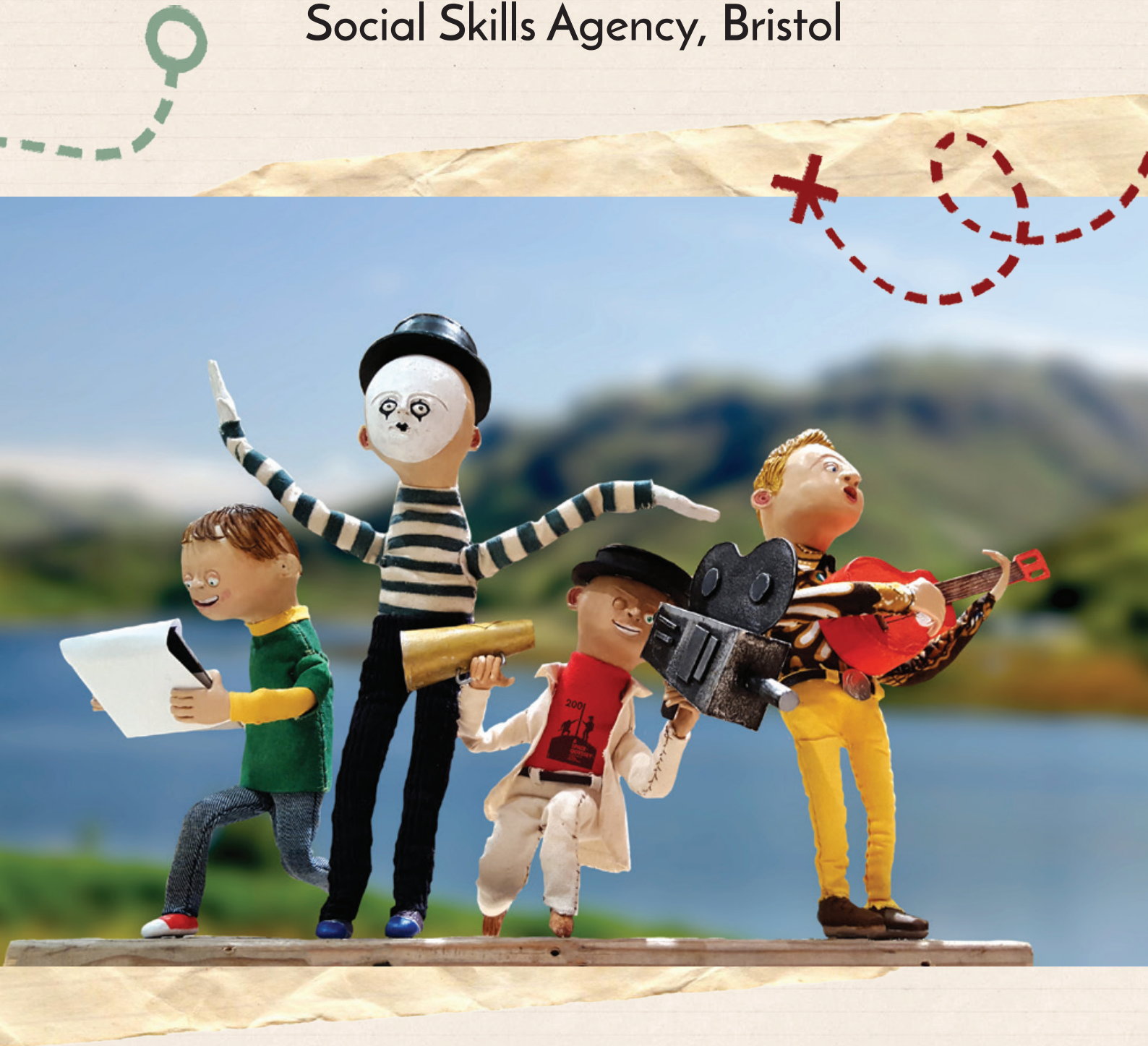


Evaluation Report

2017 Pilot Year

Social Skills Agency, Bristol



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Kate Smith has consultancy and evaluation expertise honed through over 25 years as a Participatory Learning and Development professional. She has worked on a wide range of social, learning, education and health projects with many marginalised or socially stigmatised children,

young people and adults including indigenous communities, refugees, street children, adolescent sex workers, youth activists etc. As well as the UK, Kate has worked in 17 countries worldwide for some 20+ organisations ranging from Grassroots Community entities, International NGO's, like Save the Children, Aga Khan Foundation as well as Intergovernmental organisations like UNICEF, UNHCR.

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1 Introduction

1.1 The Evaluation

An evaluation of the Social Skills Agency (SSA) pilot year was carried out between October 2017 and January 2018 by Kate Smith, an independent evaluation consultant.

The evaluation took place at the end of the pilot year of the agency's work with children and young people through the provision of clubs. Therefore, the purpose of the evaluation was to determine the impact of the SSA on the development of social learning on the children and young people (CYP) involved and to explore what has been going well, what could be better and to generate ideas of how it could improve.

1.2 Evaluation Summary Statement

"It is a really important part of my son's life." Parent

The strength of the work accomplished by the Social Skills Agency, Bristol (SSA) over its pilot year is, on the whole, outstanding and has significantly contributed to improving social skills and building self confidence for the CYP involved.

The very positive outcomes for the CYP highlighted in this evaluation suggest that the SSA has implemented the right 'ingredients' for success for working with CYP who are neurodivergent, in particular for children with Asperger's Syndrome and high functioning autism (HFA).

Evidence from this evaluation suggests that in order for CYP to learn social skills, the SSA establishes an enabling environment in a group context where CYP feel a sense of belonging, encounter a positive group experience and make friends. That environment is created by skilled group facilitators who adopt a range of creative, fun, active learning methods AND possess



compassionate, unpatronising and kind attitudes, behaviour and sensibilities.

All these achievements are particularly impressive given that the SSA is in its pilot year and has worked with relatively streamlined work force but has had an impact on many children.

Findings from this evaluation suggest that demand for SSA clubs will continue to increase particularly as evidence of the success of the approach becomes more well known.

In order to continue this momentum and increase its impact at all levels, the SSA now needs to focus on consolidating and expanding its activities.

1.3 Social Skills Agency Background

"At the Social Skills Agency, we offer social skills learning programmes for children and teenagers who struggle with social communication - the introverted, the anxious, the lonely, the bullied and the over-enthusiastic. We specialise in supporting children and teenagers with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) and high functioning autism (HFA)." SSA website

Founded in 2016, the Social Skills Agency (SSA) has been offering social skills learning groups (clubs) since the beginning of 2017.

The Social Skills Agency grew out of a recognition that there is little specific provision for CYP who have a diagnosis of high functioning autism or Asperger's Syndrome. The agency recognises that most support services for autistic CYP are generic, with no differentiation of specific needs within a very diverse spectrum.

"There is such little support anywhere for children like X which has at times left us all feeling unsupported and very lonely and isolated." Parent

The SSA has been running the clubs on Saturdays during term time in South Bristol. The CYP attended 2-hour sessions on alternate Saturdays during the last 12 months in this pilot year. The groups are referred to interchangeably as 'club' 'drama skills club' "drama club" by the various CYP and parents involved.

A total of 32 children have enrolled and attended the groups to date. Groups are between 8-12 CYP in total. Within the groups, 27 are boys and 5 are girls. They are mostly diagnosed with HFA but there are also undiagnosed CYP.

Parents are often informed of the content of the session, as well as suggested activities to consolidate learning and to share with school or other learning providers, in follow up emails from the Founder and lead facilitator in the week following the session.

Before attending the 'club' parents and children - together and separately - have a full initial assessment process with the SSA. This involves a detailed discussion between the Founder of the SSA with parents, a parental questionnaire and discussion and getting to know the child or young person.

The staff of SSA is Founder/Director Adri Bof, two part-time Engagement Coordinators and a bank of tutors and co-facilitators. Ms. Bof conducts all the initial assessment processes and currently leads/facilitates the group work with the assistance

of a co-facilitator. The staff members have been mentored and trained by the director with the goal of a career working in the field of neurodiversity. Two tutors, who are HFA, also assisted in this evaluation and the making of a film about SSA work.

