



# Red Balloon – Does It Work and Is It Worth It?



# Introduction

UNESCO states that “education is a fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights”<sup>1</sup>, yet thousands upon thousands of children in England alone are bullied out of their education despite their desire to learn. Research by the National Centre for Social Research (2011) estimates over 16,000 young people aged 11–15 are absent from state secondary school where bullying is the main reason for absence. Over 77,000 are estimated to be absent from state school where bullying is a contributory reason given for absence<sup>2</sup>. Such numbers may be a tiny percentage of the more than 3.5 million 10–15 year olds schooled in England, but the consequences of a lost education are unevenly shared.

Severely bullied children who have been traumatised to the point where they will not and cannot attend mainstream school withdraw and become isolated. The problems they develop can be chronic and multi-faceted, requiring close and specialist support before any return to an academic or social track is possible. Full-time intervention programmes appear costly when superficially compared to full-time schooling. Educational commissioners often resist paying in the order of £20,000 per annum for a dedicated intervention programme designed to allow a child with an otherwise bleak future to move on and reengage with mainstream society.

Red Balloon has initiated research to understand the effectiveness and economics of its programmes. Leading academics have guided the work, which has included a survey of former Red Balloon students and their parents. This paper aims to provide insight into Red Balloon’s alternative educational provision and the outcomes secured for the participants. A report will follow that includes further research data and analysis of the government costs offset by a comprehensive and integrated intervention for a traumatised or anxious child who cannot access his or her education.

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# Red Balloon

Red Balloon is a charity that helps severely bullied and traumatised children who self-exclude from school to get back on an academic track and reconnect with society. Since 1996, Red Balloon has educated and provided therapeutic care to children of secondary school age studying at Key Stage 3 (generally 11–14 years old) or Key Stage 4 (generally 14–16 years old). Red Balloon Centres in Norwich, Cambridge, Harrow, Reading and RBAir (an online operation supplemented with local support) provide full-time, integrated educational and therapeutic programmes.

Each student at a Centre has their own harrowing story. Most new students have been away from education for an extended period and many have seriously contemplated or attempted suicide; students typically arrive with mental health problems including depression, acute anxiety, self-harm and eating disorders.

Every Red Balloon student is linked by their shared desire to secure the future that an education offers. Students at Red Balloon Centres follow personal recovery programmes that encompass education, personal development and wellbeing. Counselling combined with participation in a therapeutic community enables students to engage with education, learn, and re-establish an academic track. Red Balloon programmes help isolated and damaged young people to regain their self-confidence and take responsibility for themselves.

Data gathered in the course of this research confirms Red Balloon's record of reconnecting children to society and, in many cases, assisting their families. However, Red Balloon currently reaches less than 1% (around 100 children) of those it is most able to support. Initial indications suggest that a strong economic case exists for the programmes Red Balloon provides to re-engage a child with relevant mainstream education, training, or employment so that they can become a fully functioning member of society.



# Approach

The conceptual model adopted throughout the research examines the nature and scale of bullying and self-exclusion from school. It then looks at the Red Balloon inputs (money and resources) applied to resolve this problem. Activities supported by these inputs and the outputs they generated are considered as well as the number of students exposed to them. Finally, the outcomes generated are studied.

Extensive literature exists on the short- and long-term consequences of bullying and truancy<sup>3456</sup>. Less is known about bullying and its relationship to truancy. This study includes ex-post research on bullying and self-exemption from school. As the only UK charity dedicated to restoring this group of children to the educational system, Red Balloon has spent nearly twenty years working with the people who have this combination of experiences.

An extensive survey of contactable Red Balloon alumni and parents was conducted to gain an understanding of students and their domestic profiles before, during and after their Red Balloon experience. A total of 193 sets of questionnaires were sent to alumni aged over 18 and their parents. The response rate of 29% yielded over 50 sets of respondents. The small number of respondents and some element of self-selection (a common problem with all surveys of this type) mean caution needs to be exercised when interpreting the results. The descriptive responses are, however, informative and useful, while the statistical significance of the results requires consideration.

