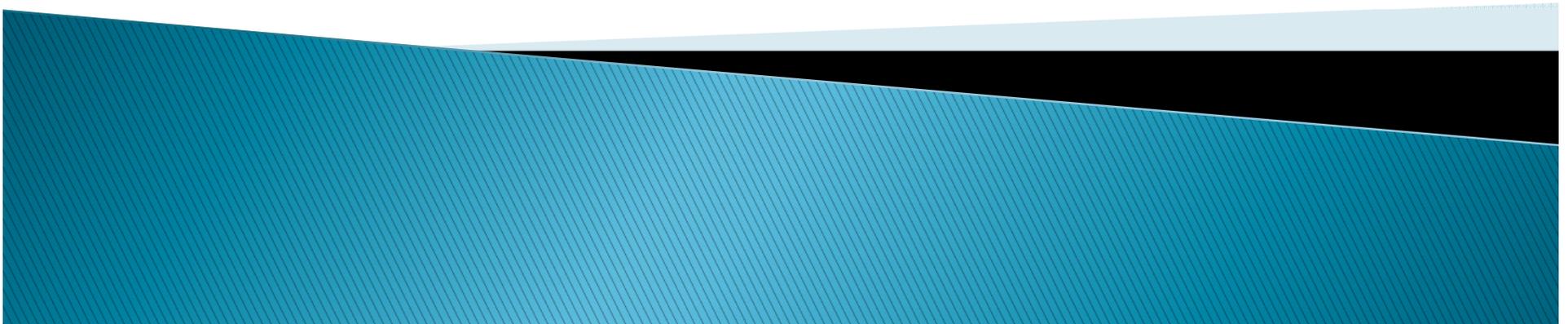


# “FUN FRIENDS”

A program that enhances emotional resiliency and social skills development in 4 to 7 year olds



# Presenters

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- ▶ Diane Bartlett, Director of Research and Program Evaluation, George Hull Centre
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# Collaboration

- ▶ The George Hull Centre for Children and Families
  - Children's Mental Health agency serving children and youth, 0–18 years old, in Toronto
- ▶ Toronto Catholic District School Board
  - One of the largest school boards in Canada, teaching 86,000 children



# Why?

- ▶ 1 in 5 children in Canada suffer from a diagnosable mental health problem. Estimates show the most common mental disorders affecting Canadian children are anxiety, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorders and depressive disorders
- ▶ 14.7 percent of children aged 2 to 5 years exhibit high levels of emotional and/or anxiety problems Kirby, M. J. L. & Keon, W. J. (2004–11).
- ▶ Anxiety represents one of the most frequently experienced disorders



# Why?

- ▶ These emotional disorders are associated with a wide range of psychosocial impairments, tend to be chronic and unremitting in course, and are associated with significant risk for other psychological disorders if left untreated. (e.g., Cole et al., 1998; Harrington, Fudge, Rutter, Pickles, & Hill, 1990; Kashani & Orvaschel, 1990; Last, Hanson, & Franco, 1997; Orvaschel, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1995)
- ▶ Although specialized treatment services exist, less than one-quarter of children receive those services.



# Benefits of In Classroom Intervention

- ▶ Target children who would not otherwise receive intervention
- ▶ Reduction of stigmatization, enhancement of peer support and reduction of psychosocial difficulties
- ▶ Promotes learning and healthy development in all children and adolescents



# FRIENDS: A Classroom Intervention

- ▶ Friends For Life – youth (12–16 year olds)
- ▶ Friends For Life – child (8 to 11 year olds)
- ▶ Fun Friends (4 – 7 year olds)



# What is FRIENDS?

- ▶ A classroom based prevention program
- ▶ Developed by Psychologist Dr. Paula Barrett
- ▶ Built on a cognitive-behavioural approach
- ▶ **Evidence based** e.g. Stallard, P. (2010), Liddle, I. & MacMillan, S. (2010), Martinsen, K.D., Aalberg, M., Gere, M., & Neumer, S.P. (2009), Rose, H., Miller, L., & Martinez, Y. (2009)



# *FUN FRIENDS*

- ▶ Teaches young children (4–7 years old) practical, useful strategies for coping with stress, fear, and sadness
- ▶ It helps young children to become more resilient and “bounce back” from challenging or stressful situations.
- ▶ Helps children learn emotional and social skills that will assist them to excel in their school years



