

Customer Voice Research Safer School Partnerships

Sherbert Research



Customer Voice Research

Safer School Partnerships

Sherbert Research

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

© Sherbert Research 2009

ISBN 978-1-64775-668-8

February 2010

Contents

- 1. Executive Summary**
- 2. Research Objectives**
- 3. Key Findings**
- 4. Communication Themes**
- 5. Annex**

Chart 1: Message Territories Overview, Sherbert Research, 2009

1. Executive Summary

Summary of conclusions for communicating SSPs to parents

- Parents need more information from the school about the particular role of the SSP officer - especially so in areas without a perceived crime problem. It is therefore important that schools keep parents fully informed and involved about decisions regarding SSPs.
- Any communication needs to be expressed in neutral terms and simple language.
- It is important to avoid over-emphasising the potential benefits of SSPs as this can easily make parents disconnect from the overall message. For example, instead of saying “you can be confident about your child’s safety in an SSP school” it would be more accurate, and therefore more likely to connect with parents, to state, “An SSP aims to help parents feel more reassured that their child is safe when at school”.
- Messages should be supported with specific examples, relevant to location. This will help parents to understand how the initiative will work in practice- helping them to feel positive about it and confident that their child will benefit. For example, “SSPs help ensure that local community issues such as gang cultures, weapons and racism can be challenged and will not be tolerated in the school environment”.
- Explaining the parameters of SSPs and the anticipated outcomes will help manage expectations and more accurately highlight the contribution SSPs can make. For example, the statement, “Many parents think that standards are slipping and children are less respectful of authority than they used to be” might best be followed by, “One of the many benefits of local police working more closely with schools is that it helps promote teaching children and young people respect, positive behaviour and moral values”. This will help to empathise with parents’ feelings: concerns about safety, morals values and their children learning and developing through school.

Summary of conclusions for communicating SSPs to children and young people

- Proactive messages resonated the best, for example, messages relating to what SSPs will do to help learning, and how they are relevant to their school and build positive relationships, rather than those about stopping current poor behaviour
- Young people would like to know how SSPs work in other schools in their area, so the scheme feels part of something positive and joined up.
- The different roles of teachers and SSP officers need to be clearly communicated and young people need to be reassured that the SSP officer is friendly, trustworthy and wants to be there.
- Advocate having a positive ‘launch’ in each school, so that the SSP officer can be introduced to the school community and information about their role can be disseminated. That way the programme is given kudos and the whole initiative is felt to be exciting.

- A strapline that's relevant and easy to remember may resonate better than the term SSPs.

2. Research objectives

Overall

To understand the current perceptions of police involvement in schools and explore how best to create a positive perception of police in schools.

More specifically, this research

- Provided an understanding of parents' and young people's spontaneous reactions and feelings about having a police presence in schools.
- Ascertained what is it they know about police in schools and where/how they get their information.
- Tested a range of messages about SSPs and explored reactions to these messages.
- Listened out for how parents and children spoke about the topic, including the language and tone they used, helping to understand how to position relevant messages.
- Explored parents' and young people's perceptions of SSPs once they were given more information and gave a considered response.
- Established how to harness the positive perceptions and address any negative perceptions.

Research methodology

- Six, 90 minute mini groups (6 individuals) with parents of children aged 9 to 17
 - two groups of fathers, four groups of mothers
- Eight, 90 minute quads (4 friends) with children and young people aged between 9 and 17

Groups were split between children who attended SSP schools and those who did not.

Research took place across England (rural, suburban and city locations) during the week commencing 8 December 2009.

3. Key findings

Overall

- Safer School Partnerships were generally regarded as a positive concept and the initiative was not rejected outright by anyone in the sample.
- No children or parents at SSP or non-SSP schools had heard of 'SSPs'. When explained that SSP stood for 'Safer School Partnerships', all respondents said this was an unfamiliar term.
- The majority of people in the sample imagined that SSPs were set up as a reactive measure to stop crime and aggressive behaviour that was already happening.
- Beyond crime solving, many in this sample struggled to imagine what other roles the police could play in schools, particularly in locations that they perceived as safe. It is therefore recommended that any SSP initiatives and communications are tailored according to the location and school. This will mean that the activities of SSP officers will feel relevant to the needs of the school and local community.
- Many respondents across the sample felt the term SSP sounded like it was 'written for teachers' and called for a snappier, more parent and child friendly phrase. They believed that this may help SSPs to feel more relevant to them, especially if they went to a 'safe' school, and would make it easier to remember. If a name change is not possible, a strapline may be helpful. They wanted it to clearly sum up the objectives of SSPs, without overstating the potential positive outcomes. The message testing section will help give the type of language and terms that could be used to create a meaningful strapline.

