



# The Incredible Years Parent Training Programme in Tauranga

## A research summary

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### ABSTRACT

The Incredible Years parent training programme is a research-based therapy which aims to help families improve the behaviour of children with conduct difficulties in the early years, while the behaviour is malleable (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003). The short-term goals of the programme are to reduce conduct problems in children by increasing parental competence and strengthening families (Webster-Stratton, 2000). The programme was developed by the University of Washington's Parenting Clinic, USA and was introduced to the Tauranga community in 2002, via the research of Lees (2003). Due to the success of the programme trialed in Lees' research, it was rapidly embraced by agencies and community organisations.

Hamilton's (2005) research is summarised in this article and was inspired by the rapid expansion of, and enthusiasm for, the Incredible Years parent training programme in Tauranga. Rather than following participants' experiences within the programme, the researcher interviewed the facilitators. The perspective taken was that most of the programme facilitators are highly qualified psychologists and social workers who collectively have an enormous amount of knowledge, experience and insight. The researcher captured the observations and insights of the facilitators who, from their experience working with the programme, made valuable contributions to the identification of the barriers to the programme's success in Tauranga, the appropriateness of this empirically supported manual-based therapy in New Zealand's bicultural environment, and the value of the programme itself. The Incredible Years parent training programme was found to be highly successful in Tauranga as it provided a supportive group environment in which parents could share concerns and ideas, and it was adaptable to different cultural and individual needs.

### Research

#### Keywords

*Behaviour problems, conduct disorder, cultural differences, early intervention, evidence based practice, parenting, parent training, programme evaluation.*

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Concerns about New Zealand youth

An examination of the statistics associated with New Zealand youth show cause for concern, and many remain largely static in that they are not showing improvement over time, for example: unemployment rates (Ministry of Social Development, 2005, 2007; Ministry of Youth Development, 2003); truancy rates (Ministry of Education, 2006); suicide statistics (Currie, 2003); and educational attainment (Ministry of Education, 2004a). In 2003, 3.5% of students were stood-down or suspended during the year (the statistics may include repeat offenders). The most common reasons for the stand-downs and suspensions were for being continually disobedient, physical assaults, and verbal assaults (Ministry of Education, 2004b). In 2006, 16% of students left secondary school having completed a maximum of less than half of a level 1 National Certificate of Educational Achievement qualification (Ministry of Education, 2006). The Ministry of Youth Development (2002) website shows a steady decline in the personal income of youth aged between 15-24 over the past decade. Therefore, many youth are struggling to gain financial independence upon leaving school and are entering adulthood economically, as well as educationally, disadvantaged. This is also reflected in the unemployment rates, as the 15-24 year old age group has significantly higher unemployment rates than any of the older ages (Ministry of Social Development, 2007). Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death for New Zealand youth aged between 16-24 years, followed by suicide (Ministry of Youth Development, 2002). In the 15-24 year age group New Zealand ranked among the highest of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations for rates of suicide in 2002 (New Zealand Health Information Service, 2002). Following continued high suicide rates in New Zealand's youth, it was noted in the 2007 Social Report that 'New Zealand is one of a small number of countries which have higher suicide rates at younger ages than at older ages' (Ministry of Social Development, 2007).

#### Suggested causes of difficulties faced by New Zealand youth

Walker (1999) commented that the American society has a tendency to minimise children's behaviour difficulties and not take action until problems become severe. Arguably, New Zealand takes the same approach to children's behavioural problems. It is often hoped that

children will outgrow their problems as the behaviour is assumed to be a stage of development which will pass (Kauffman, 1999). Albee (1999) challenges society to consider that emotional and mental disorders could be ecologically based. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of human development, known as the ecological theory, provides a framework for understanding the effects of environment on the individual. According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, the individual is in the centre of a series of "nested" systems which impact in varying levels on the life of the growing individual. Bronfenbrenner argues that while extended family and cultural expectations influence a child's development, it is the people closest to the child who have the most impact on his/her development and that is where intervention must begin.