# Fun Friends

- ▶ Enhances social emotional learning by assisting students with developing:
  - Sense of self
  - Self- regulation
  - Social skills
  - Pro-social behaviour
  - Responsibility for self and others



# Fun Friends

- ▶ Program is activity based and developmentally appropriate
- ▶ Use of songs, books, games, role playing
- ▶ Fun Friends Workbook



# Parent Involvement

- ▶ Facilitators organize a parent information session prior to start of program
- ▶ George Hull Centre: concurrent parent session
- ▶ Parents are encouraged to review Fun Friends concepts with their child with the use of the student workbook



# History of the Collaboration: TCDSB

- ▶ History of partnerships with Children's Mental Health such as CAMH, Sunnybrook, CDI, Integra, BOOST (Snap, Healthy Relationships, Feelings Club)
- ▶ *Friends for Life* was introduced in 2008 as universal prevention program (under Learning Opportunity Grant (LOG) and continuously supported by CCCC (Catholic Community Culture & Caring) expert panel
- ▶ Delivered every year in approx 20 classrooms by Guidance, Psychology, Social Work Staff
- ▶ *Fun Friends* was initiated in 2010



# History of the Collaboration: George Hull Centre

- ▶ Fun Friends introduced as a clinical program in 2010 at GHC with 7 treatment groups to date
- ▶ Offered to 11 TCDSB classrooms last school year and 8 TCDSB classrooms this year (GHC partnered in 19 of 40 classrooms at TCDSB)
- ▶ Offered to 3 TDSB classrooms



# Collaborative Program Structure

- ▶ TCDSB trained 44 staff (including 8 teachers) to date
- ▶ GHC staff and TCDSB staff run the program conjointly
- ▶ Classroom based
- ▶ 10 –12 weeks approximately 1 hour in length
- ▶ 3 classes, 3 times a year
- ▶ Teacher present throughout
- ▶ Added the research component in Jan 2013



# Goals of the Collaboration

- ▶ To offer an evidence based program to improve the mental health of all children
- ▶ To improve knowledge and collaboration across the School Board and CMHA in:
  - Delivering high quality mental health interventions
  - Identifying children at risk for mental health difficulties

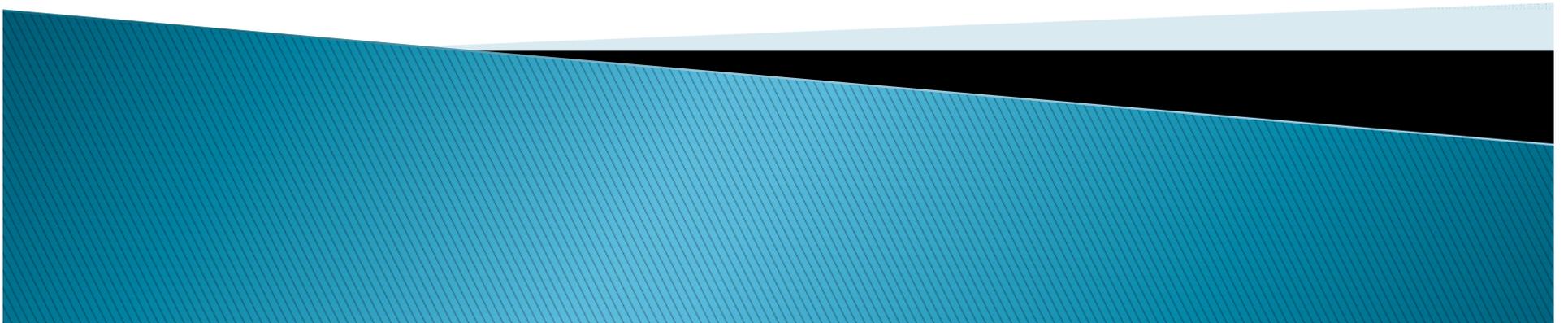


# Goals of the Collaboration (con't)

- Increase teacher capacity to identify and support positive socio-emotional functioning in the classrooms
- Supporting a shift of culture within the selected schools towards less stigma, more mental health knowledge, reinforcement of strategies that promote resilience and positive coping



# Outline of FUN FRIENDS



# FUN FRIENDS

The major components of the program FUN FRIENDS are contained in the acronym “FRIENDS” as outlined in the next few slides.