1.4 Research Context

Research about social opportunities for children, young people and adults on the autism spectrum are varied and range from discussing social isolation and bullying to the impact of these on health and mental health. The most current topics are:

Social isolation & loneliness

*"Approximately one in four young adults with autism were socially isolated, meaning they never saw or talked with friends and were never invited to social activities within the past year."*¹

"Young adults with an autism spectrum condition (ASC) are more likely to never see friends, never get called by friends, never be invited to activities and be socially isolated. The findings, over a 12-month period, are:

1. 40 percent of youth with ASC never got together with friends;
2. 50 percent never received phone calls or were invited to activities; and
3. 28 percent were socially isolated with no social contact "

*Loneliness is high amongst children with special needs and is considered "a significant risk factor for a wide range of mental and physical health problems, including depression, high blood pressure, sleep problems (...). The protective effect of having adequate social relationships is thought to be equivalent to quitting smoking."*³

Mental health - anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and depression

Anxiety, OCD and depression are common for people on the autism spectrum and are often associated with difficulties with socialising, inclusion and bullying.

The article Prevalence of Depressive Disorders in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder⁴, which involved a systematic review of nearly 8,000 research articles, reveals clear evidence that depression is highly prevalent in both children and adults with autism. It also indicates that depression is more common in individuals with autism who have above average cognitive ability.

*"We found that the highest rates of depression are seen in individuals with autism who have above average intelligence. (...) While this study did not look into why (...), we can make some guesses. (...) It could be that individuals with autism who have above average intelligence are more aware of the social difficulties associated with their autism diagnosis, and this awareness leads to higher rates of depression."*⁵

Autistica, UK's Autism Research charity, has also indicated that "depression also increases suicidal thoughts and (...) autistic adults are much more likely to consider suicide than the general population. (...) Autistic adults (without an intellectual disability) are over 9 times more likely to consider suicide than the general population".^{6 7}

1.5 Evaluation Approach

The evaluation adopted a participatory approach, consulting especially the children, young people and parents involved in the SSA learning groups.

Evidence was analysed from a number of sources including informal email communication, questionnaires to parents, consultation with children - both informally and through creative tool in group session (see section 3.3), secondary data (feedback forms, introductory questionnaires, some email correspondence with SSA from parents etc) as well as interviews with staff of the SSA. In addition, a series of observations of the sessions with the older group was undertaken.

In the autism spectrum world there has been a lot of debate about the language used to describe those involved. Often language for children, young people and adults involved is one of negatively suggesting a 'deficit' or DIS -order/ease etc. Therefore, language such as neurodivergent (as opposed to neurotypical) is often considered to have more positive connotations reflecting those who diverge from the predominant social norms. This language will be adopted in this report.

1. **Science News** - One in three young adults with autism are disconnected from work and school, Date: April 21, 2015, Source: Drexel University, Autism Institute.

2. **Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders**, November 2013, Volume 43, Issue 11, pp 2710-2719.

3. **Review on loneliness by Liverpool Public Health Observatory (LPHO)**, commissioned by the Merseyside Directors of Public Health, through the Cheshire & Merseyside Public Health Intelligence Network.

4. **Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology**, pp 1-11| Prevalence of Depressive

Disorders in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder: a Meta-Analysis.

5. **The Conversation Magazine**, Almost half of adults with autism struggle with depression. March 1, 2018

6. For further information, see **Autistica report Personal tragedies, public crisis (2016)** and the current research Understanding suicide in autism, May 2017.

7. Mental Health and Suicide within the Autism Community was also discussed in the House of Commons in 2017. For Debate pack, see **Number CDP-2017-0245, 28 November 2017.**

Findings

② Establishing an Enabling Environment

Evidence from the evaluation suggests that for CYP who are neurodivergent, and have HFA, social skills cannot be learnt in isolation but require a number of aspects to be in place that create an enabling environment before CYP are able to learn and practice these skills.

This evaluation found that the enabling environment is a small group context where the CYP have a sense of belonging and feel safe.

It is understood that children with autism can only successfully learn if anxiety and stress levels are low and they are not feeling disorientated, in an overactive fight-or-flight state. Feeling safe socially is therefore crucial for learning and cannot be overlooked, when the aim is social learning. This awareness of creating social safety has been very much at the forefront of the SSA's approach to social learning.

This 'enabling' environment is created by skilled group facilitators who adopt a range of creative, fun, active learning methods AND possess compassionate, unpatronising and kind attitudes, behaviour and sensibilities.

2.1 Belonging

"It is a great opportunity for her to mix with other autistic, aspergers kids as it boosts her confidence about her diagnosis. There are other kids out there, just like her, who are wonderful and lovely!"

One of the most successful aspects of the SSA group work, and a key to creating the enabling environment has been that the CYP feel a sense of belonging. Children and parents consulted through the evaluation felt that being part of a group with others "just like me" was one of the most significant positive aspects of the club.

"[one of the best things for me is the] feeling my child has a sense of belonging to a group. It builds his confidence."

Children and parents have shared experiences of children feeling left out or the odd one out in many other settings. For many, the day-to-day life of being at school is, at best, tolerable. A sense of not 'fitting in' or being 'different' is common.

Evidence from the initial assessment questionnaires shows the main reasons why parents enroll their CYP in the club are because their child is socially isolated, needs confidence in social situations, and because they want their children to work on their social development.

When children come to the 'club', parents and children have reported that very quickly they realise that this is a group for them.

"The club is a great way for X to meet up with other high functioning autistic, asperger's children and just a good way for her to relax with them in a really happy and supportive environment"

Children and young people find ways of connecting over similar interests - lego, a marvel hero or a joke.

"The group has enabled her to meet other autistic children and I think has led to a greater understanding and acceptance of her diagnosis."



2.2 Social Safety and Positive Group Experience

"X came away from the group really happy and said he can't wait until the next group. (...) I was amazed how relaxed he was."

Very much linked to the children's and young people's experience of belonging, and also another key successful aspect of the SSA group/club is the, often new, experience for the CYP of finding a group experience positive, safe and one in which they actively participate.

For many of the CYP, their previous experience of being in a group - whether in the classroom or other group activity - can be fraught with uncertainty and feeling unsafe. Some of the CYP have sensory sensitivity so, noisy, busy classrooms, scouts, after school clubs etc can feel overwhelming and very unsafe.

"X would never normally be able to have this experience as a typical group such as cubs would be too big and overwhelming and the staff would not be able to help

him manage his anxiety. However with Adri and her team, they are such experts in [ASC] (Autistic Spectrum Condition) and have deep understanding of each child" Parent

Through observations, many children demonstrated how comfortable and enjoyable they felt in this group setting: sitting and looking forward, some looking animated, immediately joining in games, smiling, laughing with others, having fun, making suggestions, helping each other out, explaining to each other, making fun of each other (gently and kindly). There pervades an atmosphere of warmth, kindness and fun in the club.

The facilitators notice how *"they often arrive tensed up with their shoulders high and not looking up. And then 15 minutes later, the shoulders have dropped and they are laughing at someone's joke."*

Groups are deliberately kept small 5-12 children maximum as many CYP feel overwhelmed by larger groups in an enclosed space. There is a sense of intimacy as well as belonging.



Furthermore, the methods used in the club significantly contribute to making the group situation positive for the CYP. This involves a mix of lively, fun games, where the whole body is engaged, circle time for discussion and learning points and games/drama-type exercises that specifically consolidate learning. The atmosphere is fun and inclusive.

There was only one CYP who struggled to participate in one of the sessions observed and previously had joined in with full participation. Some withdrawal and anxiety would be expected from CYP who are neurodivergent as social and group situations are so frequently fraught and many of the children have anxiety related triggers. SSA always follows up with working alongside parents to develop a strategy to overcome struggles.

"As a parent I feel very confident in the staff that they can deal with any ruffles and not be daunted by the child's behaviour or to be judgemental but see it as an opportunity to help the child learn through it and grow." Parent

Whilst recognising that the CYP accessing SSA groups are diverse in their needs, evidence from CYP experience and parents as well as observations demonstrates that the club creates an atmosphere where most of the CYP feel (unusually) comfortable and actively participate most of the time.

"X is really happy to come to the group."

When observing the CYP in the SSA club setting it is hard to imagine that many of them are not fully participating in other settings. It's a salutary reminder that for many HFA and similar CYP there are very few spaces geared to their particular needs.