Both alumni and parent surveys comprised five sections. **The alumni survey** started by examining the alumni's educational experience. History of school attendance, academic outcomes and occupational status were explored. The focus of enquiry then moved to wellbeing. Alumni were asked about their general health and state of mind. The third section studied alumni's experience of bullying before, during and after their Red Balloon programme. Bullying frequency, duration, and severity were covered as well as the support offered by school, family, friends and others. The penultimate section examined alumni social relationships before, during and after their intervention programmes. The final section of the alumni survey examined alumni's perceptions of their experiences at Red Balloon. Red Balloon programmes involve academic work, social activities, counselling and therapy, creative arts, trips and sports, and domestic activities. How each activity set affected alumni self-esteem, interest in learning, social skills, mental health and their ability to deal with bullying was studied.

**The parent survey** started by examining the support parents received before their child started at Red Balloon. Parent perceptions of their child's social relationships before, during and after the intervention programme were then studied. The third section of the parent survey looked at how a child's difficulties affected their family. Changes to the state of mind of family members before and after the child's intervention programme were reviewed. The household financial situation before and after interventions was then examined. The ability of a family to deal with the difficulties a child faced using its own resources was considered along with the nature of both family and public sector support. The final section of the parent survey looked at opinions of Red Balloon and different aspects of the programme a child experienced (e.g. academics, therapy, staff-child-parent relations).

# Findings

## Social relationships & mental health

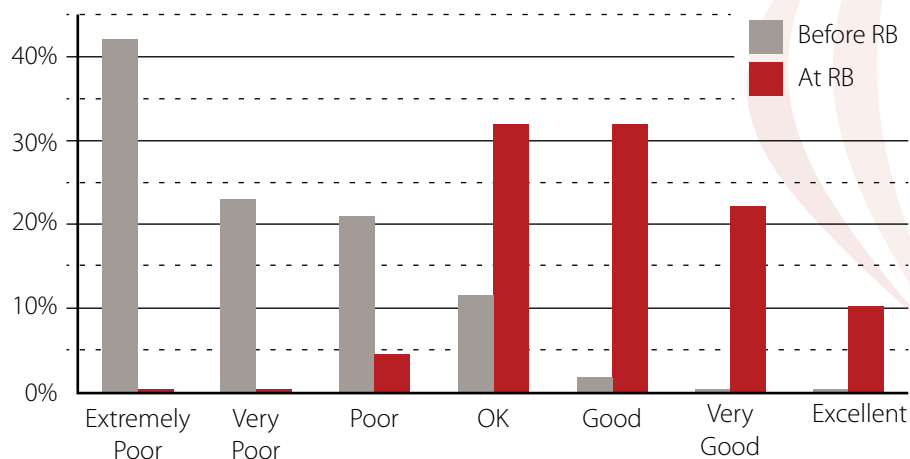
The alumni and parent surveys have generated a wealth of primary data. Analysis of this data is summarised below. Two findings that deserve particular mention are the transformation in social relationships and mental health that alumni experienced.

Alumni rated their relationships with other students, their friends and their family before and during their time at Red Balloon. The following changes occurred:

- **over 70% felt they had poor or worse relationships with other students before Red Balloon. This fell to below 4% when they were at Red Balloon;**
- **poor or worse relationships with friends whilst at Red Balloon fell to less than one-fifth of the level before Red Balloon** (falling from 39% to 7%);
- **poor or worse relationships with family were cut by more than half at Red Balloon** (falling from 32% pre-Red Balloon to 14% at Red Balloon).

Parents observed even greater changes in their child's relationships. In their view, poor or worse relationships *with other students* fell from over 86% to 4%, *with friends* from over 59% to under 14%, and *with family* from 28% to 2%. Both parents and children agreed that the improvements in each category have been sustained.

Parent view of child's relationships with other students



Improvements in the mental health of students at Red Balloon are similarly remarkable. Over 88% of parents described their child's mental health as very poor or worse prior to Red Balloon arrival. This fell to below 6% during the intervention programme and this level remains the case.

*"It gave me the chance to form happy relationships with children my own age. For the first time ever I felt 'normal' and accepted, and my feelings ... were for the first time ever being recognised, validated and importance placed on them. All of this had a huge effect on my confidence and self-esteem. My interest in academic subjects was given a chance to grow."* **Former student**



## Alumni experiences

Alumni respondents ranged from 18 to 32 years old and the gender split was 45% male and 55% female.