One suggested ecological risk factor is low household income. Scott, O'Connor and Futh (2006) suggest that it is far harder for parents who live in the stressful conditions found in poor neighbourhoods to ensure that a child is brought up experiencing warmth, love and encouragement within safe boundaries. In 2001, approximately 25% of the New Zealand child population was found to be living in a household with an income of less than 60% of the median national income (Ministry of Social Development, 2005). Beautrais (1998) found that New Zealand youth at high risk of suicidal behaviour often come from disadvantaged backgrounds, specifically lower socioeconomic status and inadequate educational qualifications. For low-income families, a well-designed parent training programme which can provide group support, encouragement and address individual needs can be invaluable.

Another suggested ecological risk factor relates to ineffective or coercive parenting practices. Gerald Patterson of the Oregon Social Learning Centre noted that many young children use whining or tantrums to get what they want and parents who give in to this behaviour inadvertently negatively reinforce the child's behaviour (cited in Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Reid & Eddy, 2002). Patterson's (1995) research shows clear links between early coercive behaviour and continuing antisocial acts, including adolescent criminal behaviour and violence. Likewise, both the Christchurch Health and Development Study and the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study - longitudinal studies that have followed over a thousand New Zealanders from early childhood through to adulthood - have found that children displaying early disruptive behaviour patterns, including conduct problems and attentional problems, have a far greater risk of later offending (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1998; Fergusson, Poulton, Horwood, Milne & Swain-Campbell, 2004).

#### **PARENT TRAINING AS AN EARLY INTERVENTION: THE INCREDIBLE YEARS PARENT TRAINING PROGRAMME**

Traditionally, parent training has been hierarchical, with the "expert" trainer teaching adults the correct ways to parent. More recently, a collaborative model of parent training has emerged which promotes partnership between the trainer (expert on child development, family dynamics and behaviour management principles) and the parent (expert on the child and family in question). Together the

parent and trainer work towards modifying the child's behaviour in a positive, supportive way (Webster-Stratton, 1998). The Incredible Years parent training programme utilises the collaborative model with the addition of support provided from the group members themselves. This programme has been developed as a result of over 20 years of research conducted by Carolyn Webster-Stratton and her team at the Washington Parenting Clinic.

The Incredible Years programme operates a weekly two-hour session for 10 to 12 weeks. It is an interactive programme which involves the group watching a video vignette as a discussion starter. From the discussion, ideas are shared and strategies evolve that are then reinforced through role play. Skills targeted for younger children include play, praise, using rewards effectively, limit setting and discipline (Webster-Stratton, 2000). The group is facilitated by two trained leaders, commonly referred to in New Zealand as facilitators. Webster-Stratton (2001) stresses the importance of highly skilled group leaders because there is a lot of emphasis on group collaboration, and judgments must be made about when to deviate from the manual in order to best meet the needs of the group participants. The programme in Tauranga complies as closely as feasibly possible with all of the expectations for operation outlined by the Washington Parenting Clinic. Facilitators undergo training by officially recognised trainers, authorised by the Washington Parenting Clinic.

#### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This article summarises the findings of two of the research questions posed by Hamilton (2005):

1. Why has the Incredible Years parent training programme become such a popular programme with agencies and parents in the Tauranga area of New Zealand?
2. How does the Incredible Years parent training programme, as a manual-based, empirically supported therapy, incorporate the facilitators' professional judgment and cultural understandings in order to meet the individual needs of New Zealand clients?

#### **METHODOLOGY**

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Waikato before any of the research began. There were no identifiable conflicts of interest for the researcher when embarking on this study. The researcher had no prior involvement with the Incredible Years series, nor has she been employed with any of the agencies for whom the research participants worked.

Due to the low number of facilitators of the Incredible Years parent training in Tauranga, all of the facilitators were offered the opportunity to participate in this research. Sixteen of the nineteen facilitators in Tauranga agreed to participate, and one participated in a pilot interview. Fourteen facilitators came from various agencies including education, health, social service, and community organisations. Two facilitated or co-facilitated the Incredible Years parent training programmes independently, in that they did not work for any of the agencies mentioned. The facilitators consisted of thirteen women and three men. Eleven identified themselves as New Zealand European/Pākeha, three were Māori, one was Hispanic, and one was Latin American.