Parents

- Parents spoke positively about SSPs and felt that their strength lies in the partnership between themselves, police and teachers. They had a keen interest to feel included in initiatives supporting their child/ren's safety.
- They stated that they often felt excluded from information about initiatives such as SSPs, especially parents of pupils in secondary schools. Schools should ensure, therefore, that parents are kept informed and involved in decisions about SSPs, that they know how to contact the SSP officer, and understand what his or her role at the school is.

Young people

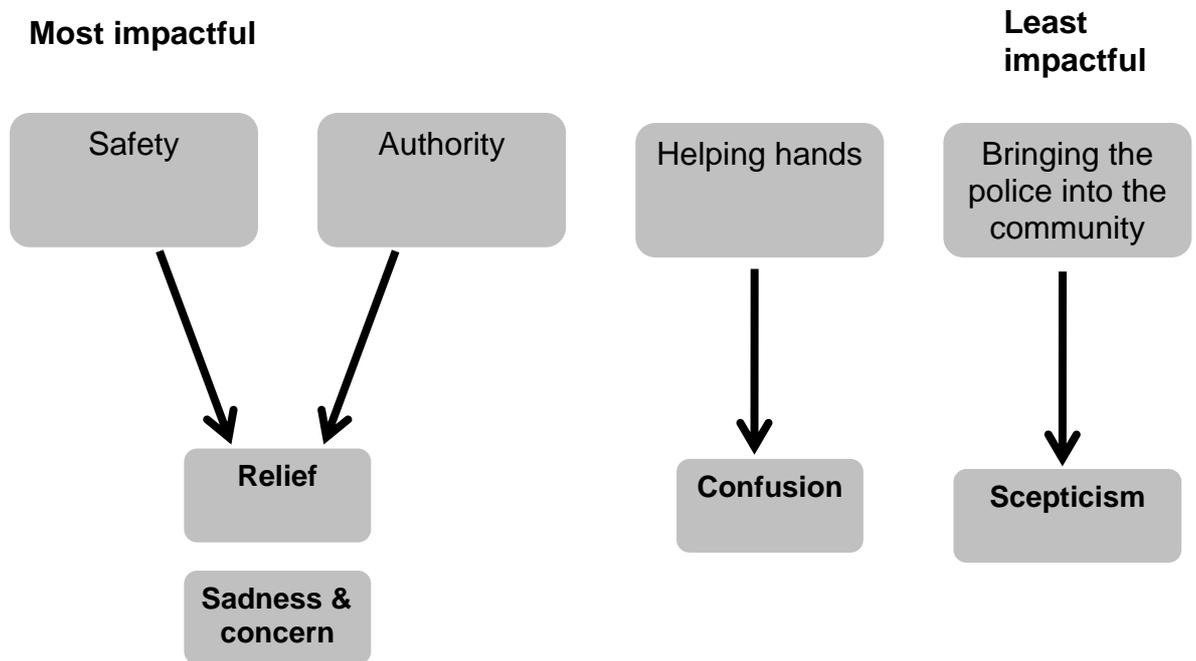
- Young people across the sample welcomed the idea of SSPs and recognised that if an individual school's SSP programme was executed effectively it could be of real benefit. Young people were very clear about how they wanted SSPs to be implemented, particularly regarding the type of person they would like the SSP officer to be and their place in the school environment, for example:
 - The SSP officer would be friendly, positive towards young people, and approachable.
 - He/she would maintain a unique position in the school, for example they would not be focussed on enforcing school rules.

- Young people felt that it was important that there were clear boundaries between the roles of different adults in their school, in order to maintain lines of authority and respect.
- Some young people were quite keen that the SSP officer avoided wearing official police uniform. They felt the uniform could be a communication barrier.
- But they did want them to wear something including the school badge to reflect their affiliation with the young people and the school. They felt this would send a message that SSP officers were on the 'same side' as them.
- Young people were insistent that the officer should want to be at the school and show that they like being around and respect young people, for example:
 - They would like the officer to provide insights into the wider role of the police and explain how they chose the police force as a career path.
 - They liked the idea of the SSP officer helping in their personal development and building positive relationships; such as teaching them alternative ways of dealing with difficult situations.

4. Communications themes

- A range of communications messages were tested which fell broadly under four communications themes: 'Safety', 'Authority', 'Helping Hands' and 'Bringing Police into the Community'.
 - The themes with the most impact were 'Safety' and 'Authority'
- Emotions were triggered when respondents discussed SSPs. These emotions are important as they help understand why the different communications themes resonated as they did. The emotions were: relief, sadness and concern, confusion, and scepticism. In order to create a positive perception of police in schools, communication will need to address these emotions in direct ways.

