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# Supporting Children Transitioning to Secondary School: A Qualitative Investigation into Families' Experiences of a Novel Online Intervention

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*ABSTRACT: Supporting children to successfully transition from primary to secondary school is of utmost importance for several reasons, including to prevent future emotional and behavioural problems. Level Up is a novel, UK-based intervention consisting of five online group sessions, straddling the summer holidays, and providing at-risk children and their parents/carers with skills to manage their behaviour, emotions, and relationships to support their transition to secondary school. A prior evaluation of Level Up reported a need to better describe the mechanisms of change. This study therefore evaluated the experiences of children and their parents/carers regarding the facilitators and barriers to engagement and change, and the perceived impact. Fourteen children and 17 parents/carers were interviewed. Identified barriers and facilitators were: (1) Having a safe, supportive, and fun space, (2) Learning through connection, (3) A family approach, (4) Problematic group dynamics, and (5) Connecting through video calls. Perceived impact was described as: (1) Empowering children, (2) Supporting children socially, (3) Supporting parents and carers in their parenting role, and (4) Supporting a successful transition to secondary school. Another theme (5) describes some families' experiences of limited impact. These findings can be used to better understand how to support children in their school transition.*

*Keywords: school transition qualitative study intervention evaluation*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Transitioning from primary to secondary school is usually one of the most stressful events a young person can experience (Zeedyk *et al.*, 2003), impacting on their socio-emotional and educational development (Evans *et al.*, 2018; Harris and Nowland, 2021). Children can be excited about the transition, for example about an increased independence, making new friends or having

different subjects (Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2019; Uvaas and McKeivitt, 2013). Yet, children also have concerns around losing friends, bullying or finding their way around their new school (Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2019; Rice *et al.*, 2011; Symonds and Galton, 2014; Uvaas and McKeivitt, 2013). Problems with successfully transitioning to secondary school and subsequent lower levels of school connectedness are associated with lower education outcomes, school drop-out, increased depression and anxiety, and increased involvement in criminal, violent, and antisocial behaviour (Bolland *et al.*, 2016; Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2019; Lester *et al.*, 2013; Rocque *et al.*, 2017; West *et al.*, 2010). Importantly, there is evidence to suggest that difficulties with this transition may not be equal across different socio-demographic variables. For example, children from underserved communities, including those from minority ethnic backgrounds and lower socio-economic status, may find the transition more challenging, which in turn impacts on their mental wellbeing and academic attainment (Simmons *et al.*, 1991). There is also evidence to suggest that pupils with behavioural and conduct difficulties fare less well in transitioning from primary to secondary schools (Palmu *et al.*, 2017; Riglin *et al.*, 2013; West *et al.*, 2010), possibly because this transition exacerbates existing psychopathology.

Theories have developed to explain the impact of transitions between primary and secondary school, such as the Multiple and Multi-dimensional transitions (MMT) theory (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016), describing the school transition not as one single change but as a multitude of smaller and intertwined changes, all of which can have a cumulative impact. Such theories also align with qualitative findings from young people suggesting the transition from primary to secondary school consists of structural, academic and social changes (Demkowicz *et al.*, 2023). Given the multitude of changes involved, such theories speak to the need for holistic approaches of support to tackle these different elements, rather than interventions just tackling the young person. Yet, according to a recent review of interventions supporting school transitioning, there is a paucity of approaches that involve other key stakeholders in the pupils' sphere of influence, including parents and guardians (White, 2020). This is supported by a recent systematic review by Donaldson *et al.* (2023) which showed less than half of the interventions supporting school-to-school transitions involved parents.

Other salient findings from these two recent reviews (Donaldson *et al.*, 2023; White, 2020) were that there was a lack of targeted interventions for pupils that would benefit from more tailored support, as well as few programmes which provided an actual bridge between primary and secondary school, with most being delivered fully before or after the transition. A systematic review by Beatson *et al.* (2023) did not find any interventions providing an actual bridge. Targeted interventions most often focused on autistic young people or young people from a low socio-economic background (Donaldson *et al.*, 2023; White, 2020), but not young people with behavioural

or emotional problems. Coping Power, a program developed in the US that has been extensively studied and used internationally, which targets young people displaying aggressive or disruptive behaviours, involves both children and parents, and provides pre- and post-transition support (Lochman *et al.*, 2012). Coping Power uses a contextual socio-cognitive model and consists of both child group sessions and parent group sessions in the year prior and after the school transition. It has been shown to improve behavioural and academic outcomes up to three years post intervention (Muratori *et al.*, 2019), showing the potential impact of inclusion of these three elements in interventions.