# F = Feelings

- ▶ Students are encouraged to be aware and identify feelings in self/others
- ▶ Normalization of all feelings
- ▶ Helping other people feel better (empathy)



# R = Relaxation

- ▶ Students are taught to pay attention to what their body is telling them
- ▶ Relaxation methods are practiced eg. milkshake breathing (deep breathing), imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation.
- ▶ They are encouraged to relax every day, as well as to use relaxation methods when stressed or anxious.



# I = I CAN TRY

- ▶ Students are encouraged to pay attention to their inner thoughts
- ▶ They are taught the difference between their thoughts and feelings
- ▶ Students examine both positive and negative thinking patterns, and how they affect their behaviour.
- ▶ Students are encouraged to think in a positive and optimistic way about the challenges and difficulties they encounter.



# E = Encourage

- ▶ Students learn how to be brave, friendly and reward themselves
- ▶ Breaking difficult tasks down into lots of little steps, rather than being overwhelmed by tackling the entire problem all at once e.g. Step Plan
- ▶ How to be friendly and make new friends
- ▶ Rewarding themselves when they try their best



# N = Nurture

- ▶ Acknowledging family, friends, and teachers that can help students become brave
- ▶ Identifying role models and their modelling, empowering, and identity forming influence in student's lives



# D = Don't Forget To Be Brave

- ▶ It's important to practice these skills everyday with family and friends
- ▶ Students identify their “support team” e.g. people that can help them to be brave



# S = Stay

- ▶ Students learn the importance of being happy with their efforts
- ▶ Celebrate finishing the Fun Friends program e.g. class party
- ▶ Acknowledge the importance of spending special time doing fun things with friends and family



# VIDEO

- ▶ FUN FRIENDS



# Activity

- ▶ Same and Different



# Research Collaboration

- ▶ What is the impact of Fun Friends Program from the perspectives of Parents, Student and Staff?
- ▶ **Parents:**
  - GHC: Standardized tool pre-post group **Strengths and Difficulties** questionnaire (parent completed)
- ▶ **Students:**
  - Board: Qualitative pre-post interviews 15 groups of four students
- ▶ **Staff:**
  - Board: Staff members who were involved in teaching Fun Friends completed a phone interview



# Parent Perspective

## “Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire”

25-question brief behavioural screening questionnaire

- 5 Scales
- emotional symptoms
  - conduct problems
  - hyperactivity/inattention
  - peer relationship problems
  - prosocial behaviour
  - total score

### Categories

Normal  
Borderline  
Abnormal

- Administered to 12 classes in 4 schools between Jan and Dec 2013
  - 8 grade one classes, 1 split grade 1-2, and 3 grade 2 classes

