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A younger view on diversity

USING the media to help young children understand and respect physical, cultural and racial differences is the aim of a new programme launched today in Belfast.

Aimed at youngsters aged from three to five, the Media Initiative for Children combines television advertisements and interaction in the nursery setting to help promote acceptance from as early an age as possible.

Developed by NIPPA, the Early Years Organisation and the Peace Initiatives Institute, the scheme has already been piloted and its authors hope its implementation in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic will play a key role in creating a culture of respect across and beyond both countries.

The project centres on a series of short television cartoons, called Together in the Park, featuring animated characters who get out different situations of exclusion and inclusion that occur while children are playing.

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The use of adverts, combined with interactive activities such as puppets, puzzles and games, helps children to talk about how they feel and their attitudes when they are excluded or are faced with people who are different to themselves.

The scheme has been evaluated by early years expert Dr Paul Connolly of Queen's University Belfast, who praised its potential in encouraging young children to embrace diversity and to be inclusive of others.

"We know that children from the age of three can, and do, develop prejudices against those who are different to themselves, whether in terms of physical or racial differences.

"The evidence from the pilot study shows that programmes such as this present initiative can be extremely effective in doing this and thus need to be strongly encouraged," he said.

After three weeks, he said 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, more considerate of those being excluded and were more willing to play with and be inclusive of others.

"If this can happen in just three weeks, just imagine what could be achieved in the longer term," he added.

Expressing her hopes for the scheme, NIPPA Chief Executive Siobhan Fitzpatrick said giving children good directions from an early age was vital.

"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."