While Coping Power seems effective, it only addresses young people displaying aggressive or disruptive behaviours. This means that young people with other behavioural or emotional problems who are at equally high risk of a poorer school transition and subsequent negative outcomes are excluded (West *et al.*, 2010). To this effect, ‘Level Up’, a novel, UK-based, psychoeducational and therapy-based intervention was developed to address the needs of children at risk of a range of behavioural and emotional problems transitioning from primary to secondary school. Level Up actively involves parents and carers and provides an actual bridge across the primary-secondary transition. It supports children with their emotions, behaviours and relationships and manages children’s expectations and concerns. Moreover, Level Up can be tailored to the individual needs of these young people.

A feasibility and acceptability study of Level Up (Lange *et al.*, 2022) suggested positive benefits to families from participating in Level Up, yet also highlighted a need to better describe the mechanisms of change of the intervention. An understanding of said mechanisms are important to further develop programs that support wider groups of young people transitioning between schools. Moreover, it is important to understand what factors promote engagement of both young people and parent carers in such programs. Therefore, the aim of this study was to qualitatively explore the experiences of participating children and parents/carers, focusing on barriers and facilitators to change and to engagement (as a prerequisite for change). We also explored their perceptions of impact. Based on the knowledge gap described above, we hypothesised that the involvement of parents and the bridge-function of the intervention would be important facilitators to change.

## 2. METHODS

### *Setting for the Study*

Level Up was delivered over two consecutive years; in the summer 2020 overlapping with the first coronavirus pandemic lockdown period and during the summer of 2021 when lockdown restrictions had eased in the UK. Level Up clinicians worked in three London boroughs. Education leads and

commissioners within the local authority supported the clinicians in contacting primary schools in that area for participation in the programme.

Primary school staff members identified children in Year 6 (aged 10–11) who might be eligible for Level Up and completed a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) about that child. If this indicated potential difficulties in at least one domain (emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship problems, prosocial behaviours, or overall) then the child was referred to Level Up by school staff. The Level Up team then invited parents and carers and children to participate in Level Up and shared an expression of interest form for the evaluation.

This study is part of a mixed-methods feasibility (first year of data collection) and pilot study (second year of data collection) evaluating Level Up (Lange *et al.*, 2022). Both samples from the feasibility and pilot studies have been combined for the purposes of this study.

### *Intervention*

Level Up was designed and delivered by clinicians at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. The Level Up team consisted of clinicians with a range of backgrounds, including a clinical and educational psychologist and a clinician with a nursing background.

It aimed to provide at-risk children (and their parents or carers) with the skills to manage their behaviour, emotions, and relationships (at home, in school, and in the community) to support their transition to secondary school. Level Up consisted of five online sessions for both children and their parents and carers separately. Four of these sessions took place over the summer holidays (after the children's final term at primary school) over four consecutive weeks. The final fifth session was delivered during the October mid-term break once the children had started secondary school. Groups consisted of five to eight children, where possible from the same school. Level Up had been designed before the advent of the coronavirus pandemic to provide in-person support sessions for children and their parents or carers. However, due to lockdown restrictions associated with the pandemic, all sessions were translated to an online, video call format.

The sessions, delivered in group format, aimed to help children and parents or carers to identify potential strengths and risks over the transition from primary to secondary school, including helping them to think about the move to secondary school and how to manage some of the feelings that the transition might give rise to. The sessions also sought to identify struggles that children may face in the areas of academic achievement and behaviour in school and in the community. Within the sessions, there was a focus on building resilience in both settings. Later sessions and

Table 1: Overview of the level up intervention session plans

Sessions over the summer holidays	
Session 1	Reflecting on oneself and one's positive attributes <i>Parent/carer session:</i> Discussion about how parents help to develop their child's self-esteem and confidence and their sense of self (i.e., personal characteristics and attributes)
Session 2	Reflecting on feelings about going to secondary school Psychoeducation about the 'alarm brain' and 'thinking brain' (emotion regulation) <i>Parent/carer session:</i> Psychoeducation about the 'alarm brain' and 'thinking brain' and how to have good responses toward stress
Session 3	Reflecting on local community and sources of support around them and available to them <i>Parent/carer session:</i> Discussing how parents/carers can support their children themselves, as well as helping them to identify other sources of support
Session 4	Reflecting on endings and new beginnings, including the ending of Level Up. Sharing positive comments about the other members of the group <i>Parent/carer session:</i> Discussion of different strategies that parents can use to support their child through change. Parents are encouraged to think about their own ways of managing change.
Session during October half term	
Session 5	Reflection on topics discussed in previous sessions in relation to the transition to secondary school

activities in particular focused on helping children to think about their community, the available support and resources within their community, and what they can do to help make their community even better. The final session reviewed the children's move to secondary school and reflected on possible changes that have occurred since then.