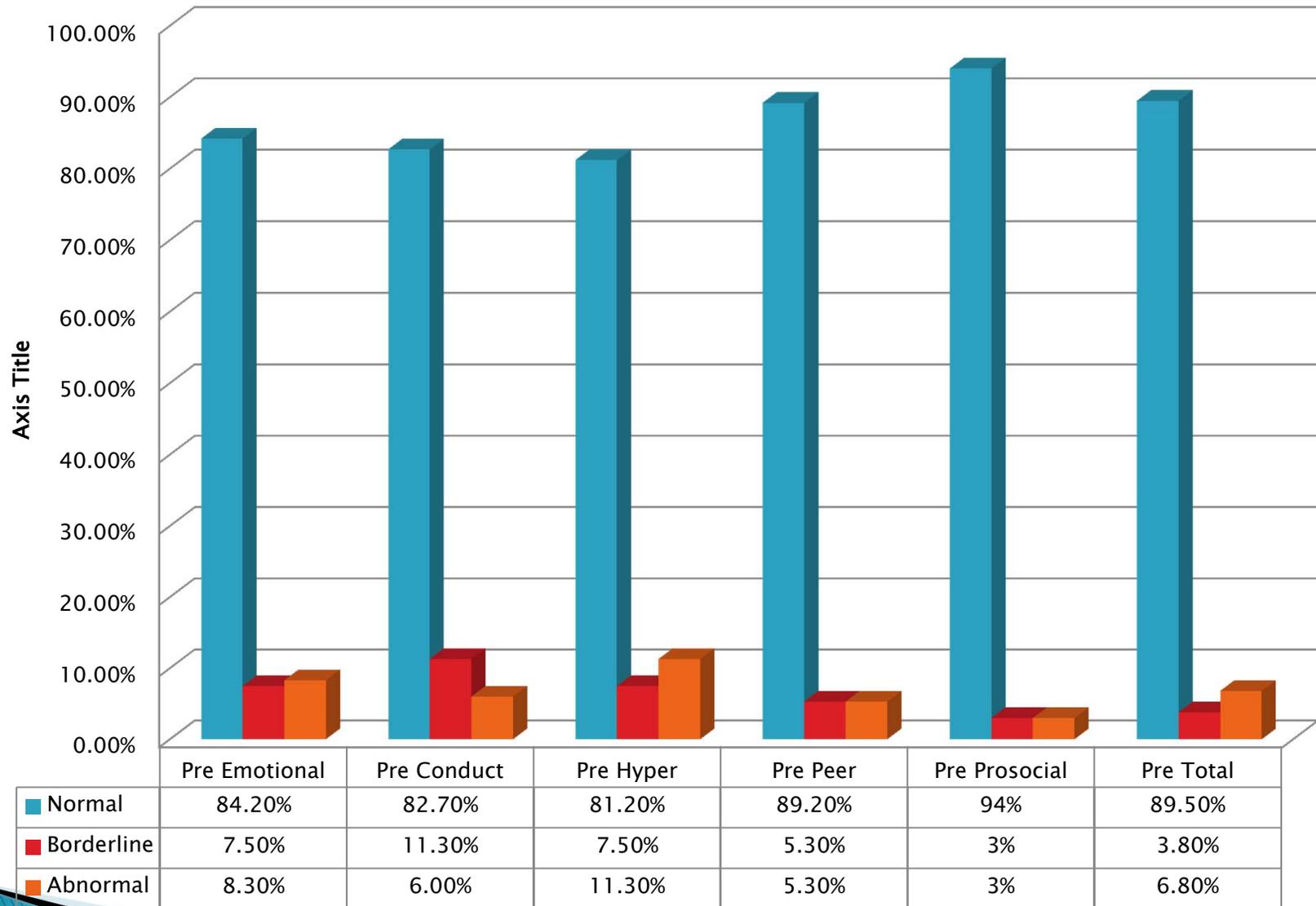
Pre-post data was extremely challenging to obtain from parents.

133 pre-questionnaires (58%) of the total students

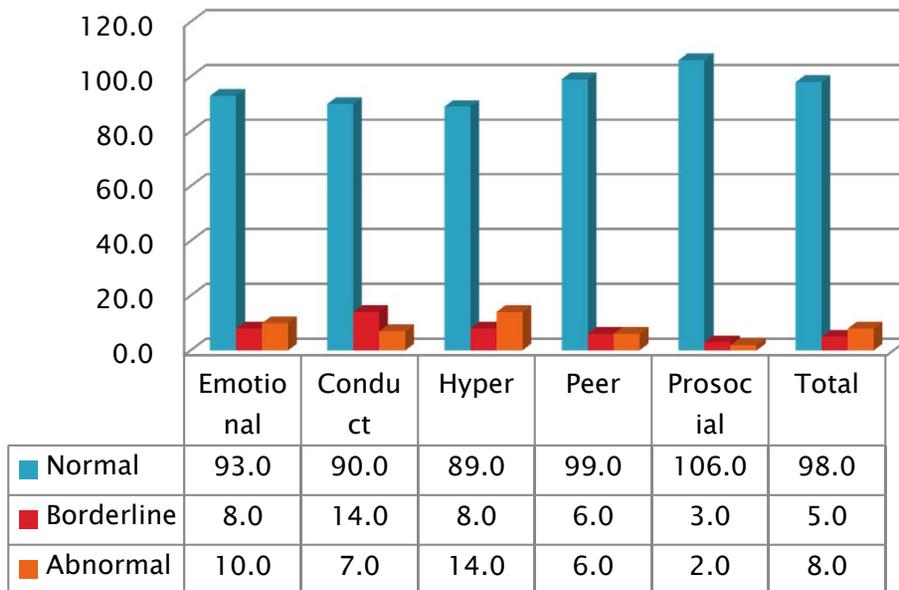
111 complete pre-post (48%) of the total students



