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# BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS, CREATING CONFIDENCE

*How a school-based intervention, delivered by students, can have a life-changing effect on children and young people*



**B**ackground to the Pyramid project  
 Pyramid clubs meet two quite different but complementary goals: they offer a potentially life-changing experience for children at risk of developing mental health problems and they give University students who deliver the programme, a professionally rewarding work experience. At the University of West London (UWL), the Pyramid project is managed by staff and volunteers who train psychology students to plan and deliver a club in local schools. This article explores this initiative from the perspective of both the children who receive the intervention and those delivering it.

### What are Pyramid clubs?

Pyramid clubs offer a low-key, therapeutic, group-work intervention for children aged 7 to 14; they are specifically aimed at those children who are shy, quiet, withdrawn, anxious, and struggling with friendships. Very often these children are overlooked in a school context as they internalise their difficulties, in contrast to the children who might externalise them and get attention because of the disruption they cause in the classroom. In her 1997 book, *The Invisible Children*, Virginia Makins describes their vulnerability in the following way:

Such children do not require special educational provision... but their inability to relate to others or their social isolation and unhappiness gives teachers cause for concern. Unless preventive action is taken quickly, there is a real danger that these vulnerable children will flounder in secondary schools. ...without intervention of some kind, many children will end up as educational and social failures, with all the costs to themselves, and to the health and social services, that this entails.

(Makins, 1994: viii)

Not all children who are quiet, or even shy, are a cause of concern, but many of the children the project works with, face considerable challenges in their lives. Issues such as poverty, physical or mental ill-health (of the child or other family members), bereavement, social isolation, domestic violence and discrimination appear on a regular basis. The government's own figures suggest that 10% of children suffer from a diagnosable mental health condition, with perhaps twice that number displaying some worrying symptoms. During the last couple of years attenders to the clubs have included children with illness in their family, with learning difficulties, young carers, disabled and sick children, and recently arrived immigrants.

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### How Pyramid Clubs operate

Pyramid clubs benefit children from a wide range of abilities, ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, gender and sexual orientation. Clubs can be run for mixed gender or single-sex groups of up to twelve children, supported by three or four club leaders. The activities include art and craft, games, food preparation and circle time. In addition, refreshments are provided each week so that the children and adults can share food and drink together in a sociable and culturally sensitive manner. These activities support the ethos of the clubs which were developed in line with the work of Mia Kelmer Pringle (1975), first director of the National Children's Bureau. That ethos is to provide 'raise and recognition; love and security; new experiences; responsibility' in order to support the social and emotional development of the children.

Children are identified by their schools through the use of the Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997) - a screening tool that is widely used in clinical and other settings to identify children who display abnormal behaviours in comparison to their peers in five key areas: emotional symptoms, peer relationships, conduct, hyperactivity and pro-social skills. Those likely to benefit from participating in Pyramid clubs usually display difficulties on the emotional, peer and pro-social scales of the diagnostic test.

Children and young people from a single year group, or no more than two adjacent year groups, are invited to join the club. It generally runs as an after-school activity in order to reduce the stigma surrounding interventions that support children who might be perceived to be failing in some way. There are several reasons for running the clubs in schools. Firstly, schools can be very lonely places if children do not have friends; so it offers an opportunity to make friends with children they will see each day. Secondly, as children are attending the school, attendance at the clubs is high and not dependent on parents getting the child to a clinic. Thirdly, schools have a duty to support the social and emotional development of their pupils, and they generally welcome an intervention which enables them to do that. Finally, offering a club in a safe, known environment is likely to reduce the anxiety of those selected to attend and therefore encourages attendance.



### The origins of Pyramid clubs

Kay Fitzherbert, an educational social worker in the London borough of Hounslow, obtained Social Science Research Council funding from 1978-82 to develop an intervention in primary schools that would help to make children ready for the transfer to secondary school. It was recognised at the time that some children were failing at that point of transition but that teachers in primary schools did not have tools to support them. Fitzherbert felt that schools should be reaching out to other professionals, and to the wider community, in order to maximise the support that could be provided to children; she therefore set out to create multi-professional teams that would identify 'at-risk' children.

Being familiar with the research carried out in Newcastle in the 1970s and by Yalom (1975) in New York, and the many articles based on the work of Schiffer and Slavson from the 1940s to the 1980s, also in New York, she believed that some sort of group work would be the best way to support these 'invisible' children, providing support that would be 'low cost, easily accessible to all children... non-stigmatising and, in contrast to most other therapies, of proven effectiveness.' (Fitzherbert, 2005: 28). The first groups using the model that Fitzherbert developed were called 'Muppet Clubs', and they took place mainly in community centres close to schools, using an eclectic range of volunteers, including many students from education and social work courses.