Chart 1: Message Territories Overview, Sherbert Research, 2009



- Relief: All mothers in the sample, some fathers, and those children and young people who lived in inner city areas expressed relief that something was being done to make schools become safer places. There was a perception that teachers lacked any power or authority over pupils and they believed that ‘something had to be done’. They imagined the role of SSP officers was to weed out unruly pupils so children could learn in a safe and comfortable environment. The safety aspect of SSPs is a key emotional hook for parents and young people but it needs to be expressed in an inclusive and proactive way to give the initiative credibility i.e. not just introduced as a scheme that has been implemented for bad pupils or failing schools.
- All parents in this sample felt sadness and concern that ‘it had come to this’ i.e. that police were necessary in schools. They recalled their school days when they felt there was a clear power difference between teachers and pupils and the police had no presence in schools. Many parents felt young people today ‘abused their rights’ thus disempowering teachers and diluting their authority.
- Parents and young people believed that SSPs could help to bring authority and respect back into the school environment. If possible, when communicating with parents and young people about SSPs, these emotions (sadness and concern) need to be reflected by highlighting how the initiative is positive and proactive in asserting authority and moral boundaries within the school environment. This theme ties in with messages around safety.
- Confusion was another emotion expressed. This occurred when some respondents were unable to find direct relevance for having SSPs in their schools /locations. It is therefore suggested that, to alleviate any confusion, it is important to make available to all parents information about SSPs relevant to the particular school and location, as well as explaining what an SSP officer is doing in the school, how and why.
- Scepticism was also expressed by some parents, who wondered how the SSPs would work in practice. Fathers in particular were more practical in their reaction to SSPs overall and struggled to imagine how the scheme would be realised in practice. They tended to focus on logistics and cost. In order to address their scepticism and help manage expectations, parents will need the parameters and outcomes of SSPs explained to them. Furthermore, clear ‘effectiveness indicators’ should be developed and communicated with parents, in order to illustrate how the scheme represents value for money. All indicators of SSP success need to be relevant to individual schools, otherwise they risk losing meaning by becoming too general

5. Annex

Annex 1: Communication messages - parents

Message	Reaction	Conclusion
SAFETY Police in schools is a way of managing behaviour and helping teachers to teach instead of making them police the school environment themselves	The majority of parents agreed with this statement Most were keen that the police would not be on playground duty, which they felt seemed over the top	The content and tone of this statement works well for parents. It is clear and simple. Would need to be followed by explanation of parameters of role
SAFETY Police in schools will help	Most agreed with this statement, but believed that for	This message is short, clear and specific. Applauded by parents

young people feel safer where there is a positive relationship between pupils, teachers and police	this to be effective it would need to begin early in children's school career. Parents wanted to be included in these statements	
SAFETY SSPs can help pupils become more aware of the risks of victimisation and intimidating behaviour, and so feel more confident to stand up to and avoid it where they see it happening	Most disagreed with this, mainly because they found the statement too wordy. They like the idea of police teaching children to stand up for themselves and resolve conflicts in a constructive way. 'Victimisation' is not a word that felt comfortable for parents	Avoid using 'big' words like victimisation and intimidating -some parents didn't understand them. The sentiment could be expressed more simply e.g. Police in schools can help children learn to deal with difficult situations which can help to help build their confidence
SAFETY You can be confident about your child's safety in an SSP school	Most disagreed with this- felt like an unrealistic promise. Mothers, particularly from inner city areas said they never felt comfortable about their child's safety. Many also said they already expected their children to be safe on the school premises	Avoid overstating aims, as these can create a negative reaction from parents and they will be more likely to switch off. Try: SSPs aim to help parents feel reassured that their child is safe when at school.
SAFETY SSPs help ensure that local community issues such as gang cultures, weapons and racism can be challenged and will not be tolerated in the school environment	Most parents agreed with this statement and liked the specificity of language, explaining what the SSP would be doing. It also sounded quite definitive and authoritative, which they appreciated. However, some inner city parents felt that such issues were too much for a single SSP officer, and suggested the partnership working role was emphasised.	Specific language that explained what SSPs would be doing was welcomed. It helped parents to understand the initiative, which helped them to feel more positive about it.
Message	Reaction	Conclusion
AUTHORITY Many parents think that standards are slipping and children are less respectful of authority than they used to be. One of the many benefits of local police working more closely with schools is that it helps promote better relationships and better attitudes towards authority	All agreed with the first half of this statement, but many disagreed with the second half. They felt that the sentence needed to be rephrased, reinforcing the importance of authority.	The sentence could be rephrased to highlight the contribution SSPs will make for example: helping teach children and young people respect, positive behaviour and moral values.
AUTHORITY	Mixed response to this	A simple rephrase with specific