"X is taking part in everything - this is extremely unusual .. as he usually opts out and tends to run and hide. I'm so pleased he settled well, this has made me realising how signing X up for this

group was the absolute right thing to do." Parent

Many parents and the facilitators also found it surprising how quickly many children feel safe in the group. When observing new children joining the group, most quickly seem to settle in as the culture and atmosphere of the group is well established and easy to absorb. Some parents reported that they were surprised at this as their CYP often find joining a new group particularly challenging.

Many parents commented that settling so quickly is unusual for their child:

"X came away from the group really happy and said he can't wait until the next group..... I was amazed how relaxed he was, once settled in the room. On entering, he said he felt shy but once he spoke to and remembered A (lead facilitator),.. he was at ease. This is highly unusual for X as he usually finds group situations tricky"

"X enjoyed his first session on Saturday. He was very positive about the session and is looking forward to next week."

Some children have never attended any group without a carer or parent present but came to the group and the parent/carers left for the 2 hours. For many, this is a huge achievement in itself.

"I felt certain that this new boy was not going to say anything for perhaps the first few months....and after 15 mins in the third session he was asking to do impressions of a frog"

Many of the CYP refer to the fact that the group is fun. At the end of the club session, CYP feedback their experience and they consistently report "fun" and "happy". Also parents have shared that their children have reported that they love the fun element and atmosphere.



"The [sessions] are really fun." CYP

"[Club] has enabled him to experience the fun of playing group games (...)." Parent

2.3 Friendship

"When I first started I didn't really know anyone (...) than I made friends with (...) everyone else"

Another key benefit of the club is that children make friends in the group. Many of the CYP have expressed that they have had trouble with friendships in other settings. Also, for parents, their child's isolation and lack of friendship is often their greatest concern. So feeling accepted and connecting with peers can be very significant for the CYP.

"He said these are the only children he has ever met who didn't find him annoying. So nice to hear (but also sad for all the other times when he didn't feel this way)". Parent

A participatory drawing evaluation tool (see box 1 in 3.3) enabled the CYP to share stories of a young person's experience **before and after joining the SSA** group. During this exercise, all the children drew or communicated their experiences about the SSA group, by referring to a fictional child, Max. All the children expressed their feelings about finding friendship difficult and some about being 'lonely' before coming to the group.

Before joining the SSA group:

"before it was difficult to make friends...."

"[before] sad a lot of the time, because there are no friends"

"feels left out"

"is bullied a lot"

And after coming to the group:

"has his own friends"

"is not lonely and is quite popular now"

"feels happy as he has friends"

During observations of session there was a feeling of empathy between the CYP in the group and this is demonstrated by how they help each other at times in games or by explaining to each other. It is possible to witness that CYP are self-regulating and putting learnt skills into practice and, for some, this means they are not blurting out truth-telling or being too direct in their feedback to each other.

It was nice to meet Z [another child in the group]. He was very polite to X. X said that everybody was really nice. X is keen to make friends with similar interests as himself and this is a large part of his motivation [to come to the group] I think" Parent

"Things changed since the beginning because before I didn't really want to come because I was a bit shy and I didn't really have any friends, but now because I've been here for a few weeks, I now want to come because there are lots of people here that I can talk to and they are my friends" CYP.



2.4 The Right Staff: Expertise with Sensibility

"Adri and her team, are such experts in ASD and have a deep understanding of each child, [from] the initial interview and observing my child, [SSA] makes it possible for X to take part."

Many parents and the CYP mentioned the importance of the high quality and calibre of the staff of the SSA - in particular the Founder/ lead facilitator as well as the current co-facilitator.

"Adri [Founder/lead facilitator] has an amazing understanding of the kids and the subject areas she teaches are always exactly what X needs."

In fact, the impact of the staff on the outcomes for the CYP cannot be overstated. It is the staff that creates the enabling environment - through a combination of the methods and approaches to the groupwork - as well as in their attitudes, behaviour and sensibilities around the CYP.

For example, the **initial assessment stage** is critical to the CYP experience of the SSA programmes. The initial assessment phase can involve several phone calls and email correspondence with parents, at least one meeting between SSA and parents/ carer of the CYP, relevant paperwork/statements consulted, a parent questionnaire and perhaps most importantly, at least one meeting between the Founder/lead facilitator and the CYP.

"Adri takes the responsibility very seriously and took time to get to know us before we joined, which was appreciated."

This initial meeting with the Founder is often what sways children to try out the group and stay in the group when they attend. She will listen to the CYP's own wishes and concerns and takes extra time to develop a bespoke strategy based on each child's needs.

"On entering [the room with the group for the first time] he said he felt shy but once he spoke to Adri [the lead facilitator] and remembered... her [from the initial assessment], he was at ease. This is highly unusual." Parent

The groups are developed with consideration of a mix of factors of who will go together and complement each other. The staff will go the extra mile to create the conditions that enable the CYP to join the group whether it is showing them the room

beforehand, taking them to look around the centre etc. The facilitator and co-facilitator are extremely skilled in noticing and moving the group along to avoid difficult interactions.

Whether it is at the initial assessment stage or how they are greeted on entering the group room, or the experience of the group process, much of the experience hinges on how the CYP are treated by the adults facilitators involved:

"The people who run it are really good... I can't think of anything negative to say. It [is] brilliant." CYP

The Founder/lead facilitator is clearly an experienced and accomplished facilitator. But what also shines through is her particular ability to relate to and understand neurodivergent CYP based on her own personal and professional experience.

"Adri brings a wealth of knowledge and experience, she truly understands the children and how to help them. She is kind and compassionate."

In truth, it is hard to fully evidence the extent of the impact of the staff but it is tangible when in the club context. A hand on a shoulder, a joke made, kindness without patronising and a fun and light spirit, appear to have a very positive effect on the CYP. These sensibilities enable the CYP to fully engage, participate and have fun. They also calm anxiety and move children away from flight-or-fight mode.

"Adri and Martha have managed to create a warm, inclusive and accepting environment for the children to explore social skills via games and activities."

Also, the facilitators are modeling behaviour for the CYP who then behave in that way in the group. Kindness and being nice to others is explicitly explained as only prerequisite behaviour to joining the club.

During the past year, the SSA has been identifying professionals who can work with the agency to consolidate and expand the work. Whilst the Founder currently leads sessions, it is hoped that other facilitators will be identified who can lead sessions in the future as demand continues to increase for the SSA work/clubs.

Experience gained by the SSA over the last year showed that many skilled professionals, who facilitated sessions, did not necessarily gel the best with the group of CYP, despite good credentials. In contrast, others with less apparent relevant experience/credentials seemed to make better connections with the CYP and have been able to facilitate the groups well. For example, the film-tutors, who are autistic and helped make a film with the CYP, fitted very comfortably with the groups. Also, the current co-facilitator, who is non-neurotypical and has a sibling on the autism spectrum, has amazing rapport with the CYP.

It appears that certain sensibilities, a lack of awkwardness, as well as non-institutionalised, non-paternalistic attitudes are more important to working with and engaging CYP than professional expertise.

In terms of expansion, the evidence would suggest that identifying staff with the right "sensibilities" might be preferable over 'credentials'. Ideally, both would be in place.

3 Impact on CYP

3.1 Social Skills Development

"People would say hello and he would look at his feet and now he looks at people and says hello, greets them, which is fantastic" Parent.

Evidence from this evaluation as well as consultation with secondary data demonstrate that SSA Clubs have had a significant impact on the CYP involved. Most importantly they improve social skills as a result of being part of the SSA club. This is the result of the enabling environment being in place (belonging, group safety, friendship, expert staff), which creates the conditions where they are able to learn and practice new skills.

In some cases, the improvements are noticed very quickly whilst in the majority it is a gradual shift in social skills.

"X is definitely thinking more about how other people are feeling and what they might want from an interaction with her.....She is thinking more about what she says to people using the check list that Adri taught: "is it true, is it kind, how will it make the other person feel?" Parent

Woven within games, pair and group work activities, SSA adult facilitators provide CYP with specific learning points around a social topic. So the CYP will learn and discuss about this issue and also receive some tools for helping them: e.g. sentence starters, list of compliments, prompts, list of questions to ask oneself before speaking, tools for assessing friendship, reminders to help them in their day-to-day interactions with others etc.

For many of the CYP, learning social skills is like learning a new language and the SSA often uses this useful analogy to explain the acquisition of social skills for CYP who are neurodivergent. For many of the CYP, reading social cues, body

language, recognising and discerning others emotions or similar does not come intuitively.