Following the pilot work at three primary schools in Hounslow, and a name change from 'Muppet' to 'Pyramid', Fitzherbert went on to obtain funding to run a larger pilot in the London borough of Hillingdon,

and in Bristol and Cardiff, leading to the establishment in 1992 of 'The National Pyramid Trust', a charity dedicated to promoting the Pyramid model of group work. In each area students were recruited from the local universities, alongside paid staff in the schools and community volunteers, in order to deliver clubs to children in primary schools. With the arrival of a Labour government in 1997 in the UK, ring-fenced money was made available to local authorities under the 'Children's Fund' and later the 'Targeted Mental Health in Schools' schemes. These schemes were supporting early interventions with children aged 5-13, allowing the Pyramid model to spread to around forty local authority areas across England. At the same time it expanded across Wales and to Northern Ireland where the National Pyramid Trust worked in partnership with the charity Barnardo's. By 2006, around 650 clubs were running nationally, supporting about 6,500 children and run by 1,400 Club Leaders. The National Pyramid Trust did not run the clubs directly, but rather they licensed the model to local statutory or voluntary groups and ran a national network of Pyramid schemes using the same model and materials.

The National Pyramid Trust became part of a larger charity, 'ContinYou', in 2007, and the work was expanded to encompass children in secondary schools. However, by 2011, following the withdrawal of specific funding in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, many of the successful local projects started to close and the project as a whole was under threat. A UWL PhD student had begun to evaluate the impact of Pyramid clubs in



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secondary schools and, rather than risk the entire practitioner base disappearing, the University offered a home for the project and began to look for new ways make it available to as many children and young people as possible.

### The research base

From the start, Fitzherbert was adamant that the work needed academic research to demonstrate its effectiveness. Some promising initial research was carried out when Fitzherbert worked at the West London Institute for Higher Education, and this led to other positive evaluations, mainly around improvements in self-esteem, social skills, self-concept, mathematics and writing skills. However, these were all very small scale studies and the methodology used was often not robust enough – most were not peer reviewed or published.

Organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (Green, 2003) and Barnardo's (Anderson and Healy, 2006) produced reports of a high standard, covering their work in the London borough of Wandsworth and Northern Ireland respectively, carrying both monitoring data and stories about the impact of the project on the children, their parents and their schools, and also on the volunteers who helped to deliver clubs. A Barnardo's report covering the period 2003-2006 includes quotations from children such as 'I love the Pyramid club: it taught people to play and make friends with other people' (Anderson and Healy, 2006: 14); from parents 'She is a different girl. More lively and friendly and always has something to say which before she would have said very little' (Anderson and Healy, 2006: 14); and from volunteers 'I felt I made a difference to the children's lives' (Anderson and Healy, 2006: 18).

In Buckinghamshire a local 'Educational Psychology Service' carried out evaluations from 2002-2005, basing their conclusions mainly on data from teachers. They found statistically significant reductions in peer and emotional difficulties and statistically significant improvements in pro-social skills across the entire group, although the results varied across schools, leading them to question the factors that led to more or less successful clubs, an issue that would be examined in more detail in later research (Jayman, 2017).

What was missing, however, was a robustly designed, quasi-experimental study that would lead to peer-reviewed publications. The University had encouraged students to volunteer at its local Pyramid project in Ealing since 2004 and one of those students wrote her undergraduate dissertation, and later on a PhD, on her experience as a Pyramid club leader.

Her thesis (Ohl, 2009) examined Pyramid's impact on the socio-emotional health and wellbeing of children in middle childhood. With data gathered in Ealing schools on children aged 7-8, both those receiving the intervention and a matched control group, Ohl used the SDQ to take measures prior to, immediately after clubs, and 12 months after the intervention. Ealing is a diverse borough, both ethnically and economically, and this diversity gave her the opportunity to examine how Pyramid impacted differently on different national and linguistic groups.

A number of papers have since been published in peer-reviewed journals based on Ohl's thesis (Ohl *et al.*, 2008, 2012 and 2013), prompting similar structured research at Ulster University (McKenna *et al.*, 2014) based on the clubs run by Barnardo's in schools across Northern Ireland. The University of Manchester (Lyons and Wood, 2012) looked in more detail at a Pyramid transition club to try to understand which elements of the club actually resulted in the impact. This theme has been taken up by a current UWL PhD student, who has used focus groups with young people who attended Pyramid clubs in secondary schools and the leaders who ran the clubs, to examine what effective ingredients in Pyramid trigger change. Having completed her data collection (pre- and post-club, and 12 months after the club), using both the SDQ and a measure of children's perception of their wellbeing, Jayman has found that young people who attended clubs made significant improvements in their socio-emotional well-being in the short-term that was maintained in the longer-term, while the control group did not change over time. Her findings indicate that Pyramid clubs offer protection against the dip that normally occurs in adolescents' academic performance in the early years of secondary school education.

