Thriving in adversity:

Equipping children and young people with life skills in India

Dr Fiona Kennedy, Dr David Pearson, Dr Katherine Newman-Taylor, Suchetha Bhat

> "There is now overwhelming evidence that severe social adversity is associated with disrupted development and mental health issues."

It is possible and effective to train people with no mental health background to develop 'life skills' with children and young people living in adverse conditions. Our recent pragmatic randomised controlled trials conducted in India showed large effect sizes for two brief psychosocial interventions.

What are the problems and how can we help?
There is now overwhelming evidence that severe social adversity is associated with disrupted development and mental health issues. 'Failure to thrive', often indicated by stunted growth or wasting, affects around 160 million children in India, and many more globally. Failure to thrive is characterised psychologically by cognitive deficits, behavioural and emotional regulation problems, insecure and disorganised attachment, mental ill-health and neuropsychological problems as well as post-traumatic responses. Little research has examined how we can understand and ameliorate the effects of early social adversity.

Over the last 14 years, Dream a Dream NGO has worked with clinical psychologists Dr Fiona Kennedy and Dr David Pearson, recently joined by Dr Katherine Newman-Taylor, to develop and evaluate brief psychosocial programs for children and young people. The programs draw on the principles of validation, positive reinforcement and secure attachment. Appetitive rather than aversive motivation in the context of safe, boundaried relationships are facilitated via after school sports

and arts interventions for young children, a work-readiness program for young adults, and mentoring and teacher-training for educators.

How can we measure outcomes?
We developed the Life Skills Assessment Scale (LSAS) given the need for an instrument to measure outcomes in these contexts. The scale needed to be relevant to children and young people from adverse backgrounds in developing countries. It had to be simple, allowing observers to assess children in relatively large groups over a period of a few hours. Rather than mental health symptoms or educational achievement, we wanted the scale to focus on 'life skills' that support psychosocial competence – the ability to deal effectively with demands and challenges of everyday life (Birrell et al.,1997).

Items were developed using focus groups to operationalise the ten life skills identified by the World Health Organisation. The resulting 5-item scale has now been validated for different age groups (Kennedy et al., 2014; Pearson et al., 2020)

and has been made freely available. The LSAS can be used to evaluate individuals' progress, the effectiveness of specific NGO programs, and organisational impacts. The LSAS is currently in widespread use in India, Africa and other developing countries. Implementation videos have also been made freely available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhbBldB3-TI

How theory and research has changed Dream a Dream organisationally

Suchetha Bhat, CEO of Dream a Dream, describes the contribution of theoretical knowledge about the effects of adversity and the psychological aspects of failure to thrive as a "light bulb moment". She says "Once the organisation understood the psychological challenges faced by the children, we could help others around them become more compassionate in their approach, from a place of understanding. Secondly, we understood the need to create opportunities for secure attachment, acceptance, validation and positive reinforcement of exercising agency and self-expression, in contrast to the prevailing obedience to authority and correction of errors culture.

"Over the past 21 years the organisation has embodied these values and understanding and have used these to create their mentoring, after schools, career readiness and teacher training programs. We have partnered with State governments around India to introduce these understandings and interventions into education and child care.

"Dream a Dream is currently involved in The Happiness Curriculum, a revolution in education from the Delhi government, reaching nearly one million children every day. The LSAS has allowed Dream a Dream and other NGOs to reliably assess the impact of their programs and use the results to improve outcomes. This is most unusual in the developing world, where most NGOs rely on anecdotal evidence. In addition, we are leading the way in more formal research activities as described above.

"All of this has impressed donors and allowed Dream a Dream to raise funds from major sources such as the Michael and Susan Dell foundation and others, allowing the organisation to develop and grow."

(Above) At the 2019 Change the Script event

(Pictured opposite) Young people from Dream a Dream's After School LifeSkills Arts Programme at the Excellent English School (Raza Educational and Social Welfare Society)

Randomised Controlled Trials using the LSAS

We assessed the impact of two Dream a Dream programs designed to facilitate life skills development. Two pragmatic controlled trials used the LSAS as the key outcome measure administered by local facilitators. Study 1 recruited ~1200 children aged 9-15 to the After School Life Skills program run over one year. Schools (matched for age, socio-economic status and religion) were allocated to the program or a control group. We found significant differences between groups, with very large effects. Study 2 recruited ~650 young adults aged 17-22 to the 25-day Career Connect work-readiness program. The young people were alternately allocated to the program or a wait list control. We found significant differences between groups, again with very large effects. The results show that (i) NGO programs can be routinely evaluated, (ii) these programs can be delivered by local facilitators, and so disseminated widely, and (iii) the programs address the cognitive, affective and interpersonal life skills deficits associated with early social adversity.