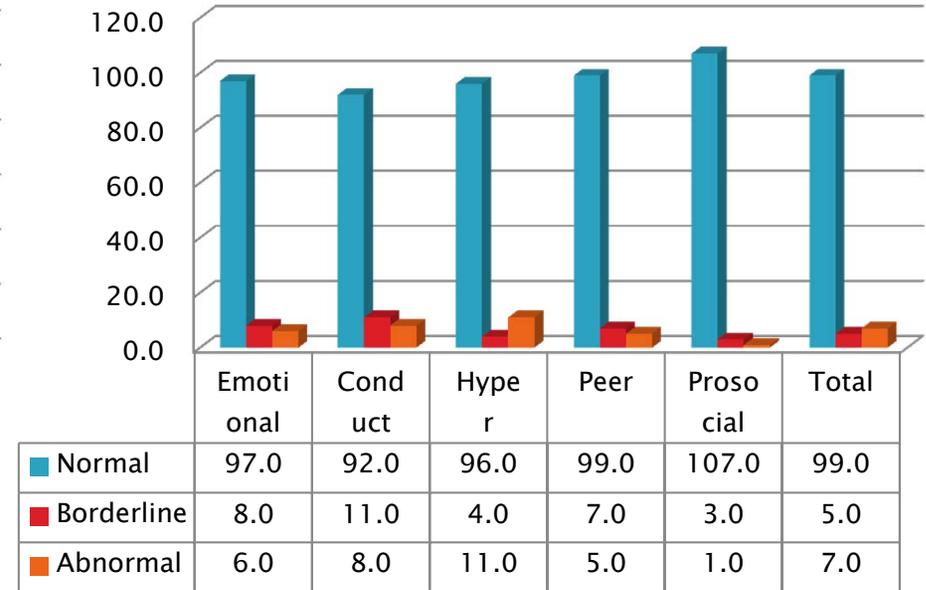
## Pre-Scores by Scale - All Children (n=133)