### How students benefit from running Pyramid clubs

Like the children who attend Pyramid clubs, the club leaders come from a variety of backgrounds. In areas without access to a higher education establishment, club leaders are often teaching assistants in the schools, or community volunteers. However, the use of students provides a new source of supply for schools and the students themselves bring enthusiasm and a fresh perspective to the clubs. At UWL the students who volunteer are mainly, but not exclusively, final year psychology students.

One of the key roles of the Pyramid club leader is to act as a role model for the children, modelling the sorts of behaviours that they want to encourage in the children. It is important that they do not project an authority figure, out of touch with the concerns that affect the children concerned. Being closer in

age to the children than most teachers or parents, they represent something that those children can aspire to become in a not too distant future. Warm and relaxed relationships are quickly established between children and club leaders, allowing for a therapeutic environment to develop. For the club leaders it offers the opportunity to build their own self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy, as they see the positive changes that take place in the children.

This is a well-organised enterprise underpinned by solid logic. All club leaders receive training in group work theory and practice, behaviour management, strategies for supporting self-esteem and building resilience, safeguarding, and planning activities for specific groups based on observations of practice. Pyramid clubs have been developed using theoretical concepts from two key psychological models: cognitive psychology and positive psychology. The interventions thus include solution focused brief therapy; cognitive behavioural therapy; attachment theory; risk and resilience models; and play.

The clubs offer children and young people an experiential model of learning about and developing strategies for managing their thoughts and feelings in a supportive environment. For students, seeing how theories operate in the real world and the different aspects of psychology they have studied during their course (cognitive, developmental, social, individual differences, health etc.) impact on children, can provide a life-changing experience. Students are encouraged to reflect on the experience, and to consider not just the child's needs and experience, but the interplay between their own character, skills and attitudes, and the child's. Inevitably, some students achieve this better than others, so the Pyramid team carefully matches up students in their club leader groups to try and maximise the benefits to all concerned.

Each year the Pyramid clubs are evaluated. In 2016, when interviewed about their own self-knowledge, students stated – 'I am not so bad at team work'; 'I'm a bossy leader and I'm quite good at organising things'; 'I am better at expressing my ideas than I thought'; 'I can communicate well with children'; or 'I'm more confident than I thought'. These comments show the impact of the intervention and the development of skills that some were not aware that they had. When asked how the club would help them in the future they identified key issues such as learning about early intervention for mental health for young children, helping them to communicate better with children, and gaining valuable and transferrable skills such as team leading, planning, and organisational skills.





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### The future of Pyramid

Having been supported for the last three years by the John Lyon's Charity while the project embedded itself in the University, alternative sources of funding are now being pursued to expand the project, so that every child who could potentially benefit from Pyramid can have access to it. Schools in west London pay UWL to run clubs for a moderate fee. Other partners across England, Wales and Northern Ireland contribute to the University's costs through licence fees, training charges and sales of materials. The University does not currently receive any government funding, although an application has been made for a grant to expand to selected areas of England through partnerships with other universities, local authorities and schools.

The research evidence supporting the Pyramid clubs model of working in primary schools has now been externally evaluated by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) and will be included in the EIF guidebook for commissioners on interventions known to support children's social and emotional learning. The EIF also examined the costs associated with implementing Pyramid clubs and has put them in the lowest cost bracket (1 on a scale of 1-5), confirming that it is a low-cost evidence-based intervention. An evaluation of the model in secondary schools will follow later in 2017.

Kay Fitzherbert celebrated her 80th birthday last year and she received an honorary doctorate from the University. She is grateful that the project she started all those years ago is still thriving. In an article she wrote for *Young Minds* magazine in 2005 she expressed her frustration that successful and cost-effective interventions were not being nationally rolled out. With its proven track record and an emergent research base, the Pyramid model is in a good position to support children and young people in the future. It has shown itself to be resilient to the changing political and economic environment and has played a positive role in the lives of over 30,000 children in the past 20 years. This provides a good platform for its sustainability in future years.

For more information see our website [www.uwl.ac.uk/pyramid](http://www.uwl.ac.uk/pyramid), or email [pyramid@uwl.ac.uk](mailto:pyramid@uwl.ac.uk).






## PYRAMID CLUBS

### building friendships

### creating confidence

Therapeutic clubs for children and young people aged 7-14 who are shy, quiet, withdrawn or anxious.



*'The children love their Pyramid Club and make it their own. Activities are planned around the children's need to interact socially with others. It is a wonderful experience to watch the group grow over the 10-week period and to see the children developing their confidence and self esteem.'*

**Teacher, London school**



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### Keywords

Children, mental health, early intervention, schools