SSPs provide reassurance that teachers have the support they need to deal with extreme behaviours and bullying	statement Thought it depended on size of school and extent of bullying as an issue. Majority of parents did not think that there were enough officers to make this such a strong a statement. Especially negative in inner city areas	examples may work, for example: "SSPs will support teachers as necessary to deal with extreme behaviours and bullying by ..."
HELPING HANDS The police have a role in helping the community on a range of areas, not just crime detection and public order. In schools they also contribute to helping teachers talk about road traffic safety and stranger danger. We want to encourage children and young people to see them as helpful and supportive, not threatening or only around when there is trouble	Most agreed with this, but there was a strong sense that they already did this in assemblies and lessons. Parents felt there was scope for them to expand the range of topics they could talk about, as they felt their children would be interested in a range of issues and would benefit from developing skills through the police. Young people are really interested in a range of areas: true crime stories, Internet safety and other issues that are relevant to them today- drugs, alcohol, photos online etc	A positive message. May be helpful to explain in more detail how SSPs can contribute to young people's learning. This is likely to hook parents in and feel that this initiative is adding value to their children's overall education.
Message	Reaction	Conclusion
BRINGING THE POLICE INTO THE COMMUNITY SSPs help to break down the barriers between police and the wider community. Being in school regularly helps the community see that the police are involved in all areas of community safety	Mostly agreed. Thought this was very important in primary school when attitudes about the police are forming. Many felt that the personality of the SSP officer was crucial in 'breaking down the barriers'	Tone felt appropriate as it said 'help to' May help to expand on how they are involved in all areas of community safety to make it more specific and relevant.
Police presence in schools helps children and young people become comfortable and familiar with police and builds up trust. This has benefits when young people meet in the wider local community and shapes their view of the police for the rest of their lives	This statement felt too wordy, but most agreed with the sentiment, especially about feeling more comfortable and familiar. 'Shaping views for rest of lives' sounded like an exaggeration, many replied 'not necessarily'.	Try to avoid statements that are not neutral and are likely to provoke a reaction. Sentence still has value if it stops at 'community'

Police partnerships with schools are just one of a bigger plan to create further extended services which already includes adult learning, parent support, child care services etc...	This was a positive and well liked statement.	Simple with specific outcomes- helping parents to understand potential role and effectiveness
--	---	---

Annex 2: Communication messages – young people

Message	Reaction	Conclusion
You can feel safer knowing that a police officer is on hand to help sort out serious fights and arguments and respond to hurtful behaviour	Maybe - most felt unconvinced by this statement But most CYP felt it was not the role of police officers to get involved in playground skirmishes, as 'kids have been doing that for years'. However, some recognised that the police had different authority from teachers, which they appreciated. Inner city kids felt that they were not helpful in these situations and should call for back up	Roles need to be really clear and the SSP officer needs to be friendly and trustworthy
A police officer around schools means you can learn better because you can attend school in safety	Younger children tended to agree as they believe strongly in the police Older children hoped this would be the case, but were more realistic and felt one officer could not be everywhere. Many felt CCTV cameras could help, although many did not like the idea of being under surveillance	Parameters of the officer's role need to be clearly defined
You will find out how to avoid being drawn into crime and anti-social or extremist behaviour and learn many of the good things the police do in the community	Most agreed with this message They liked the idea of police talking to them about the law and crime, bringing it to life with anecdotes. Younger children were excited about learning what the police do. Felt this was closely allied with PSHE and would like police to share info from the 'coalface' of crime	Interesting, adds a human face – 2 way relationship

You will receive support if you have been a victim of crime, learn new skills and avoid being a victim and be safer on journeys to and from school	Like the idea of support if a victim of crime, e.g. phone or iPod stolen, as many recognised this is a hard experience to overcome. But some inner city kids felt their safety to and from school could not be guaranteed, so this felt a bit over optimistic. Emphasis on support role is important.	Many felt they would only seek support if they thought the officer at their school was 'sound' and easy to relate to
You will benefit from a positive role model through contact with the SSP officer	Younger children agreed with this as they felt excited by police. Older children (Year 9 +) felt this was dependent on the type of person the SSP officer was and how they related to the young people in school. Liked the idea that the SSP officer could teach children how to behave and have manners! Inner city kids less positive: minority ethnic young people felt they had been stopped and searched more than white friends	Would really like a positive role model but is highly personality-specific and depends on how much the CYP can get to know the officer as a person- not a role model just because a police officer

Ref: DCSF-RR212

ISBN: 978-1-64775-668-8

© Sherbert Research 2009

www.dcsf.gov.uk/research

**Published by the Department for
Children, Schools and Families**

Registered Charity no. 313393

