workers are viewed as approachable, friendly and sensitive to individual children's needs. These are skills and qualities that are rated highly.

We also observed that smaller group size (for instance 6-10) was most effective in engaging children. Children were more likely to be distracted and become disinterested in larger group sizes, and this has the potential to be difficult for project workers to manage. The environment is also an important consideration. Quiet rooms with minimal distractions are more effective at facilitating learning than rooms or corridors which are busy. Once children are familiar with the project worker and the puppets, they mostly demonstrate enthusiasm to learn, though some do not engage as well as others. It is likely that children with prior knowledge of the subjects are able to engage better, and children who struggle with literacy skills, do not have English as their first language, or who have additional support needs, appear to struggle to engage.

Most parents highly value the opportunity to open up conversations about topics covered in the workshops with their children. Additionally, the workshops seem to act as an education for some parents, helping them to talk about these subjects with their children, and prompting awareness of the vulnerability of younger children to abuse. Access to information about the content of the workshops and how they are delivered was viewed as important to most parents. However, most parents do not look at the SSF website, suggesting that the website may not be advertised in places the parents see, or that parents do not have time or the resources available to look at it. Indeed, some may struggle with literacy skills or may not use English as their first language, thus, it may not be accessible to them. Nursery and school staff may be placed well to identify where there are additional barriers, and work with SSF project delivery staff to appropriately support these families to access materials and resources.

Whilst the workshops are highly valued by many, a small number of parents feel uncomfortable at the prospect of discussing secrets, sexual abuse and consent with their child, and thus, opt not to read the storybook to their child. For some, this may be about confidence to approach the subject, and for others, it may be that it is difficult to acknowledge that young children can, and do, experience sexual abuse that is not necessarily perpetrated by a stranger<sup>16,17</sup>. In addition, the content of the workshops is regularly reviewed by SSF. Of note, some participants commented on the new inclusion of internet safety. Given that in the UK, there has been a year by year increase in recorded child sexual offenses online<sup>18</sup>, the inclusion of internet safety is a necessary and valued development.

Learning can be viewed as an on-going process. Whilst the workshops are highly valued and viewed as beneficial by most people, the learning and implementation of key messages does not stop once the workshops are completed. Almost all participants felt that repetition, reinforcement and opportunities for refresher workshops would benefit children. It is important to consider how schools, nurseries and families can engage with the key messages both before and after children participate in workshops. For example, some nurseries seemed to embrace the SSF messages and embed this into the culture and routines of nursery (for example, keeping puppets and storybooks and inviting children to reflect on their learning). Whereas others seemed to value the workshops but not pay attention to how the lessons are embedded into their usual practices. This is understandable as nurseries are underfunded and largely under-resourced, leaving staff short for time. It may also be that whilst staff view part of their role as safeguarding children and keeping them safe, it is difficult to talk about sensitive subjects with children, and some may feel worried about what to do with disclosures of abuse if they open up discussions<sup>19,20</sup>. This being said, SSF have reported a significant increase from 2018 to 2019 in their reports of child protection concerns from participating schools and nurseries. Whilst an increase in child protection concerns may be worrying, it also suggests that (a) professionals might feel more able to report a concern if they have one, and (b) children may feel more able to disclose.

Accessibility is a crucial consideration. The inclusion and representation of a diverse range of families, particularly for children who are not looked after by their parent, is important to consider. Many children identify parents as a safe adult, but there will be some children for whom this is not the case. Additionally, it is important to include all children in workshops, including those with additional support needs<sup>10</sup>. However, this can be a challenge in mainstream nurseries and schools. It is also important to consider the accessibility of the website and other resources and information, including the storybooks that are provided to parents and children. For example, parents and children who do not use English as their first language or who struggle with literacy skills (i.e. struggle with reading or writing) are likely to encounter additional barriers to participating and supporting their children to engage with workshop material. Further, these parents may experience more shame and stigma and may be less likely to reach out for support. Whilst services are short of resources and time, it is necessary to consider the addition of picture storybooks, and alternative sources of information, for these families.