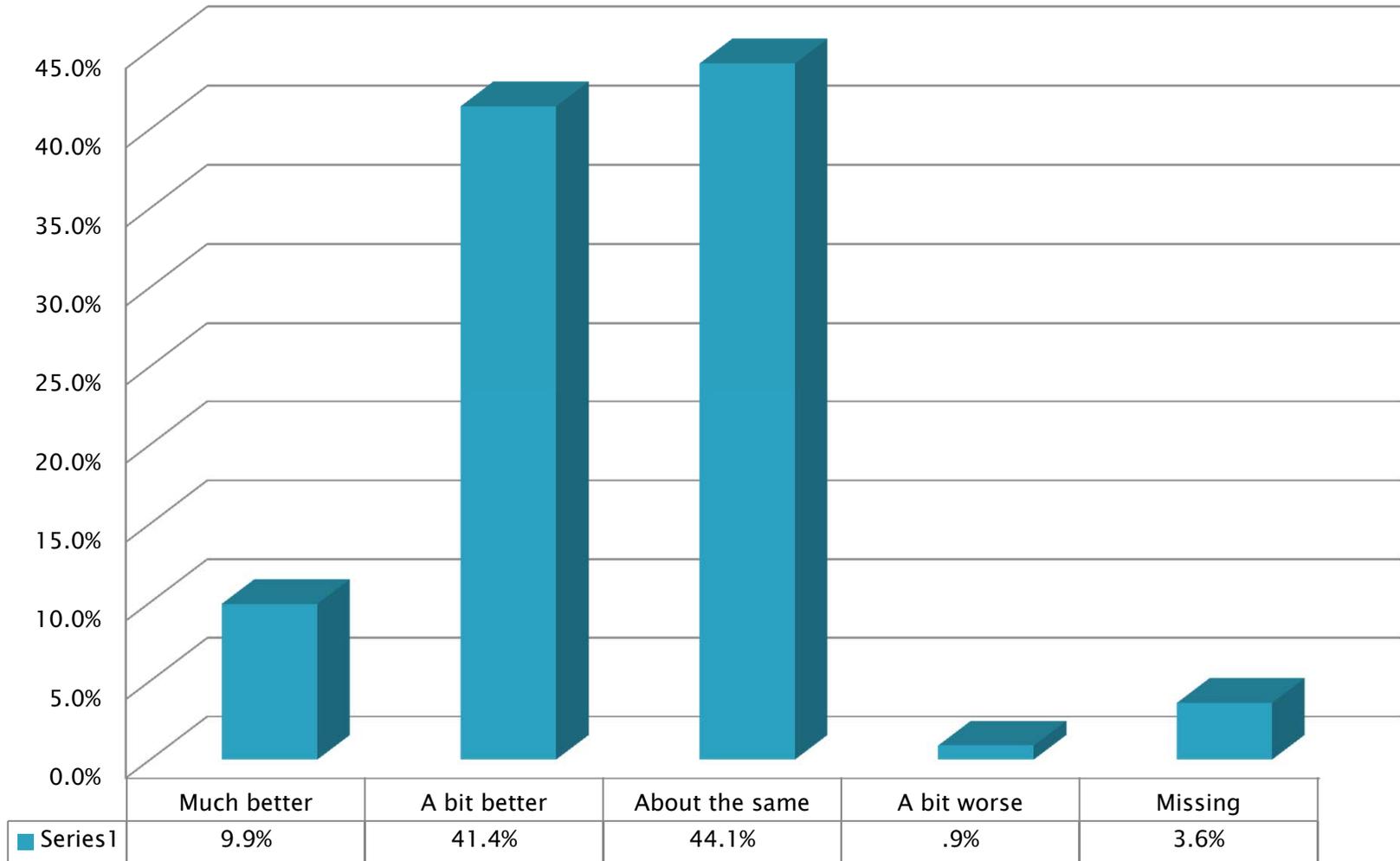
## Pre Total Kids - n=111



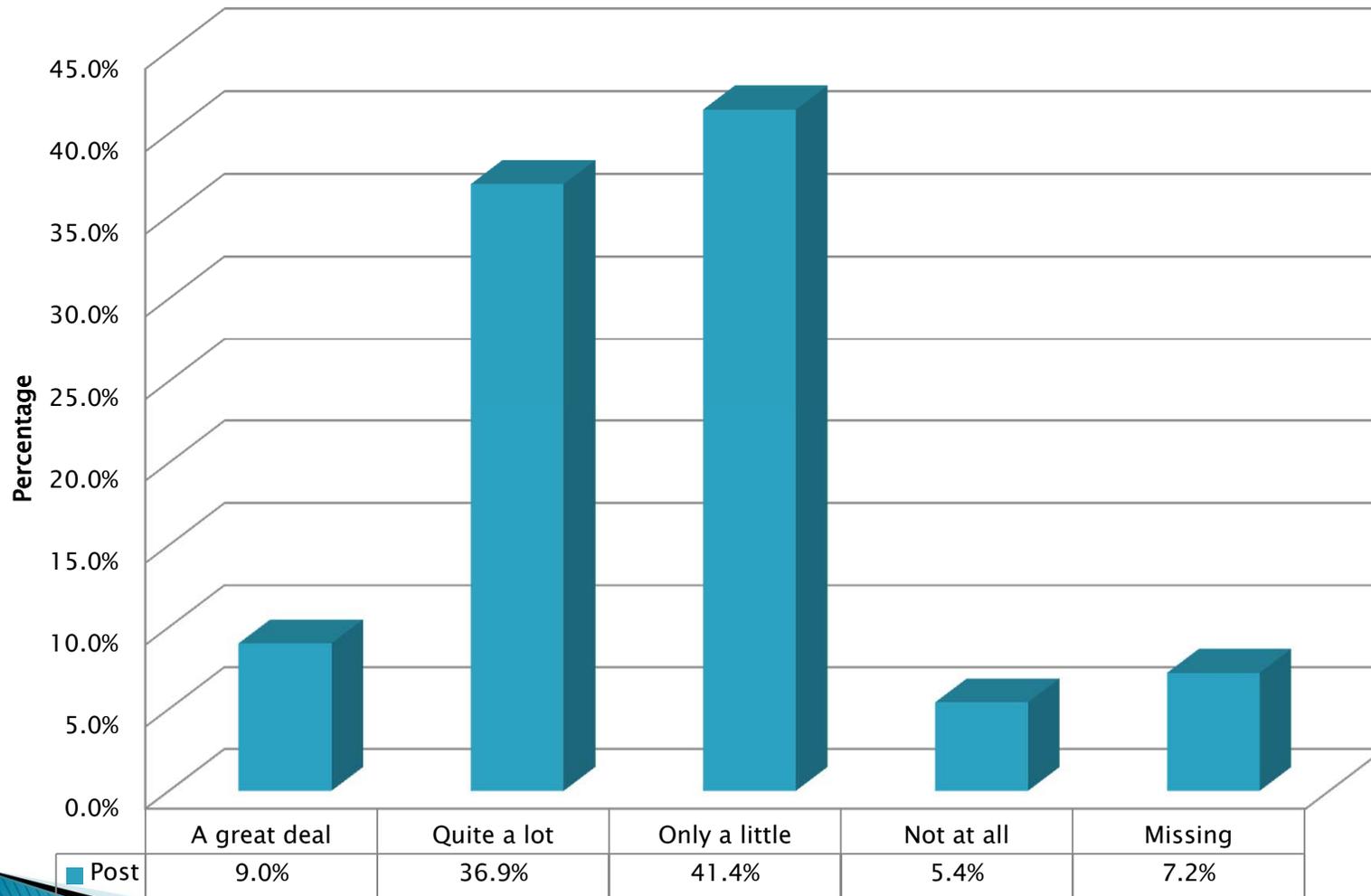
## Post Total Kids - n=111



## Since the start of the Fun Friends program, are your child problems...



Has the Fun Friends program been helpful in other ways, e.g. providing information or making the problem more bearable?



# Summary

- ▶ Parent perspective difficult to obtain. Pre–post only obtain for 50% of children. Outcomes for the remaining 50% are unknown.
- ▶ About 50% of parents who completed post questionnaires said that since the beginning of the Fun Friends program their child’s difficulties had improved, however categorical shifts were small on the SDQ measure.
- ▶ Parents reported program helpful in other ways than reducing difficulties.
- ▶ A teacher measure would produce a larger percentage of pre–post measures for a classroom.



# Student – Method

15 groups of four (on average) students were interviewed at both the beginning and end of Fun Friends using a group interview method which covered many topics taught in Fun Friends.

All students were enrolled in one of the two schools which collaborated with the George Hull Centre.



# Student – Results

## Relaxation

▶ Before beginning Fun Friends, students were aware of some relaxation methods – sitting, laying down, watching relaxing TV or videos.

After Fun Friends, students were more aware of:

- ▶ deep "milkshake breathing",
- ▶ use of yoga and similar techniques,
- ▶ the value of relaxation when worried.