Alongside these weekly sessions, children were also able to join a weekly art therapy session. They were sent art tutorial videos and an online art group took place. Children were provided with the art materials needed to participate. Children could also access online activities via the Level Up website prior to each session and were encouraged to complete these. Parents and carers were provided with online videos that they could access prior to each session, including parenting tips and explanations of what the children were doing within the sessions. The Level Up team also had regular contact with parents and carers over the course of Level Up to help them to explore any concerns that they may have, build their relationship with them, and help them to get more support if they wanted it. Follow-up work also included liaising with the children's secondary schools to help ensure that the children had transitioned safely. An overview of the sessions is provided in [Table 1](#).

*Participants*

A total of 14 children and 17 parents and carers participated in interviews as part of the evaluation. All children were 11 years old. Parents' and carers' ages ranged from 28 to 55 years old. Most parents and carers (89%) identified as women and 42% of the children identified as girls. Half of the children identified as Black or Black British (52%) and 23% as White or White British. The other participants recorded an Asian/Asian British, Mixed Ethnic, or Middle Eastern background (percentages have not been included to protect participant anonymity). All children attended schools in London.

*Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University College London (UCL) Research Ethics Committee (ID numbers: 18633/003 and 18633/002). Parents or carers gave informed consent for their own and their child's participation in an interview, and children gave assent as all were under the age of 16. Data were confidential between participants and the research team. Transcripts were anonymised. Given the sensitive nature of the intervention, it was recognised that a small number of participants may find the interview questions stressful or upsetting. The researchers were experienced in interviewing children and vulnerable groups and parents and young people were provided with information in the participant information sheets on who they can contact to get support and discuss any concerns they might have. Participants were also informed that they could stop or take a break, at any time.

*Data Collection*

The research team contacted families who had completed an expression of interest form about taking part in the evaluation to send them the study information sheet. Parents and carers and children were invited for an interview towards the end of Level Up. The interviews were conducted between the last summer holidays session (session 4) and the final session during the October mid-term break (session 5) when pupils had transitioned into secondary school. The interviews took place in autumn 2020 and autumn 2021. Children and their parents or carers were interviewed separately in all cases apart from one. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The interview included coverage of the following topics: experiences of the sessions and activities; perceived changes in the child or parent/carer as a result of Level Up; perceived causes of those changes, including what was helpful and unhelpful about Level Up; and suggested improvements or recommendations regarding Level Up. Interviews were audio recorded using encrypted Dictaphones and took place online via Microsoft Teams at a date and time suitable for both the participant and the researcher. Interviews with children ranged from 6 to 22

minutes in length, whereas interviews with parents and carers ranged from 8 to 49 minutes. Across both cohorts, the mean interview length was 17.84 minutes ( $SD = 11.8$ ). Interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.

### *Data Analysis*

The qualitative data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis within an experiential and contextualist perspective (Clarke *et al.*, 2015) in NVivo 12 (QSR, 2020). Guided by the six steps identified by Braun and Clarke (2006), the first author familiarised themselves with the dataset through conducting the interviews, quality checking interview transcripts and re-reading transcripts. As the interviews were conducted as part of the wider evaluation, original coding and themes covered the evaluation research questions regarding what were the intervention's core activities, the barriers and facilitators to delivery, the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the intervention, engagement and satisfaction with the intervention, and early indications of perceived impact. For the purpose of analysis for this paper, transcripts were reviewed again and text related to engagement, change and perceived impact was coded. The first author coded the data and similar codes were then combined to create themes and subthemes, using a 'bottom-up', data-driven approach. To enhance rigourousness the second author was involved in the following steps. In an iterative process, the first and second authors reviewed these themes by reviewing the coded text, the names of the themes, and the 'fit' of the themes to the dataset as a whole, including assessing the degree to which the themes reflected and were clearly grounded within the data. Finally, all researchers discussed the themes with each other and reached consensus on the final list and names of themes and subthemes.

## 3. RESULTS

Following our research questions, the findings centred around two topics, namely 1) facilitators and barriers to engagement and change, and 2) the perceived impact. All themes are presented in [Figure 1](#).

