

Opening Statement – OIR committee – Suzanne Connolly, CEO Barnardos

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today. Barnardos provides a range of services to children and families in our 40 community based centres, in family homes and in schools. In 2020 these services were delivered to nearly 18,000 vulnerable children and parents.

Our key message today is that early intervention and prevention is vital to reducing the impact of bullying on mental health. To meet this objective Barnardos delivers the following programmes in schools and communities –

The Roots of Empathy Programme is an evidence based programme focused on social and emotional learning. A parent and a baby visit the classroom every three weeks over a nine-month period. Children learn about child development and indeed their own development through observing a baby growing and the relationship the baby develops with its parent. They learn to understand the range of emotions that a baby experiences and can connect that to their own emotional world. Through observing the relationship between the parent and child, children can see a real live example of a nurturing relationship. This programme has been proven to reduce levels of aggression for children in primary school, and therefore bullying.

Friendship Group is an evidence based group work programme that helps children develop skills to form healthy relationships with their peer group. It teaches children how to negotiate, express and explore different views and feelings, how to win and lose gracefully, and work as a team. It reduces bullying because it helps children relate to each other with respect and understanding.

Our Online Safety Programme is run across primary and secondary schools and aims to promote safe online use and to build critical thinking capacity and healthy behaviours when interacting online.

Through the Friendship Group and Online Safety Programme, children learn that you don't have to like everyone, and you don't have to be friends with everyone, but you do have to treat everyone with respect.

Bullying, without the appropriate supports, can have devastating short and long-term effects. When a child is bullied to the extent that their mental health is impacted it does not solely affect the child concerned, but the family and often the broader community.

The impact of bullying on mental health is not restricted to bullying within school grounds and therefore a holistic approach to tackling the issue must be taken outside of the school context, with consideration given to family and community supports.

Key to reducing the long-term impact of bullying is early intervention and prevention. Evidence based programmes such as Roots of Empathy increase a child's empathy and awareness of others, while Friendship groups can support a child's well-being and build confidence required to negotiate peer relationships.

Targeted and resourced family support, specifically those within communities also help children grow and learn in a home environment that enables them to navigate and manage school conflicts.

Finally, the introduction of a comprehensive digital literacy and online safety programme, must be progressed to ensure children build the capacity to think critically about their behaviours online.

In short, we cannot underestimate the importance of a holistic approach across schools, communities and homes when putting in place early intervention and prevention measures to mitigate the devastating impact bullying can have on children, and young people's, mental health. **Thank you.**