

Tolerance is way forward

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A UNIQUE project to encourage young children to respect physical, racial and cultural differences was launched yesterday at the Odyssey Arena in Belfast.

The Media Initiative for Children is aimed at children between the ages of three and five on both sides of the Border.

The initial pilot, carried out with 95 local children in 2004, was hailed a huge success.

Organisers hope that every child within the early years sector in the North and the Republic will have an opportunity to access the programme by 2008.

The programme, a joint effort between NIPPA - the Early Years Organisation and Peace Initiatives Institute (Pi), involves children watching a series of short television cartoons called *Together in the Park* which feature animated characters who act out different situations of exclusion and inclusion.

The impact and effects of the programme have been evaluated by Dr Paul Connolly of Queen's University, Belfast: "The research results are compelling and illustrate the potential that this initiative can have in encouraging young children to embrace diversity and to be inclusive of others.

"After just three weeks the evidence from the pilot study showed that the children who took the programme were more aware of children being excluded because of their differences; became more empathetic to those being excluded; and were more willing to play with and be inclusive of others, including those different to themselves. If this can happen in just three weeks, just imagine what could be achieved long term."

In considering the wider implications of this initiative, Dr

Connolly said: "We know that children from the age of three can and do develop prejudices against those who are different, whether in terms of physical or racial differences. Previous research I have conducted in Northern Ireland shows that children at this age are already beginning to have their attitudes and beliefs shaped by the ongoing community divisions. It is therefore essential that we begin to work with young children, parents and local communities to begin to address all of this and to give all our children a much better start in life. The evidence from the pilot study shows that programmes such as this present initiative can be extremely effective in doing this and need to be encouraged."

Siobhan Fitzpatrick, chief executive of NIPPA, said: "We are delighted with the initial research results which indicate a significant change in the behaviour and attitudes of young children over a relatively short period of time. Between the ages of three and five children acquire the core values that drive actions in later life; the Media Initiative for Children is about helping to build a culture of respect from the bottom up through young children and out to their families and communities."

Paul Harris, Executive Director of Pi, said: "It is critical to us that the Media Initiative for Children has been developed at a grassroots level involving people at many levels throughout the community and also to eventually involve all children in nursery and pre-school communities. We are confident that this programme will help more young children within Northern Ireland to understand what it feels like to be excluded and to be more willing to include others who are different from themselves."

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Zara Birch helps launch a ground breaking educational programme encouraging young children to respect physical, racial and cultural differences between themselves and others.

PHOTO: THOMAS MCMULLAN