Our evaluation of the pilot workshops for children with additional support needs is a small-scale evaluation and care should be taken when interpreting the findings. Very little is known about abuse prevention programmes for children with disabilities and additional support needs<sup>10</sup>, therefore whilst the data gathered is based on a small-scale delivery of the project in one school, it is still valuable to consider the implications of the findings. We found that most children were keen to participate in workshops and remembered some of what had been discussed in prior workshops. Further, we found that some children needed less additional support than anticipated and could participate independently. Familiarity with the SSF project worker, routine around the workshops, and the individualised, tailored delivery according to each child's needs was a key strength of the way the workshops were delivered. Project workers need to be flexible and approachable, and there are specific skills needed to communicate and engage with this group of children. Communication could also be a potential challenge; basic BSL knowledge helped, and other programmes such as Makaton may be of benefit. However, these should be individual to the child.



Visual and interactive materials, particularly photos of family members and teachers was a key feature of the workshops that children appeared to engage well with.

Parents and staff all commented that refreshers and repetition of the key messages would be beneficial especially as children got older. They also felt more access to materials and knowledge about the workshops would help them to reinforce messages outside the workshops, highlighting that learning is on-going and the role of family and school staff is important. However, this material should be provided at appropriate times, in an accessible way, and opportunities for educating parents could be beneficial, given that all parents we interviewed noted that their child's participation in the workshops increased their awareness of the vulnerabilities of their child.

## Recommendations

- **Interactive and visual materials**

Interactive and visual workshop materials engage children and help children to discuss what they have learnt outside of the workshops with family members and in nursery. SSF should continue using these materials and resources, and consider ways in which nurseries and family members may become more familiar with them too. This applies to the workshops delivered to children with additional support needs. We suggest SSF should continue to use photographs, visual materials and reinforce key messages through repeated use of these visual and interactive materials with the same SSF project worker if possible.

- **Maintaining positive relationships and partnerships**

Positive partnerships and relationships with schools and nurseries is key to the successful running of the workshops. It is particularly key to supporting nursery practitioners and school staff to embed key SSF messages into their practice. We recommend that SSF continue to maintain the positive relationships that currently exist. We acknowledge that this takes time and resources. However, where possible we suggest that regular SSF visits to school, keeping open lines of communication, sharing of resources, and keeping books and puppets at school might help to embed key messages in school cultures and routines if nursery and school staff feel confident in doing so.

- **Nursery and school involvement**

Nurseries and schools can play a key role in supporting children to retain information from the workshops and put what they learn into practice. SSF already provide nurseries with teaching resource packs via downloadable resources on the website. These resources are linked to the curriculum and include activities for children. It may be beneficial to consider ways that schools and nurseries can be better supported to embed key messages more into their everyday nursery/school life. For example, by providing physical copies of resource packs, or by supporting nursery and school staff to build some of the lessons around consent and respect into routines and the culture. It may be that training sessions or workshops for school staff could help with staff's ability and confidence in modelling and embedding key messages into their practice more.

- **Group size and environment**

We observed that group size and environment are important considerations for facilitating children's engagement in workshops. Whilst it is not always possible, due to larger nurseries or limited time and space, we suggest that small group sizes work best (approx. 5-10 children) and a room that is quiet, private and does not have many distractions. Whilst it may not always be possible to have a separate and spacious room to deliver the session to children, small changes to the environment (such as removing barriers, such as tables and chairs, and sitting on the floor with the children) could have a positive impact on how the children engage with the session.

- **Refresher workshops**

The workshops are highly valued by most people, and we found that most people also felt that reinforcement, repetition and opportunities for refresher workshops would be beneficial. Most children do engage with the key messages, but workshops only in nursery and P1 may not be enough for long-term retention of the messages, particularly if they are not reinforced at home or school. We suggest considering opportunities for workshops to be delivered again to children throughout primary school, or at least in P1 and P2, or considering the possibility to train some nursery or school staff up to deliver some of the material. This may also help to maintain important relationships with the school, staff and children. We suggest opportunities for refresher workshops would also be beneficial for the workshops for children with additional support needs.