Age at entry to Red Balloon was 13 to 15 years old in 75% of cases with boys tending to be a year younger than girls at entry. Over 82% of Red Balloon arrivals had experienced severe bullying. School attendance amongst Red Balloon entrants had been low: 63% had stopped attending school altogether, 16% truanted several times a week, 11% truanted weekly or less. Over half had been avoiding school for more than 7 months. The poorest school attenders had experienced the highest frequency of bullying. Under 6% of those bullied felt supported a great deal by their school while over 70% felt totally unsupported by their school.

*"When the bullying got worse I ended up missing more and more days 'til I stopped going altogether for my own safety and mental wellbeing."*

**Former student**

Parents commonly sought advice for their child from CAMHS, GP, local authority and school prior to placement with Red Balloon. Many children received therapeutic help from CAMHS (57%) and some from their GP (22%) but few (14%) received help from their school<sup>7</sup>. In a majority of households (58%) a parent suffered mental health issues (e.g. depression, anxiety) associated with their child's difficulties and 40% of households where this occurred received professional support for this.

Over 95% of children came to Red Balloon from a household where someone worked. In the majority of cases a member of the household arranged time off work or resigned from their job because of difficulties a child faced. In nearly 40% of households, income fell by 20% or more as a consequence. The income decline lasted a year or longer for 40% of households (proving permanent for 12%).

Attendance improved dramatically when students were at Red Balloon. Half of students stopped truanting altogether (16% truanted or missed school once a week or more due to other complications). Bullying stopped completely for three-quarters of students attending Red Balloon with the remainder experiencing bullying once or twice. Most of the students who experienced bullying during their time at Red Balloon felt the organisation greatly supported them (to a similar degree as their families).

Students most commonly (36%) spent two full years at Red Balloon, which coincides with the length of a GCSE course, while 28% attended for one year or less (74% for two years or less). Over 60% of alumni respondents hold five or more GCSEs and marginally under a third hold A levels. A greater proportion of female alumni (37%) hold A levels than male (24%). Over a quarter of alumni hold degrees and the female:male ratio within this small group is 4:1. Sample size was a challenge when investigating any association between the duration of bullying, its severity and attendance, upon academic qualifications. Severity of bullying was found to have a negative effect on qualifications secured (significant at 10%). Our hypothesis is that truancy's negative effects through loss of teaching/learning can be more quickly recovered, and the duration of bullying becomes less important over time. However, the impact of severe bullying on self-worth and confidence takes longer to heal and the overall experience has a longer term negative effect<sup>8</sup>.

*"I realised I was intelligent at the Red Balloon. I had not thought about myself in this way before and I think when you begin to realise your intelligence it gives you confidence to practise it by aiming to achieve good grades."*

**Former student**

Red Balloon's programme was divided into six activity sets and alumni were asked to score each activity for its impact on self-esteem, interest in learning, social skills, mental health, and ability to deal with bullying. Alumni were generally positive about Red Balloon's programme with social activities (e.g. group sessions, facilitated discussions, communal lunches) being widely beneficial. The table shows the percentage of alumni responses falling in the two most positive of seven possible ratings for different aspects of the programme.

#### **Programme Activities – Alumni citing positive or better impact**

	Self-esteem	Interest in Learning	Social Skills	Mental Health	Handling of Bullying
Academic work	61%	76%	61%	67%	45%
Social activities	69%	64%	78%	72%	69%
Counselling/Therapy	63%	51%	55%	65%	53%
Creative arts	68%	66%	62%	66%	51%
Trips & sports	60%	65%	71%	71%	40%
Domestic activities	53%	51%	51%	55%	40%

Over 85% of parents gave Red Balloon the highest of four satisfaction ratings for each of the following areas: academics, therapeutic support, staff and the feel of the place. Over 80% of parents rated RB as better (not just somewhat better) than their child's previous school in these categories. Over 80% of parents felt RB had a very positive impact on their child's life (the highest of seven possible ratings). Alumni were similarly positive about Red Balloon's impact on their lives.