Continued overleaf

> "Once the organisation understood the psychological challenges faced by the children, we could help others around them become more compassionate in their approach, from a place of understanding."

Thriving in adversity:

Equipping children and young people with life skills in India

(Continued)

Young people at a Dream a Dream Outdoor Experiential camp

At the 2019 Change the Script event

Young person from Dream a Dream's After School Life Skills sports programme

The lived experience of three young people

Ravichandra K.,
Facilitator and Life Skills Assessor for Dream a Dream

"During my school days I had absolutely no confidence and I was scared of my teachers as they were too strict and not approachable. When Dream a Dream came to our school, it was a life changing experience; I used to eagerly wait for that one day of the week when we would have our rugby session with them after school. The facilitator, Revanna, created a different environment for all of us where there was no one to judge or punish us. I was there in this program for three years and I have learnt to deal with conflicts, take initiatives and solve problems, which made me feel confident. I proudly believe that my life script has undergone a drastic change because of my engagement with Dream a Dream."

Pavithra KL,
Director of Innovation Labs for Dream a Dream

"I joined Dream a Dream as a young person and enrolled in Life Skills Development Programs. Dream a Dream has played an instrumental role in shaping the person that I am today. I was part of the Dream Mentoring Program, having a caring and compassionate adult who helped me navigate through the complex phase of adolescence to adulthood was the foundation to what I wanted to do in life. Dream a Dream staff/volunteers always ensured to hold space for me to learn skills that were required for me to work while I continued to study in an evening college. Today I want to ensure that young people who come from difficult backgrounds are not going through what I went through in life. I want to ensure they realize the potential that they have and support them to make a meaningful choice in life."

Pallavi,
Life Skills Facilitator for Dream a Dream

"I joined Dream a Dream as a student. I was a part of the Computer and Spoken English program, and then moved to the Career Connect program. Dream a Dream taught me to be strong and solve problems in personal life. This was important for me as I faced many challenges and was in a state of chaos. Like me, I know there are many young people out there who are struggling to lead a decent life. I want to be a role model to them so that they can also achieve their goals, make their own decisions and become better human beings. This is why I work as a Life Skills Facilitator with Dream a Dream."

Young Dream a Dream programme graduate Sandeep Akash P at the FIFA Foundation Festival in Moscow

Summary and conclusions

The results of our pragmatic RCTs indicate that simple programs drawing on cognitive-behavioural, attachment and educational principles are effective in addressing the psychological problems typically associated with severe early adversity. We now need to run a full RCT and examine the long-term effects. Implementation by local staff mean that the programs are cost-effective and scalable. Partnerships between NGOs, non-local healthcare professionals and other organisations can be an effective way to support the development and evaluation of programs designed to facilitate global mental health care.

Check out our recorded presentations from EABCT 2021 at www.greenwoodmentors.com/working-in-the-developing-world/

Dr Fiona Kennedy Psychology Department, University of Southampton, and GreenWood Mentors; **Dr David Pearson** Psychology Department, University of Southampton; **Dr Katherine Newman-Taylor** Psychology Department, University of Southampton; **Suchetha Bhat** Dream a Dream Non-Governmental Organisation, Bengaluru, India

References

Birrell, R., Orley, J., Evans, V., Lee, J., Sprunger, B., & Pellaux, D. (1997). *Life skills education for children and adolescents in schools.*

World Health Organization. https://bit.ly/2RIrvTI

Kennedy, F., Pearson, D., Brett-Taylor, L. & Talreja, V. (2014). The Life Skills Assessment Scale: Measuring life skills in disadvantaged children in the developing world. *Social Behavior and Personality,* 42, 197-210.

Pearson, D., Kennedy, F., Talreja, V., Bhat, S., & Newman-Taylor, K. (2020). The Life Skills Assessment Scale: Norms for young people aged 17–19 and 20–22 years. *Social Behavior and Personality,* 48(4), e8938

Pearson, D., Kennedy, F. C., Talreja, V., Bhat, S., & Newman-Taylor, K. (2021). Thriving in adversity: Do life skills programs work for developing world children? A pragmatic randomized controlled trial. *Social Behavior and Personality,* 49(9), e10493

Pearson, D., Kennedy, F. C., Bhat, S., Talreja, V., & Newman-Taylor, K. (2021). Thriving in adversity: Do brief milieu interventions work for young adults in the developing world? A pragmatic randomized controlled trial. *Social Behavior and Personality,* 49(9), e10494

"The results of our pragmatic RCTs indicate that simple programs drawing on cognitive-behavioural, attachment and educational principles are effective in addressing the psychological problems typically associated with severe early adversity."