In the same way a new language is learnt, practice and repetition are key, where mistakes are often repeated before a level of proficiency is achieved on the way to fluency. Like language learning, the more practice in the language context - home, school etc. the better the learning is consolidated. And of course, people learn at different paces.

Therefore, the learning of a new social skill is not delivered in one session, remembered and adopted straight after (for most of the CYP as with most learners). New social skills need to be learnt, repeated, practiced, mistakes made, before becoming proficient and adopted easily.



The club context is the first place that CYP practice their new social skills. Evidence from this evaluation suggests that the CYP are able to learn and practice social skills because **the right environment has been created**: the CYP feel a sense of belonging, enjoy the group (social safety) and have friends around them. This further enables them to move beyond their familiar fight-and-flight mode or anxiety state, which are barriers for learning in general and particularly for social learning.

The club provides an opportunity for the CYP to put into practice their new skills - turn taking, not blurting out ideas, not putting someone ideas down, not correcting others (policing), being kind to others, complimenting others etc. In the sessions observed during the evaluation, many of the CYP were witnessed thinking and reflecting on their

own behaviour before acting. This happened in more structured learning circle time of the session as well as games where skills are practised.

"X's development over these weeks has been extremely positive - in fact, surprisingly quick for 6 sessions! He seems comfortable in the group, he has a talent for picking up nonverbal cues and is great at giving other people a chance to talk and feel at ease in his company." Feedback to parent

Also, there is significant evidence from parents that the CYP are adopting social skills in daily lives beyond the group:

"One of the first lesson they've learned that, just because something it is true, doesn't mean that you have to say it out loud, which we've been trying to coach A into understanding it, but it has being quite a hard road for us, but this group really cemented the idea for her. For instance, when she meets her grandmother, she can't get over how wrinkly and old granny looks. She was always telling granny how old she looked, look at your chin it is hanging down... We've seen great progress in just the 4-5 weeks she has been here. We just really please with the course." Parent

"She asked her brother to play with her the other day and he said no as he was busy doing something else. She came to talk to me about it and then had an idea. She said, "I know what I'll do. I'll think of the two games [brother] likes the best and give him the choice which one to play then he is more likely to say yes to playing with me." So she went off and did just that, and luckily he said that he would love to play" Parent

"He ..made himself a reminder of the social skills topics covered last week. He did this by himself and wants it laminated and on a key ring in his pocket!" Parent

Many of the parents/carers have witnessed a shift in attitudes and behaviour in their CYP when in social situations:

"This week she... started saying "sorry" spontaneously when she needs to. She has NEVER done this before!"

"X has been really inspired by acts of kindness this week. (The Club) .. has really made her think outside her own little world and directed her thoughts towards other people"

"X [will] say 'hello' to people we pass on the the street, whilst in the past he used to be quite shy."

A number of CYP and parents also shared experiences of CYP demonstrating better ways of coping with their emotions.

"We have noticed a real change in X over the past few months. She now enjoys school and seems to have less meltdowns"

One of the CYP explained that he had learnt to deal with his anger as a result of being in the group and by "playing calm music".

3.2 Enhanced self-confidence

As a result of the enabling environment and learning new social skills, many of the CYP involved demonstrate improvements in self-confidence.

"X is beginning to realise he is different which is hugely impacting on his self-esteem." Parent of 9 year old

As the above quote suggests, many of the CYP attending the groups come to the SSA struggling with issues of self-esteem and self-confidence. Many of the parents report at the initial assessment



stage, that children often recognise they are not neurotypical around the ages of between 9-10. This self-realisation of 'difference' can undermine self-confidence often exacerbating challenges in the child's social life.

One of the most frequently mentioned changes noticed by parents (in the evaluation and other data) is the improvement in self-esteem and self-confidence of the CYP as a result of attending the club.

"SSA has either helped and/or driven my son's increased confidence to socialise this last year. It is still with its challenges of course but it has great to see him confidently going into sessions without any anxiety"

As many of the examples given in this report attest, the majority of parents believe that their children have an improved sense of themselves and their self-confidence as a direct result of coming to the group.

"I notice an increase in his confidence and happiness really" Parent

"X finishes the sessions brimming with happiness and confidence."

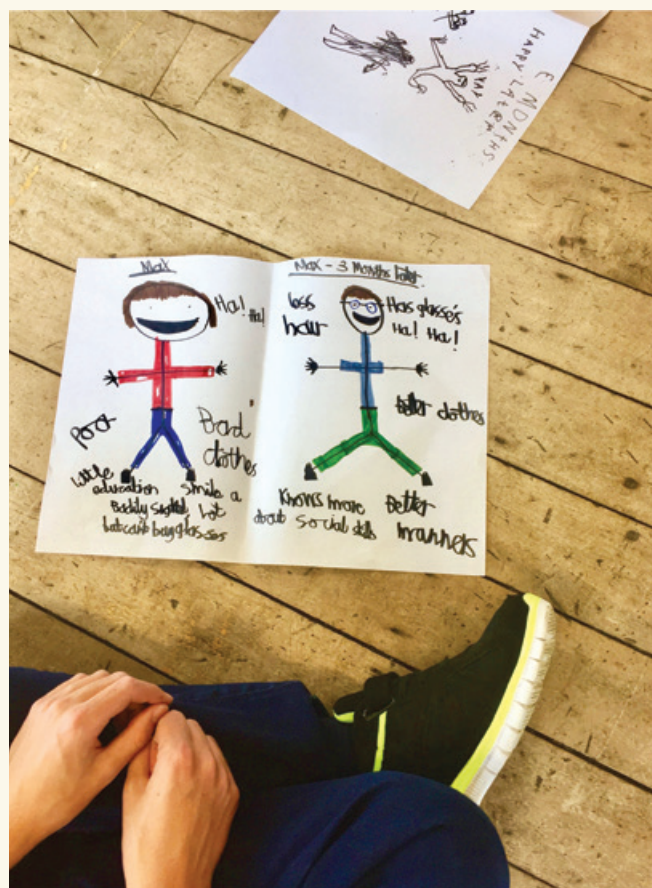
"X is really happy to come to the group. He's much happier and confident around other people [since coming to the group]" Parent

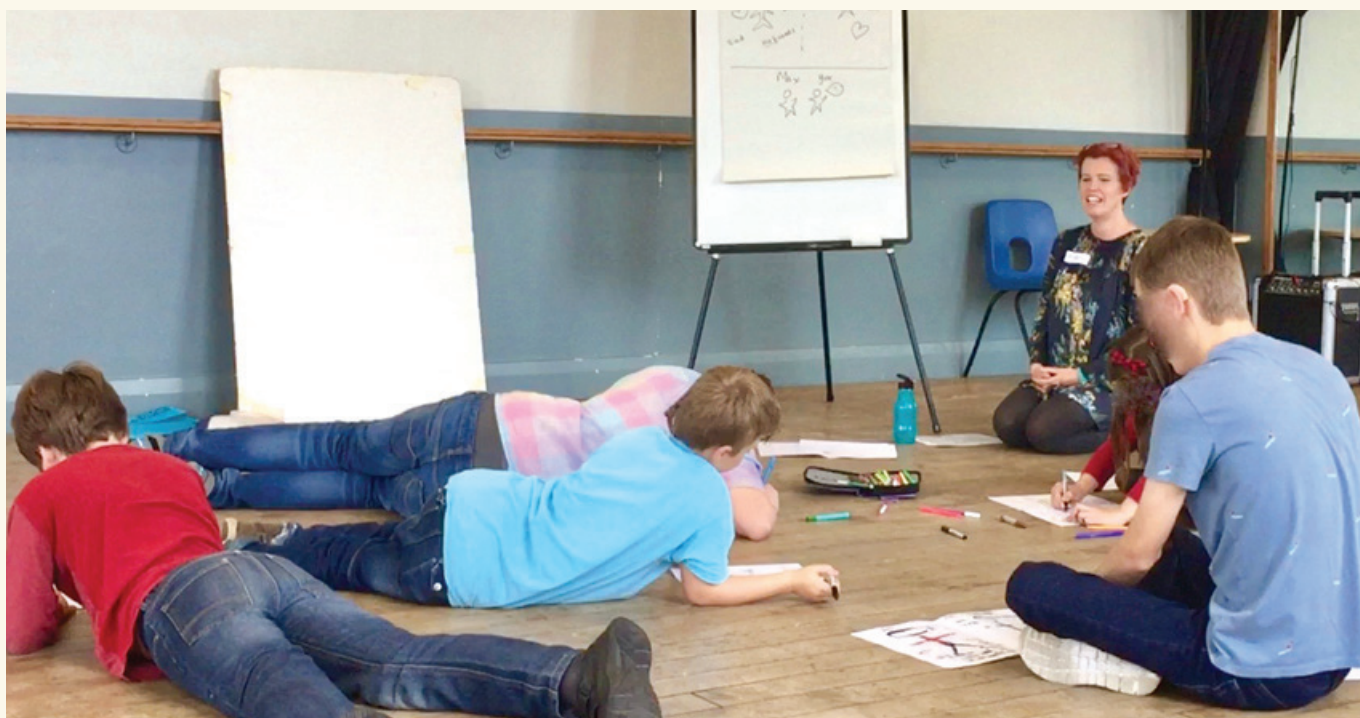
3.3 Children' and Young People's Perceptions of Impact of the SSA club

A key part of the evaluation was to understand impact of the SSA Club on the CYP from their point of view and to provide a platform for their voice to be heard.