*"(Red Balloon) gave her the confidence to move forward with her life and enabled her to go to college and gain her qualifications."*

**Parent**

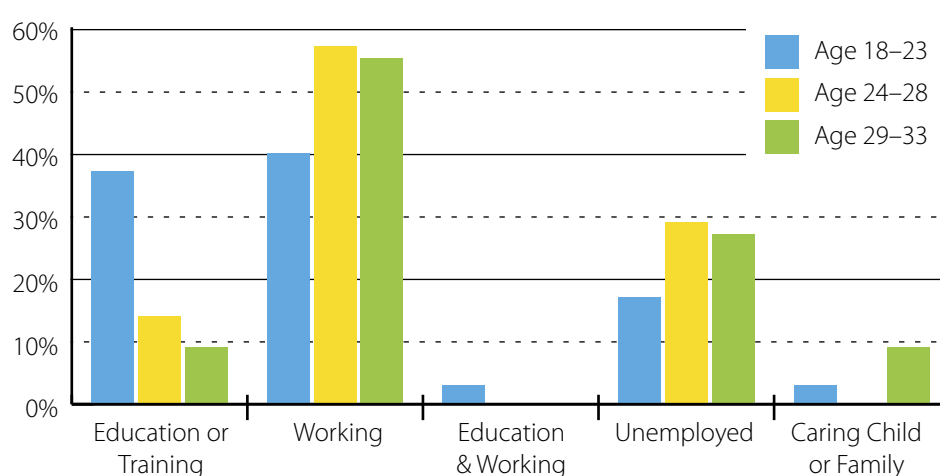
Parents (88%) felt that the mental health of their whole household improved during their child's intervention programme. At a financial level, half of the households where parents reduced working hours because of difficulties their child faced saw parent working hours increase whilst their child was at Red Balloon. In more than 40% of these households, income rose by over 20%.

*"I was very worried about my son – it was affecting my morale and my work as I was constantly having to pick him up from school ... This severely affected my ability to work – I was self-employed at the time and I had to register for state benefits."*

Parent

Upon leaving Red Balloon, the large majority (82%) of students continued in education while 11% started work or engaged in training/apprenticeships. The proportion of alumni in work is greater amongst older than younger alumni, many of whom remain in education or training. The majority of alumni are in education, training or work (73%) but a significant proportion are unemployed (23%). Just over a quarter receive benefits (these include disability benefit for 19% and jobseeker's allowance for 8%).

Alumni activity in 2015 by age group



Bullying has stopped for 91% of alumni but many (41%) feel their experience of being bullied has had long-term effects consistent with the literature<sup>9</sup>. Although 88% of parents now consider their child's mental health to be satisfactory or better, over 65% of alumni have experienced a mental health issue over the last year; occurrence appears to decline with age. Amongst this group, depression and anxiety have been common (affecting 76% and 54% respectively). A majority of those affected (62%) have sought professional support with slightly under half (44%) paying for it themselves. There is a strong consensus among alumni (80%) that attending Red Balloon was the right thing for them.

*"It was a very important step for me on the road to academic achievement and also in the management/slow recovery from mental health difficulties."*

Former student



*"At RB he grew in confidence and mental strength ...  
He went back to school, faced his bullies and carried on with  
his education ... He still has his struggles with his past, but he  
manages to live a normal life with a full-time job."*

**Parent**

*"I have got the education I was missing out on, I managed to go to  
college, get a job ... I managed to make a couple of friends ..."*

**Former student**

Only a tiny proportion of children whose education is disrupted by bullying access a comprehensive intervention programme such as that offered by Red Balloon. Children experiencing Red Balloon's intervention programme noticed a transformation in their social relationships and their school attendance. Parents concurred and saw significant improvements to their child's mental health although difficulties persist for those affected by the bullying. Parents also saw the improvements spill over to their own mental health and their ability to re-engage at work. Both parents and children who experienced Red Balloon's programme endorse it.

Research into the value of social relationships published by Professor Nattavudh Powdthavee in 2007 estimates that "an increase in the level of social involvements is worth up to an extra £85,000 a year in terms of life satisfaction"<sup>10</sup>. This makes a useful reference point as Red Balloon research continues into the economics of its interventions.



**Red Balloon students – Summer 2015**

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\*Mr Barry Moore died unexpectedly during the course of this research <sup>11</sup>.  
Red Balloon extends condolences to his family.

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