### *Barriers and Facilitators to Change*

#### *Having a Safe, Supportive, and Fun Space*

The safe, supportive, and fun space provided by the Level Up team was described as a facilitator for learning and engagement. The Level Up team were able to create a comfortable and confidential atmosphere in sessions: '[I] felt like I could express myself around them.' (Child) The Level Up team were described as friendly, welcoming, approachable, and interested in the participants. This made families feel supported and listened to. As one parent or carer



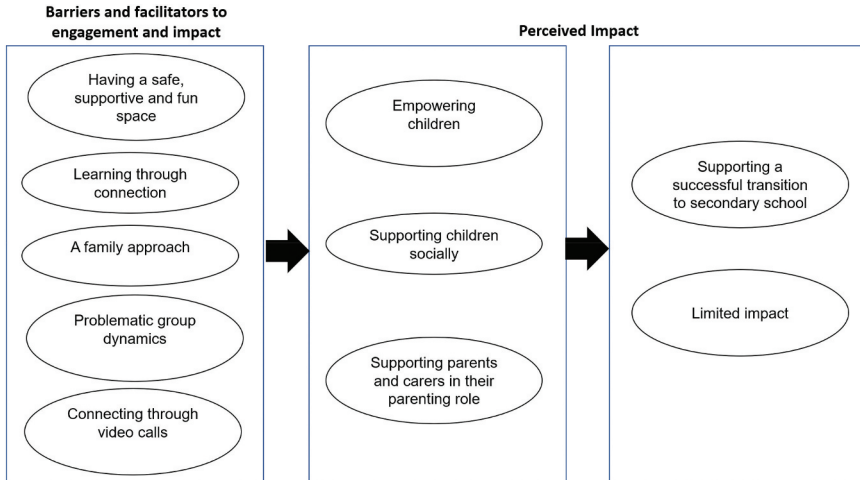


Figure 1. Diagram representing themes and their associations

explained: ‘They were really lovely and you could ask questions and they would answer. You didn’t feel any judgment, you just felt like they were listening and it was really nice.’ Families also mentioned particular gestures of support made by the Level Up team, such as a handwritten card or a follow-up phone call. These gestures made families feel appreciated. Families described the fun and enjoyable nature of the sessions and the materials. The session materials and content were praised for being accessible and age appropriate by including cartoons, videos, and examples. As one child explained:

They did it in a very... my style, with all the emojis, and I just thought this is what you want to do to make it feel like a fun activity, not this boring half an hour homework every single week.

### *Learning Through Connection*

Participants highlighted how learning was facilitated through connection; talking in groups allowed participants to learn from one another and grow in confidence. Participants enjoyed being part of a group and meeting others. A child explained that ‘it was just a feeling of being included in something and hearing how other people think.’ Some participants also explained how it was helpful that others could ask questions as well, as some of them felt too shy to ask a question or had not thought of that question themselves, saying ‘It’s also nice having the other parents because you pick up and learn on things that they picked up on or with their children, and it actually gives you an insight.’ (Parent or carer)

Parents and carers also enjoyed having an adult-only space to discuss the transition to secondary school from their perspective and how they could support their child. For example, one parent or carer explained: ‘We talked about our anxieties on our children moving on to secondary establishments, how they felt about that, ways that we can assist them emotionally with that transition.’ The separate sessions meant that parents and carers also felt included.

On the Tuesday the children took part, and then on the Thursday they [the clinicians] come back to you and relay back what they [the children] have learned. So that was really good because it actually made the grown-ups or the parents feel involved. But not invade in the children’s space, or the children not invade in the adult space. (Parent or carer)

Being in a group helped both parents and carers and children to realise that they were not alone in experiencing fears or worries around the transition to secondary school. This supported children to feel more confident and make friends: ‘I felt a bit more confident by realising that other people were feeling the same about it as me.’ (Child) One parent or carer explained how Level Up also helped them to connect with other parents and carers:

For me, it’s more the help is to be confident with the parents. Because sometimes your children stay at school for many years, you don’t talk with the parents, you didn’t say hello to them. You don’t have any phone numbers.

Both parents and carers and children liked being in a group with others that they knew from school as this made them feel more comfortable; it ‘broke the iceberg, the tension’ (Parent or carer) and allowed participants to share more easily. One child explained: ‘I preferred when it was just me and my other classmate. [...] Because it will be easier to speak about things if the people there actually fully know you.’