A participatory evaluation activity (detailed in Box 1) was developed to work with this specific group of CYP. The activity was carried out during one of the Saturday sessions with the group of older children. The aim was to explore the CYP's experience of the club and the changes they perceive as a result of coming to the club. It also provided an opportunity to explore the CYP's hopes for the club in the future.

For many of the CYP involved in the group there are various factors to consider when developing an evaluation or research tool. For example, for many they have had painful experiences of being marginalised so using tools that remind them of those times can cause distress and further anxiety. The potential to throw the CYP back into flight-or-fight or anxiety has to be avoided if possible.





Also, a number of the CYP might have challenges around writing and drawing - dyslexia, dyspraxia. So writing was an option but the main tool involved was creating an image.

It was already apparent that a great deal of trust had been established by the SSA Facilitators and the CYP therefore some risks could be taken in getting the CYP to step out of their comfort zones.

Experience of carrying out participatory research and evaluation tools with many marginalised and/or vulnerable groups in the UK and internationally has revealed that it is often best to explore personal experiences through the medium of telling a story of a fictional character rather than focusing on the self. So instead of asking "What happened to you before/after?", we instead imagine a character, in similar circumstances, and give the CYP an opportunity to tell a story through that character.

In this activity, the character was called Max (gender neutral name) who has been struggling at home, school, elsewhere and then starts coming to the club. The CYP are asked to create a drawing and key words relating to Max before he joins the SSA club and then 3 months later after he has joined a club. The full process is detailed in Box 1 below.

This participatory tool provides an opportunity for the CYP to depict their own experience - to a greater or lesser extent - either literally, allegorically or metaphorically. They might also 'imagine' themselves in the shoes of one of their club friends.

In any participatory evaluation process the analysis of imagery and its meaning needs to be carefully considered especially when the participant has not given their own verbal interpretation. Nevertheless, the nature of participatory work recognises the importance of triangulation. This means bringing in other data to cross reference with the data produced in order to explore the potential meaning.

In this case, the visuals and words were triangulated with observation of the participants over time, parent feedback, initial assessment data and other more informal data - conversations etc. Some of the visuals and words produced by the CYP speak for themselves. Sometimes it is not clear if the CYP are communicating what has happened to them or their aspirations for the club on an on-going basis. Whichever, the visuals and words created by the CYP in this activity are a rich source of data for SSA. They provide an understanding of the focus for young people and to build upon what has been successful and what CYP aspire to achieve in the club.

Box 1:

Before and After: Guided story-making and spontaneous drawing

(This participatory research tool uses a deliberately gender neutral language - the name of the child and pronouns so that the CYP themselves can develop their own version of "Max")

This is a child called Max. (Draw a stick diagram on flip chart). Max is struggling at home and at school. Max is not participating in a club or group like you are here today. And because of that, Max has not been able to meet a group of great young peoplelike you.

Close your eyes and I want you to imagine a child like Max (they could be a girl or boy), who may be finding friends difficult or is having some troubles at home or school.

So imagine that child or young person. It may be someone you know. They might be not making friends at school, or finding school too busy or hectic.

They could be:

- feeling left out at school and people are calling him/her names
- regularly told off for fidgeting in class - it is making him sad
- quiet in class. Doesn't say anything
- feeling sad as not able to make many or any friends
- called 'weird' at school because they collect statues of kings
- or something else - you decide what is happening with Max

When you've imagined Max in your mind. Can you take a photo of Max?

You have been given a piece of paper. (A3)
Fold in half.

On the left side - Can you draw a picture of Max - this child/young person who may be having difficulties with friendship, struggling at home or school?

Time given for drawing

So what is happening to this child? What are their struggles at home or at school?. Can you write a few words around the picture?

What is this child feeling? Can you put some more words around the picture

Time given whilst CYP finish drawing and writing

Then this child is lucky and meets someone like you from this group and, because of that, they start coming to a new group with Adri and Martha ...

So go back to your paper. So we are now 3 months later. Max has been coming to a group like this for 3 months or about 10 sessions.

On the right fold of your paper can you draw a picture of Max now? Is there anything different about Max now? Can you show it on your picture?

What is happening to Max now? - Put some key words around the drawing.

How is Max feeling now?

Give time for CYP to draw and write

Ask the CYP if any of them would like to share their drawing with the group or keep private. Ask permission to take photos of their drawings. They can choose to keep their drawing and take home or leave with the facilitator.

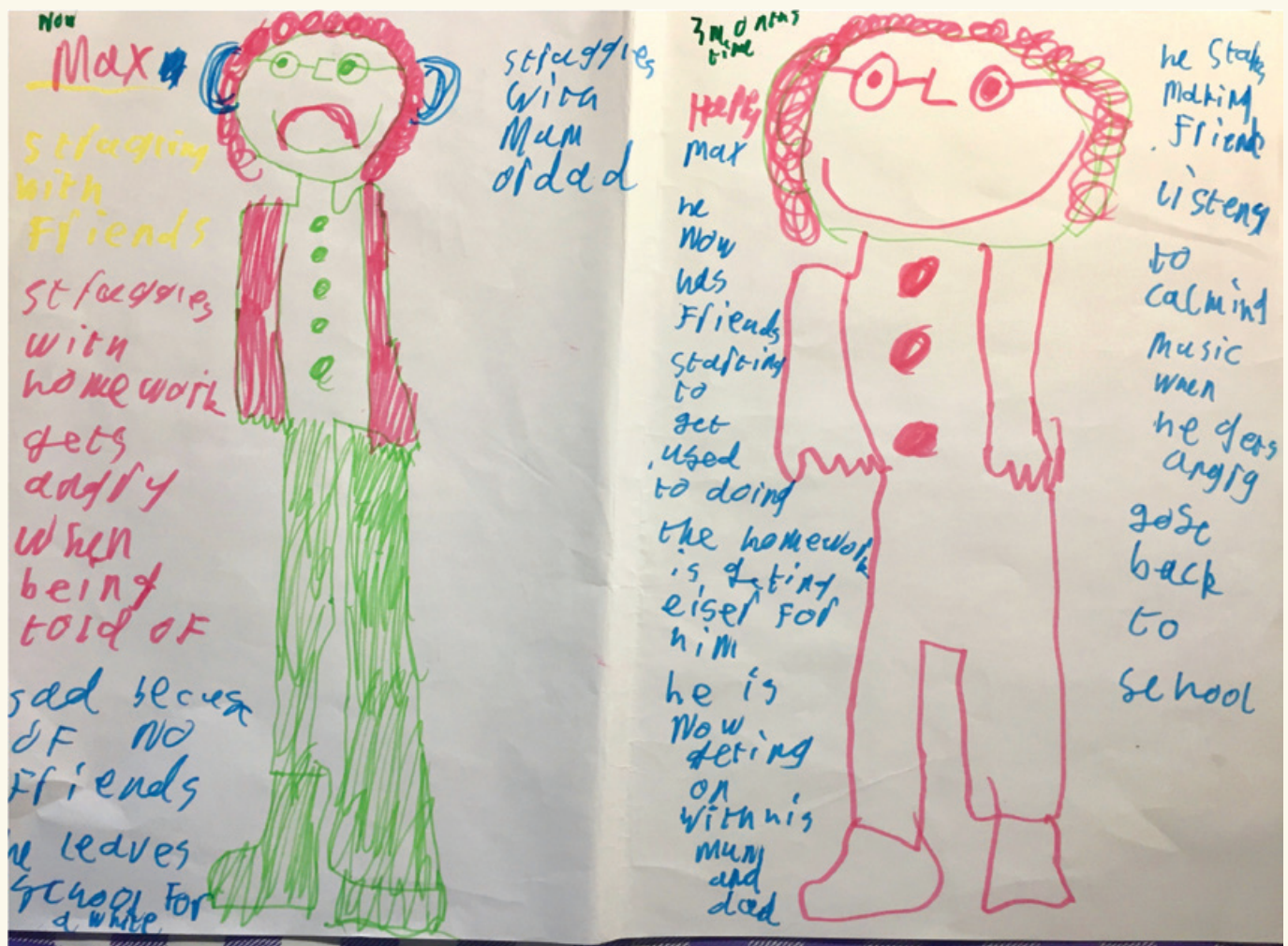
CYP1:

Before: struggling with friends, struggling with homework, gets angry when being told off, sad because of no friends - he leaves school for a while, struggling with Mum and Dad

After: Happy Max - he now has friends, starting to get used to doing homework as its getting easier for him, he is listening to calming music when he gets

angry, he goes back to school, he starts making friends, he is getting on with his mum and dad.

This young person's visuals and words suggest that the club has had an very positive effect on many aspects of his life and the development of his social skills - coping with anger, making friends, managing relationships with parents. He has also reported separately being much happier in all aspects of his life since joining the group.



CYP 2:

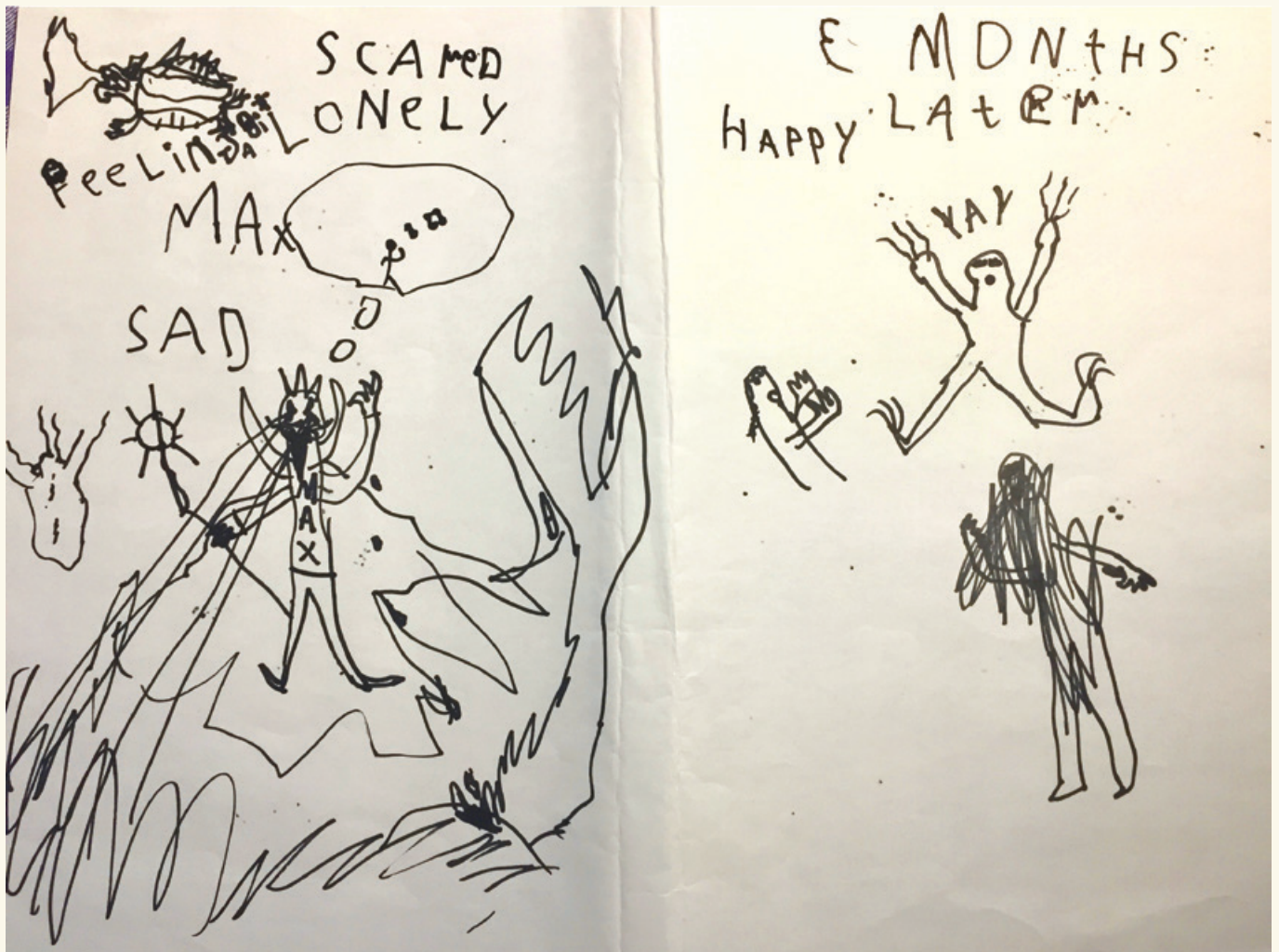
Before: Feeling lonely, Scared, Sad

After: Happy Max, Yay

The imagery here is very strong and a little dark and scary in the "before" visuals. After, there is celebration - someone is clapping and it is joyful. At the start of this group, this child had quite frequently

'shocked' others with a preoccupation with the dark and deathly. He was also quiet and subdued. This would seem to be depicted in this "before" imagery.

"After" suggests a big move from the 'dark' to a playfulness and celebration of being watched and 'applauded' by others. This young person was observed as most often joyful, playful and enjoying performance in the club.



CYP 3:

Before: Max gets bullied, max feels left out, Max has X friends : (, Lonely

After: Happy, Max is very popular, Max has lots of friends, Max never feels lonely

This young person has flourished in the group and the imagery speaks for itself how she views herself now and her aspirations to continue to improve her social skills and relationships. She has shown courage and initiative in the group setting.