# Student – Results

## Helpful Thoughts

- ▶ After Fun Friends, students were better able to substitute helpful green thoughts for unhelpful red thoughts.
- ▶ Students in 1 / 3 of the interview groups were able to discuss the value of using green thoughts in questions on being brave and addressing worry



# Student – Results

## Exploring Solutions

- ▶ There was a substantial increase in the number of groups in which students suggested breaking down problems into manageable components (e.g. 13% to 66%).
- ▶ When asked to provide a series of steps to learn to ride a bike, students suggested 1 or 2 steps, but not a detailed series.

## Rewards

- ▶ The percentage of groups recognizing the importance of rewards for being brave increased from 67% to 85%.
- ▶ Over the course of Fun Friends, students became more specific about the type of reward, giving examples of appropriate small rewards such as a pat on the back



# Note on Student Data

## Fun Friends Results Are Preliminary:

- ▶ The interview technique was experimental to develop a method for use with very young children.
- ▶ Results reflect opinions of groups of students, not necessarily all individuals in the group.



# Staff Measure – Method

Staff members who were involved in teaching Fun Friends (n=10) completed a phone interview .

All staff members were drawn from classes which finished Fun Friends at least 8 weeks before the interviews.

Staff members did not necessarily teach the in the same schools as students who were interviewed.