Lastly, participants perceived Level Up to fill a gap during lockdown by providing social contact and activities. One child explained that ‘during lockdown, they gave me something to do. [...] Just seeing a friendly face, like talking to somebody other than my family in lockdown’ was enjoyed and appreciated. Level Up also compensated for school closure during lockdown and ‘helped a little bit with that transition where they have not received that from the primary school at all.’ (Parent or carer)

### *A Family Approach*

Participants liked the family approach for several reasons. Firstly, parents and carers valued hearing from the clinicians what their child had learned during the child session to then reflect on whether their child had put in practice the strategies discussed and the impact that had on their child. In this way, parents

felt supported in helping monitor their child's behaviour, as well as felt supported personally, by the clinicians.

For myself, it was just having a weekly meeting after the children had taken part in their sessions and just going over what the children have spoken about, evaluating if they did put the theory into practice, how I felt as well, how we felt, and if it had an impact over the week. What they've learned. (Parent or carer)

Another positive element of the family approach was that some participants experienced Level Up as providing similar advice to the children as parents had done, thereby strengthening the message.

Because sometimes you know, the children when the parent talks, they think: 'Ah, you're talking too much.' But when it's someone else and then they said, 'My mummy told me this before, but I don't listen to her.' But because he listened [to] another person, he said, 'Okay [...] that lady talking to me, I understand more'. (Parent or carer)

Lastly, Level Up provided time for parents and children to talk about the transition and spend time together: 'It was nice to spend some time with him doing that stuff.' (Parent or carer). Taking part in the intervention as a family opened the opportunity for parent and child to have conversations around their community, safe places for the young person and where they can go for help if needed. Likewise, young people described feeling more comfortable asking for help from their parents or carers.

### *Problematic Group Dynamics*

On the other hand, a few participants mentioned negative experiences related to the group format. These negative experiences were sometimes due to a dislike of the other participants or the dynamics in the group. For example, one child explained that 'some of them [other children] are really annoying', whereas a parent or carer said that they 'did not like some of the comments some of the other mothers were making'.

Some participants also referred to low engagement levels of other participants as demotivating or negatively influencing their experience: 'Sometimes no one would talk. I would be the only person talking, and I just kept on saying ideas, on and on, and it was only me talking, so I felt a bit nervous about that.' (Child) Indeed, parents and carers described how they could sometimes be the only one or one of two parents and carers attending sessions. While having one-to-one private time with the clinician was useful for some, they also stressed the benefits of a group setting and hearing others' experiences.

It's far more beneficial that other parents or other children could have taken part continuously. If you're not going to be dedicated to it... so that is one thing that they, they've got to be strong in the sense where someone has to sign, we have to

sign and say, ‘You know what? At least four out of five sessions we will be available’. (Parent or carer)

Reasons for non-attendance included work or childcare commitments, difficulties balancing competing commitments – ‘It was all up and down really in the holidays’ (Parent or carer), and not necessarily seeing the benefits for themselves. Going forward, parents and carers suggested creating more flexibility in the dates or times of the group sessions and making parents and carers more aware of their expected involvement in the programme and how taking part benefits both parents and carers and children.

### *Connecting Through Video Calls*

Level Up was delivered fully online. Participants felt that they had been able to connect through video calls. For some, video calls had not created any barriers to engagement and connection. As one parent or carer explained: ‘Sometimes I didn’t even feel like it was on the screen, it was like we got to know each other.’ The fact that people had grown used to video calls during the coronavirus pandemic lockdown periods was perceived as a facilitator to having a positive experience online. Some participants also mentioned advantages of using video calls over face-to-face meetings: for some it was easier to talk online as they felt more comfortable than meeting people face-to-face which was sometimes felt as being overwhelming, particularly in the shadow of the pandemic. Others mentioned practical advantages such as being able to join from any location (i.e., their workplace).

Nevertheless, some participants felt that in-person sessions would have been more enjoyable and allowed for better interactions and connections with the group. As one child explained: ‘I like that feeling when you see someone face to face.’ Reasons participants provided were that often meaning and body language got lost over videocall and that people were less outgoing when on the screen. Building on this, it was suggested that in-person sessions could have been more impactful, as they would potentially facilitate greater communication, increase engagement, and allow for different activities. Others mentioned the technical difficulties that they had experienced online and would not have had in-person.

### *Perceived Impact*

#### *Empowering Children*

Children reported that they felt more confident and less worried about transitioning to secondary school after completing Level Up, saying that, for example, ‘Level Up has made me unnervous and I talked about why I was nervous and they helped me. And now I’m not nervous.’ (Child) Participants (parents and children) described how the children’s and parent’s worries about secondary

school had reduced, how the children felt more confident to make friends or try new things in school, and how the process had helped the child to feel ready for the school transition as they knew what to expect.