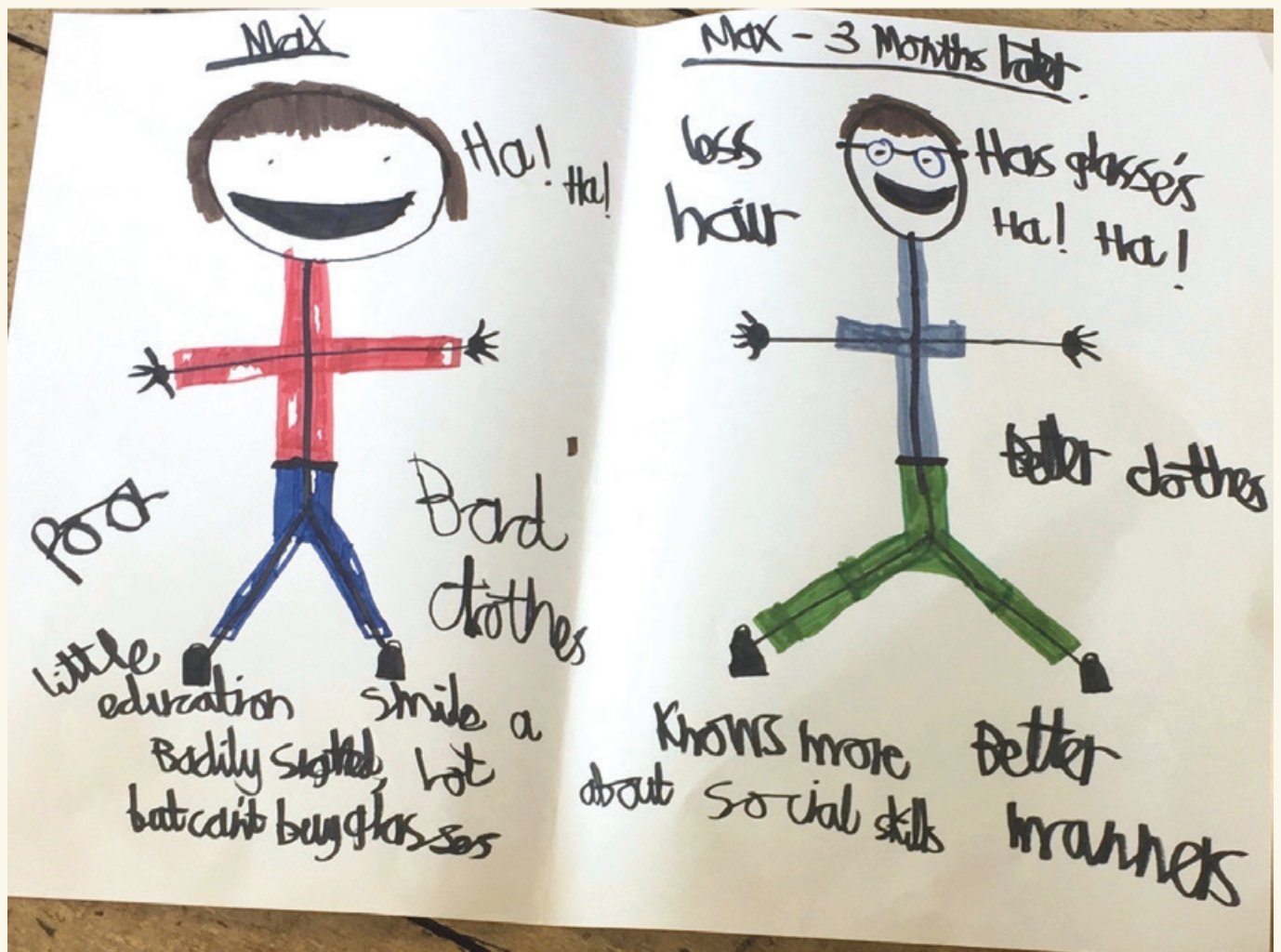


CYP 4: (1st time attending group)

Before: Max had bad clothes, poor, little education, badly sighted but won't buy glasses, he smiles a lot.

After: He wears better clothes, has less hair (appears 'smarter'), has better manners, has glasses now Ha Ha!, knows more about social skills.

This was this young person's first time in the group. He has probably communicated his hopes and aspirations for the group. Some of the "before" might be telling a story of himself or how he views himself currently.



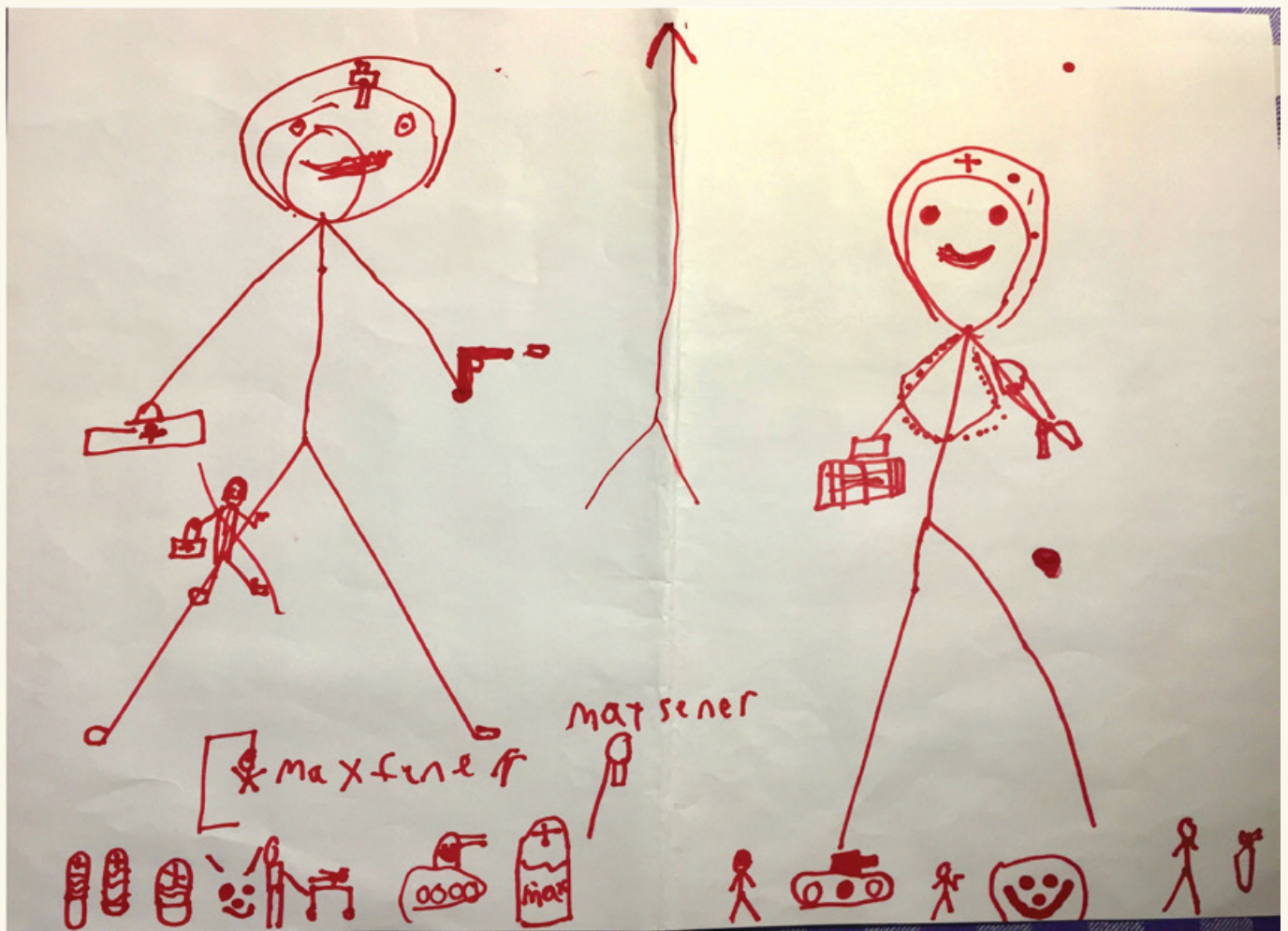
CYP 5:

Before: This young person gave a verbal explanation: Max is a Military medic. Other military medics who were his friends were dying and he's angry and worried about getting shot or attacked and other friends dying.

After: He's not angry anymore. He now has better tanks and resources. He can deal with challenges better now. The war has finally stopped.

When he started the club, this young person had had recently a friendship breakdown experience (his only friend at that time told him that he did not want to be his friend anymore) and this might be interpreted in the death of friends.

Through the club, he had made new friends and been able to overcome some very difficult issues. His social skills developed very quickly once he had the tools and guidance. His story of the Military Medic is imaginative and creative way of telling a complex story.



For all the young people, friendship and their ability to make, keep and enjoy friends has been one of the most significant outcomes of being part of the SSA group, as has been highlighted in section 2.3.

4 Parents

4.1 Communication with Parents

Establishing positive relationships between SSA and parents is key to success for positive outcomes for the CYP.

Bespoke service:

Many parents with neurodivergent CYP have experienced a wide range of service providers usually over a number of years. It is common that parents have had some negative experiences. Parents have become wary of feeling judged, patronised and not supported adequately and their children not understood, marginalised and (sometimes) punished for their difference. Some of the professionals offer a very 'institutionalised' approach.

"X really enjoys the sessions [club]; it feels like the only support we have at the moment in an unhelpful, judgmental world."

The SSA is very aware of this experience being common for families and was established as a counter-balance to that experience. Much of the evidence already highlighted in this evaluation report clearly demonstrates that what the SSA offers is personalised, bespoke and supportive to parents and CYP alike.

For example, after each session the facilitators reflect on the session, evaluate the session as a whole as well as reflecting on the issues around individual children. Any concerns or strategies for different children will be incorporated into the subsequent sessions. Sometimes follow-up contact will be made with parents of a particular child.

As previously mentioned the initial assessment stage when communication is first established is often key to parents and CYP joining SSA and participating in the club.

Email communication with parents:

In the week following the session, the SSA often emails parents to inform of the content of the session, as well as suggested activities to consolidate learning.