- **Sharing information about the workshops with parents**

Most parents and carers are keen to know about the content and delivery of the workshops but they do not look at the SSF website, where such information is provided. The SSF website provides parents with information about the workshops, parent resource packs including activities for children, and videos of the workshops. Since the majority of parents do not look at the website, we recommend to consider other ways of providing parents with information that is accessible and might accommodate for those who do not have a lot of available time. This includes information about the workshops for children with additional needs. This could be in the form of physical copies of leaflets, booklets or information packs that are sent home to parents, or it could be via SSF's existing social media platforms.

In addition, whilst time and resources are not limitless, it would be worth considering holding more events that parents are encouraged to attend, such as parent information sharing events, or inviting parents to see how workshops are delivered. Previously, SSF have held information events for parents which have not been well attended. However, this does not mean parents are not keen to support their children's learning and safety. We recommend that some specific information or guidance about how to talk with children about the topics, particularly the Secrets workshop, may be beneficial. If possible, SSF project workers could attend events that parents are likely to already attend, for instance, parents' evenings. This could be an opportunity to engage with parents. Consulting with parents about the most suitable ways to do this would be beneficial in future

research. We recommend that SSF continue the important community work they do, in order to provide opportunities for parents and children to get involved and understand more about SSF.

- **Inclusion and accessibility**

Children from a diverse range of families participate in the workshops, including those not looked after by their parents, those who have parents or carers who are LGBTQ+, those from minority ethnic backgrounds, and those who have English language and literacy difficulties. SSF value inclusivity and non-marginalisation, and we encourage the development of inclusive practice by ensuring project delivery staff are sensitive to the diversity of families. Nursery and school staff could be well positioned to identify where there are additional barriers. Further, alternative picture books may help for families where English language or literacy is a difficulty.

- **Supporting children with additional needs**

The inclusion of all children vulnerable to abuse and assault is necessary. As a minimum, workers delivering the sessions in mainstream nurseries and schools must be told in advance whether there is any child with an additional learning need and what would be required to ensure that the child can fully participate in the workshops. Additionally, if a number of children with additional learning needs are identified, it could be worthwhile considering what kind of adaptations might be necessary to enable full workshops to be delivered to these children in a way which meets their needs, for instance, by providing a separate adapted workshop to these children. We also recommend setting out clear role expectations for school staff, especially for workshops delivered to children with additional needs. These expectations would be made collaboratively with the school, with the needs of the child at the centre. They would set out how support staff can support each individual child during workshops whilst also enabling time and space for them to participate independently if appropriate. Non-verbal communication, use of programmes such as Makaton, would need to be tailored and familiar to individual child – ASN workshops

We recommend that SSF could consider reaching all additional needs schools. There are specific communication and interpersonal skills required for this delivery, including familiarity with the needs of individual children. We are aware that the geographical spread is far-reaching and one member of staff would likely not be able to cover all areas. Therefore training other staff up to deliver these workshops might be beneficial. This training may also support project delivery staff in mainstream schools to work effectively with children with additional needs too.

- **Future research**

Longitudinal research would be beneficial, for instance, following children through primary school to explore to what extent key SSF messages are remembered and put into practice. Including children's views about the workshops would be very beneficial to future research. It would difficult to ascertain whether the SSF programme delivery directly affects an increase in reported child protection concerns and children's disclosures of abuse or assault. However, considering nursery/school staff's confidence in dealing with potential disclosures would be a beneficial area to explore in further research. Also gathering children's views about their

confidence in talking about abuse and what they might do if themselves or someone they know is unsafe, would be useful.

Further research to evaluate the impact of the workshops for children with additional needs is necessary. This is an important and under-researched area. Again, a more longitudinal research design would be beneficial and considering ways to include children's feedback would support the development of workshop materials that are appropriate and effective.

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