I think she's more open to the idea of joining different clubs and societies and just doing lots of different things. I think that's been spurred on by [name of clinician] trying to get the children to do, just to be open to new things. (Parent or carer)

Level Up provided a feeling of empowerment and increased the children's resilience for starting secondary school. As one child explained: 'I would recommend it to my brother, because it's just empowering. It helps you feel more confident when you've done the rest of the sessions.' (Child)

Participants also referred to a particular topic covered during one of the sessions around valuing one's personal qualities and described how this had increased their confidence.

I can remember, I think it was in the second week, that we were seeing what we were good at and how our skills can help us to have more confidence in ourselves and we were just helping each other to ... we were just saying memories about ... I don't know, they were just making us feel better about ourselves. (Child)

### *Supporting Children Socially*

Children and parents and carers described how Level Up had helped children to make friends and positively interact with their peers in their new school. Level Up had given children the confidence and tools to talk to classmates and become friends. One child explained that without Level Up 'I would be less sociable. I might be less confident with other people.' Another said:

I knew a bit about how to talk to new people, but it gave me a lot more knowledge and I could speak to more people, because obviously there were some people in the group that I didn't know already and it then helped me find friends in my new school because I knew how to talk to people.

The knowledge that other classmates would feel the same also helped children to feel more comfortable approaching their classmates and make friends.

Level Up had also had a positive impact on children's thinking, behaviour, and emotion regulation in relation to their peers, thus facilitating positive interactions in secondary school. For example, participants referred to having learned techniques to regulate their emotions (e.g., alarm brain vs thinking brain techniques), as well as being better able to think through their actions and consequences, saying that: 'Going to this and talking about her feelings and how it might, how her behaviour might affect others has helped her a lot. [...] She's understanding that consequences of her actions.' (Parent or carer).

I don't get as much angry as I did back at primary school. [...] I think I've been in alarm brain. [...] They taught us how to think, how to get out of your alarm brain if you was turning angry. (Child)

Lastly, Level Up supported children in staying safe in their community and solving problems that they could encounter outside of the house. One parent or carer explained that 'the videos were very helpful about your communities, what you need to be aware of, it's telling children outside the house what is around them.' Participants felt that it had been helpful to talk about different situations and how to handle them, such as what to do when accidentally getting on the wrong bus. They also talked about who to go to for help and learned to identify support around them:

I think there was one session where he had to talk about who was available for him to talk to in his circle, and then the outer circle, and that kind of thing. And he realised that actually he has a lot of people that are here to support him, and that was really nice for him to recognise that. (Parent or carer)

Talking about how to find safe places in their local community and where/who they can go to for help if needed supported children in feeling safe in the area they live and commute in.

#### *Supporting Parents and Carers in Their Parenting Role*

Parents and carers felt supported by Level Up in their parenting role. Similarly to the children, parent and carers reported feeling more confident and less worried about their child transitioning to secondary school. For one parent or carer, Level Up felt 'almost like a guideline, [laughs] and I think every parent should have access to that guideline.' Participants valued the time and space to talk about things that mattered to them, explaining that 'I got to just fluff on about, you know, everything I wanted to talk about, which was really nice.' (Parent or carer) Parents and carers felt supported and reassured by the facilitators, saying that the sessions were 'just having [name of clinician] just reassure what I'm doing is right.' (Parent or carer)

#### *Supporting a Successful Transition to Secondary School*

The above three themes all contributed to supporting the child to successfully transition to secondary school, as graphically represented in [Figure 1](#). Most children described how the transition had been a positive experience and stated that they were enjoying secondary school, saying: 'It's been really good. I found lots of friends.' (Child) One parent or carer explained:

Now she's got into the school and she's taken her steps in there, she's doing so much better, she's coming home, she's excited. She's made new friends and she's

took some strategies that the lady, [name of clinician], was saying to her and she's using them strategies to help her build her friendships over there.

#### *More Limited Impact*

However, the impact of Level Up was perceived to be more limited for some participants. Some participants described not having learned anything or feeling bored. Others could not remember what they had done during Level Up. One parent or carer felt that the impact was more limited than she had anticipated in terms of her child's learning: 'I thought it was going to help her more with her emotions. [...] She said that she didn't really learn anything.'