Some parents have found this extremely useful:

"X had a lovely time today. He's never terribly good at explaining what he's done so the summary is extremely useful for us."

Some parents might be struggling to keep up with the correspondence:

"I see another email from Adri and I think, that's important... and I must read that... sometime."

Parental expectations.

There are a wide range of Parents expectations - those who are simply hoping for an environment where their child can belong, enjoy a group, make friends and build a bit of confidence to those who believe that their child might "get better" - to essentially become more neurotypical.

The majority of parents recognise that their child's diagnosis means that social skills are a challenge for their child.

"I like the idea that this would help him with social skills. Skills that he would naturally would not pick up. Sometimes autistic kids need to actually be taught so this is really helpful and the idea that he can actually be himself amongst other children"

However, there are times when parents' expectations have exceeded what is possible - that essentially their child will learn to be (more) neurotypical because of the acquisition of social skills.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges is that some parents don't recognise that developing social skills can take a long time and the benefits of the club go beyond social skills acquisition - belonging, social safety, friendship, healthier sense of self and well-being as well as reducing potential risks of mental health difficulties in the future.

As mentioned previously, for many of the CYP, learning social skills is like learning a new language. Therefore, the learning of a new social skill, like language learning, is not delivered in one session, remembered and adopted straight after (for most

of the CYP as with most learners). New social skills need to be learnt, repeated, practiced, mistakes made, before becoming proficient.

This evaluation found that all the parents consulted had witnessed change and most recognised the benefits of their child belonging to this group. However, there is a possibility that some of the CYP who dropped out in the pilot year may have had parents who did not witness significant and rapid change in social skills despite the other benefits of belonging, group safety and friendship.



5 Conclusion and Recommendations

Evidence from this evaluation suggests that the SSA groups have created the enabling environment that is right for children to be able to learn social skills. The clubs create the context where children can learn and practice social skills before stepping out into the world.

This evaluation found that the enabling environment is a group context where the CYP feel they belong - they have positive group experiences / feel socially safe and make friends. That environment is created by skilled group facilitators who adopt a range of creative, fun, active learning methods AND possess compassionate, unpatronising and kind attitudes, behaviour and sensibilities.

As a result of this, the CYP develop their social skills and improve their self-confidence. In the long term, it reduces the risk of mental health issues as adults.

Findings from this evaluation suggest that demand for SSA clubs will continue to increase. The very positive outcomes for the CYP highlighted in this evaluation suggest that the SSA has implemented the right 'ingredients' for success for working with CYP who are neurodivergent in particular HFA.

In order to meet the demands of the work on an on-going basis, the SSA is going to have to expand its staff capacity to continue to meet the current need and build capacity for the future.

5.1 Recommendations

Package and promote the SSA approach:

use findings of this report to 'package' the SSA approach and share with parents and potential funders/investors. In addition, share learning with other organisations and institutions working with HFA/neurodivergent CYP. Explicitly spell out that the benefits of the club for CYP are belonging, positive group safety, friendship and learning social skills.... which leads to increase in self-confidence...

and potentially reduces risk of mental health issues in the future. Emphasise that the first 3 need to be in place for the child before they are able to learn social skills.

Develop a training programme:

Based on the findings of this evaluation, develop training for different stakeholders at different levels: i.e. entry-level parent training, sibling training (these could be one day/half day training). Also provide training for organisations, co-facilitators and facilitators - see below.

Increase human resource capacity:

establish a cadre of SSA recognised facilitators who are registered and able to facilitate clubs within the SSA framework. Explore different models of sharing expertise through recognised SSA trained providers (monitored and supervised by the SSA to ensure standards). Family members could be potential trainees.

Sibling support group

As well as offering training for siblings to become SSA facilitators, set up a sibling support group. This would enable siblings of neurodivergent CYP to come together to share their unique experience as siblings, develop coping mechanisms and celebrate their unique family set up.

Actively recruit, mentor and train those with experience of autism and neurodivergence:

these could be neurodivergent themselves or have experience of neurodivergent CYP. Adverts do not break recruitment laws if they say, "we especially welcome applicants from neurodivergent and HFA backgrounds or from neurodivergent families"

Satellite Activities throughout Bristol.

Develop a plan to start more groups in the next 2 years ran by trained SSA facilitators.

Orientation for parents.

As part of the sign-up process, set up an orientation workshop which will provide parents with an orientation of the SSA approach with HFA neurodivergent CYP, including the language-

learning model. The workshop would mirror the style of club with the CYP, bringing in games and fun activities as a means of exploring the issues and understanding the SSA approach. The workshop would enable the SSA to see parents with the potential to become facilitators.

Communication with parents.

Instead of the regular emails, create a club guideline, which summarises all the main social learning that takes place in the club. Provide this to the CYP and parents. With the parents, use this as a learning tool for them to use at home with their CYP to consolidate learning from the club. Furthermore, these guidelines can be provided to schools as a means of creating a link between SSA and schools.

Building links with schools.

Links with the school are best facilitated and promoted by parents who already have established relationships with schools. Creating a pathway where SSA can work collaboratively with schools and their support/specialist staff will enable schools to consolidate individual learning from SSA club in the school context. Collaborative work between

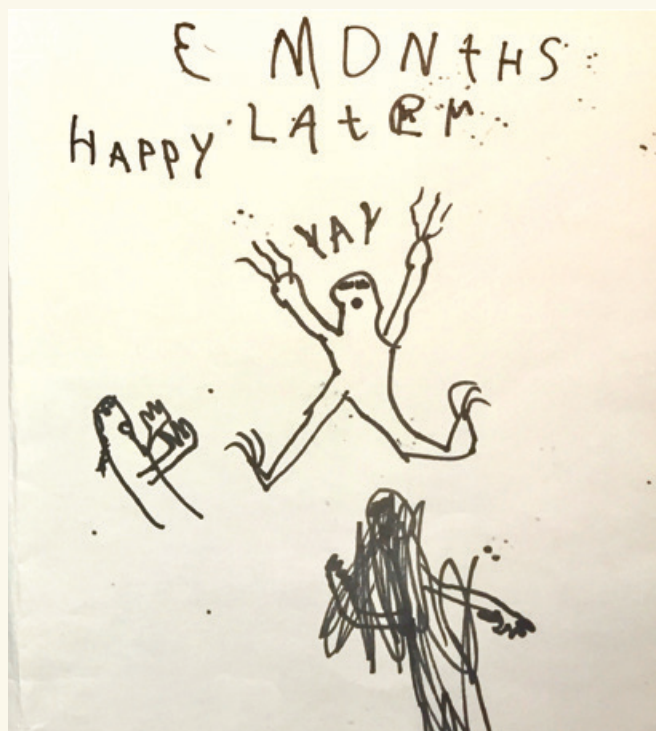
SSA and schools could be in various forms: meeting SENco's; training learning support assistants; attending EHCP meetings or similar.

Funding:

There is a need to highlight to parents the importance of applying for support from local authorities either during the EHCP process or annual review or through Personal Budgets/ Direct Payment. Other options for funding include DLA or PIP (Personal Independence Payment) and the organisation could provide information to parents about the application process, as part of the package of support to the CYP.

If possible seek funding or private investment to lower the weekly costs for some families in hardship. This could be through fundraising events supported by parents, or gaining sponsorship by local organisations or investment funding from appropriate ethical companies.

Develop a simple manual, leaflet, to explain the SSA approach and that illustrates the impact and outcomes for CYP.





Social Skills Agency Services

- Social Skills learning through individual or group sessions
- Parent Support Strategies
- Classroom and Inclusion Strategies

Social Learning Groups & Clubs

- Drama and Creative clubs (10-18 years old)
- Music club (13-25 years old)
- Film club (13-25 years old)

Pre-employment skills (15-25 year-olds)

One-to-one or small group sessions

Adult Social Skills Programme

One-to-one and coaching sessions.

For people outside Bristol

- One-to-one support and Classroom and Parent Support Strategies.
- School Holiday Intensive Social Learning Programmes.

www.socialskillsagency.org / office@socialskillsagency.org



Social Skills Agency Services

Professional development for Schools, Museums and Art Galleries

Schools:

- Autism Training Introduction
- Using Drama to Support Social and Emotional Learning
- The Inclusion Programme for mainstream schools

Museums, Art & Cultural Institutions:

- Access & Engagement

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