# Interview Topics – Staff

- ▶ The need for Fun Friends and benefits to students and staff
- ▶ Student utilization of skills taught in Fun Friends
- ▶ Opportunity to reinforce Fun Friends concepts, especially after the program ended
- ▶ Quality of materials and of the program.
- ▶ Strengths of Fun Friends and areas for improvement
- ▶ Ease of integration into the curriculum



# Staff – Results

## Awareness of feelings

Staff generally thought that students understood the concept of feelings well.

Some staff members observed that students recognize their own feelings and those of others, but had difficulty in responding appropriately to others' body language and emotions.

## Relaxation:

Staff generally agreed that students understood the concept of relaxation.

One instructor recommended teaching relaxation methods in gym class



# Staff – Results

- ▶ Exploring Solutions: Staff generally thought that students could learn to break problems down into manageable steps, provided they had ongoing support and reinforcement.
- ▶ Rewards: Staff had very little to say about rewards.
- ▶ Helpful Thoughts: Staff generally thought that students understood the importance of positive thinking.
- ▶ Respondents said it was important to continue teaching students to think in a helpful way.



# Did Fun Friends meet student needs?

- ▶ Staff reported that students had improved ability to use social and friendship skills, think helpfully, relax and, occasionally, solve problems.
- ▶ Students continue to use their skills for about a month after the end of classes. After that, it was necessary for staff to reinforce Fun Friends concepts, either on a regular basis or in response to specific incidents.
- ▶ Good collaboration between the Fun Friends instructor and classroom teacher was considered essential.



# Staff Strengths and Concerns – Materials

- ▶ Staff generally approved of the books and handouts, finding them easy to use and helpful in preparation of lessons.
- ▶ Staff in schools collaborating with George Hull and the Etobicoke Children's Center appreciated the materials provided by the agencies. These materials substantially reduced lesson preparation time.
- ▶ Some staff suggested modifying one of the step plan handout.



# Staff Strengths and Concerns – Program

Staff generally thought the program was high-quality.

Appreciation was expressed for the hands-on procedures and the relevance of the program to real life.

Staff also appreciated the songs and activities which they thought facilitated learning.



# Staff Strengths and Concerns – Program

- ▶ Staff had mixed opinions about the age appropriateness of Fun Friends.
- ▶ Some staff thought the program was age appropriate.
- ▶ Others thought it was either too difficult or too easy (and should be started in Kindergarten).



# Staff Strengths and Concerns – Program

- ▶ Staff thought that there was too much to cover in many of the Fun Friends lessons; material should be chosen judiciously to meet the needs of their particular students.
- ▶ After formal instruction in Fun Friends ends, students need ongoing reinforcement of concepts that they learned. Consider presenting Fun Friends – or reinforcing Fun Friends concepts – in subsequent years.



# Links to Curriculum

Fun Friends meets many of the goals of the current curriculum

Similar concepts are taught currently:

- ▶ Religion/Fully Alive: Jesus' treatment of others.
- ▶ Social Studies: especially in Grade 1, which is focused on community and responsibility.
- ▶ Language Arts.
- ▶ Health and gym: Relaxation is taught in gym.
- ▶ Virtue of the month



# Benefits of the Collaboration

- ▶ Builds bridges between the School Board and the mental health agency
- ▶ Teachers develop increased capacity
  - Increased willingness of TCDSB staff to discuss mental health concerns
  - Increased knowledge of mental health
  - Increased knowledge of mental health resources for their students
  - Develop mental health promotion skills to use with their classrooms
- ▶ Teachers and Mental Health staff developed a common language to discuss mental health concerns
- ▶ George Hull staff were able to identify student mental health issues occurring in the classroom such as anger, calming/relaxation and anxiety.



# Benefits of the Collaboration

- ▶ Increased willingness of TCDSB staff to discuss mental health concerns
- ▶ Developed a common language to discuss mental health concerns
- ▶ Teachers developed increased level of competence in supporting the mental health needs of students



# Barriers

- ▶ Research barriers (approval, scope, information from parents)
- ▶ School barriers (teacher workload, board staff training, union concerns)
- ▶ Children's Mental Health barriers (focus on prevention and universal programming vs treatment, resource limitations, little parent involvement)



# Next Steps

- ▶ Develop practices for staff, parent and school to reinforce concepts
- ▶ Create easier access to identify mental health needs in the classroom
- ▶ Increase parent awareness of and participation in the program
- ▶ Redesign evaluation e.g. Teacher point of view