Some children experienced issues around the transition to secondary school despite Level Up. These related to detentions, difficulties adjusting to the new rules, or struggling with other aspect of the new environment and expectations. For example, a parent or carer explained that her daughter 'really struggled with everything. She's struggled with getting from one class to the next, dealing with the assortment of lessons, timing, being able to manage her time and her social time as well.'

## 4. DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore the barriers and facilitators to engagement and to change, and perceived benefits of the intervention according to parents and carers and children participating in Level Up, a psychoeducational and therapy-based intervention, delivered across the Year 6 to Year 7 school transition period. Children, as well as their Parents or carers identified five barriers or facilitators to engagement and change: (1) Having a safe, supportive, and fun space, (2) Learning through connection, (3) A family approach, (4) Problematic group dynamics, and (5) Connecting through video calls. Perceived impact was also described in five themes: (1) Empowering children, (2) Supporting children socially, (3) Supporting parents and carers in their parenting role, (4) Supporting a successful transition to secondary school, and (5) More limited impact.

Children and parents and carers learned through connection with the Level Up team, with the other members in their group, and within the family. More specifically, children and parents and carers described how the supportive and safe environment created by the Level Up team and the positive rapport within the group had acted as a catalyst for their learning. Children and parents and carers also learned from other members of the group by sharing experiences, and being in a group allowed participants to realise that they were not alone in their worries and concerns. Participants also described a positive impact of the family approach, i.e., involving both children and parents and carers in the intervention. Previous research has highlighted how different connections are indeed crucial elements of effective interventions. For instance, children with consistent, ongoing parental support and a stable home environment are also

more likely to experience smoother transitions (Duineveld *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the therapeutic relationship with the professional, peer support, and using a systemic or family approach are all well-known facilitators of change within different interventions (Burlingame *et al.*, 2018; Carr, 2019; Flückiger *et al.*, 2020; Niela-Vilén *et al.*, 2014). These facilitators for change also seem an important factor within Level Up and underpin the relevance of using a group and systemic approach in interventions aimed at supporting children during the school transition. Nevertheless, some children and parents reported negative experiences of participating in the group, for example, low engagement of other members could be demotivating. More research is needed on group interventions for young people at risk, as previous research has shown that a group setting may escalate or maintain behavioural problems (Poulin *et al.*, 2001) and evidence suggests that considerable clinical skill may be required to prevent such negative effects (Lochman *et al.*, 2017).

One theme related to connecting through video calls. There is increasing evidence regarding the potential of delivering therapeutic interventions through video conferencing, such as increasing accessibility, allowing professionals to see families in their homes, and providing a safer and more comforting environment for families (De Boer *et al.*, 2021; McLean *et al.*, 2021). Comparable to previous studies, we found that most parents and carers and children felt that they were able to develop a strong relationship with the facilitator through video calls (De Boer *et al.*, 2021; Mc Kenny *et al.*, 2021) and that teletherapy provided benefits to some families, such as increasing accessibility, for example allowing them to attend while being on holiday (Maier *et al.*, 2021; Mc Kenny *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, some parents and carers mentioned issues around attendance from home, such as technical difficulties or finding a private space to talk. Some participants further mentioned that they would have preferred in-person contact, feeling that it could improve connection and communication, also aligning with previous research (Mc Kenny *et al.*, 2021). The use of video calls rather than in-person meetings was a result of the COVID-19 pandemic rather than preconceived notions of mechanisms of change. Nevertheless, this study showed the virtual meetings to provide an advantage for interventions bridging the summer holidays, as families could join the sessions when on vacation or out of town. Thus, virtual meetings can provide a unique opportunity to allow families to receive ongoing support over holidays. Other interventions can benefit from this insight too.

Surprisingly, parents and young people did not reflect on the bridge function of the intervention. One possible explanation is that the interviews were conducted shortly after the transition, so participants may not have had enough time to reflect on the potential bridge function of Level Up. Alternatively, the bridge function may not have had its anticipated impact. Level Up aimed to bridge the transition by providing sessions over the summer period, with a final session after the transition. Potentially, interventions aiming to bridge the transition



would benefit from including additional strategies, such as facilitating active communication and cooperation between all involved stakeholders (children, parents, primary and secondary schools). Level Up, similar to most transition interventions, was set up from a single stakeholder perspective (in this instance: families), while partnership between all parties might be crucial to facilitate a smooth transition and form an effective bridge (van Rens *et al.*, 2018).

Overall, Level Up seemed to have a positive impact on most children and their families, from their perspectives. Children felt more confident regarding the transition to secondary school, and had acquired tools and skills to successfully navigate this transition. This included, for example, social skills to make friends and problem-solving skills to cope with unforeseen situations when outside in their community. Parents and carers felt supported in their parenting role, including feeling better able to support their child to transition to secondary school. This suggests that at-risk children can benefit from interventions that involve parents and children and support them in transitioning from primary to secondary school. More research is needed to understand the value of providing pre- and post-transition support.

Our findings align with those from a recently developed teacher-led intervention to support the school transition. This universal, emotional-centred intervention, TaST, was found to reduce worries related to the school transition in children (Bagnall *et al.*, 2021). However, no changes were observed in emotional and behavioural problems or coping skills which was attributed to the short period of time between pre- and post-intervention and the fact that children had not yet transitioned to secondary school at the time of their evaluation (Bagnall *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, given that transitions, such as the primary to secondary school transition, can best be perceived as a process rather than a single event (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016), it is likely that the impact of the transition will continue over time, but equally that young people may require some time to test out their new-found skills. As such, evaluation studies should follow-up school transition interventions over a longer period of time. Preliminary evidence suggests a lack of sustainment of positive outcomes over two years post-intervention (Donaldson *et al.*, 2023), however, so far, few evaluations studies have included long follow-up assessments.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

We interviewed a small sample of self-selecting participants. This potentially limits transferability of the findings to other populations. Social desirability bias may also have affected how participants answered some questions with them providing information they thought researchers would want to hear, even though researchers were independent of Level Up. A small proportion of parents or carers and children did not experience a substantial impact of Level Up and some children did experience challenges when transitioning to secondary

school. Future research should investigate how these families can be better supported. For example, a targeted sample of in-depth interviews may be conducted to understand the experiences of these families when transitioning to secondary school and what additional support they feel that they would need. Also, in future research, data collection conducted at different timepoints during the intervention could enhance the richness of the information gathered on the elements of the intervention that did or did not support the child and their parents and carers in real time, rather than retrospectively towards the end of the intervention. Acknowledging that transitions are a process rather than an event, future studies should include longer follow-up assessments to test for sustained impact. Finally, the coronavirus pandemic may have influenced the potential impact of Level Up. Level Up was initially designed as a fully in-person intervention and had to be adapted to an online format given the national restrictions on meeting in-person.

### *Policy Implications*

Findings from this study showed that children, as well as their parents and carers, found many positive benefits from engaging in Level Up, a programme that was delivered by child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) professionals to bridge primary to secondary school transition. This shows professionals with different skillsets, including clinical and educational psychologists, as well as nurses, can be useful in supporting young people through this transitional period. Given that there is no legal requirement for schools to make arrangements to support pupils with transition (Department for Education, 2022), consideration should be given to where transition support programmes, such as Level Up, are best placed to provide pupils with professionals skilled enough to deliver it. Whilst CAMHS is an option, an increase in referrals of over 53% since 2019 (YoungMinds, 2023), may mean they are unable to provide this support without additional resource. Professional groups, including Educational Psychologists and Education Mental Health Practitioners (EMHPs) are well suited to take on such roles. Indeed, Educational Psychologists have previously been seen as ideally placed to help with school transitions as they work across schools and can help bolster supportive networks and relationships during transition (Mumford and Birchwood, 2021). Whilst a more novel professional group, EMHPs also fulfil these criteria and should be considered as a professional group able to support pupils as they move to secondary schools.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The transition from primary to secondary school is an important time for young people. Level Up, a novel intervention targeting at-risk youth, involving parents and providing a bridge between primary and secondary school,

was perceived to improve confidence of children and parents and carers, and facilitate the transition to secondary school. To achieve a smooth transition, it seems crucial to create a safe, supporting, and fun space where parents and carers and children can connect with the intervention facilitator and with each other in order to exchange experiences, learn from one another, and feel supported rather than alone. Other interventions may wish to include these elements when targeting this population. Additionally, the group format, as well as the inclusion of young people and parents and carers, was perceived as beneficial.

There is also a need for interventions providing an actual bridge between primary and secondary school. Level Up aimed to address this by providing summer holiday sessions, yet the current study did not find any evidence for the benefits of this approach. More research is needed to better understand how the transition can be most effectively bridged which should employ techniques such as purposeful sampling with those that did not engage or had low engagement with this intervention.

These findings can be used by professionals and researchers aiming to fill the current void between primary and secondary school and better support children in their school transition, with the aim of potentially reducing the risk of school drop-out and increased emotional and behavioural problems that children may face.

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