Approaching the facilitators began with a meeting between the researcher and the chairperson of the Incredible Years Guardian Group, Tauranga. The researcher was then invited to attend a meeting of the Group to outline the proposed research to the facilitators present, and to invite them to participate in the research. Facilitators were given an information sheet outlining the research procedures and the University of Waikato's Human Research Ethics Regulations, for their consideration. The facilitators were extremely supportive of the research idea and although they were encouraged to take a few days to consider their willingness and availability to participate, the enthusiasm was such that all of the facilitators present approached the researcher immediately for a Research Participation Agreement. Facilitators not present at the meeting were contacted individually to have the research proposal presented to them.

Each facilitator was interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview format. The interviews were taped, transcribed and sent to the facilitators for verification of accuracy. The interview transcripts were analysed in accordance with the thematic analysis procedures recommended in Drewery's (2005) notes, *Working with qualitative data*. Due to the openness of the questioning and the thematic approach taken to the transcript analysis, the facilitator numbers indicated in the results as making certain comments or observations does not necessarily infer that other facilitators had an opposing view. Each facilitator was assigned a pseudonym to protect his/her privacy. The pseudonyms were randomly assigned so that females may have been given a non-gender specific name. All facilitators, whether Māori or non-Māori, were given a Māori pseudonym. Each facilitator completed a brief questionnaire about his/her qualifications and experience. The most senior facilitator from each agency completed a brief questionnaire about their agency's involvement with and future plans for the Incredible Years programme.

## RESULTS

Three main themes relevant to this article emerged from the data analysis, and within each were sub-themes. The themes are most clearly expressed in question form as follows:

1. What makes the Incredible Years parent training programme unique and powerful?
2. What are the issues associated with the successful implementation of the Incredible Years programme in Tauranga?
3. How appropriate is the Incredible Years parent training programme for the diverse New Zealand society, particularly with regard to New Zealand's bicultural commitment?

### What makes the Incredible Years parent training programme unique and powerful?

More than half of the facilitators commented that the concepts presented in the Incredible Years parent training programme were simple and easy to grasp, and three noted that the programme covered a comprehensive range of parenting skills. Although the facilitators realised that the

Incredible Years programme was originally designed for children with behaviour difficulties, most indicated that this programme was also appropriate for parents whose children did not have behaviour challenges. The facilitators noted that the Incredible Years programme empowered parents to try new strategies. They observed that the supportive nature of the group environment reduced parents' feelings of isolation and enabled them to help, support and encourage each other. One facilitator commented:

**Marama:** If one parent has a problem the other parents start feeding in. They just support and help each other. The course is of sufficient length that they actually form their own support network. It forms a really good protective network for children and families.

The power of the group dynamic is a definite strength of this programme and, as such, the programme is not designed to be adapted to individual parent therapy.

The facilitators commented that because the Incredible Years parent training programme focuses on improving the parent-child relationship, it has a positive impact on the child's behaviour. Facilitators went on to comment that couples have reported developing a closer relationship between one another, and individual parents have experienced improved relationships with their children's teachers. Ideally, couples attend the parent training programme together, but barriers such as work commitments, childcare availability, and single parent family situations often prevent this from occurring.

Although somewhat dated, the facilitators found the video vignettes to be an invaluable tool for showing scenarios from which discussions could begin. Even though the Incredible Years parent training programme is a prescribed manual-based system, the facilitators commented that there is room for flexibility within the programme in order to best meet the needs of the particular group they are working with. They felt that the flexibility was apparent because they were able to decide the method of programme delivery and they had the freedom to enhance the programme with complementary activities, without making changes to the fundamentals of the programme. In the words of one facilitator:

**Jo:** It looks very structured but there's a great flexibility within it in terms of what people will get from it, relating to what they're needing.

### What are the issues associated with the successful implementation of the Incredible Years programme in Tauranga?

Firstly, time constraints were identified as a common issue for facilitators. Most facilitators were in positions in which only a portion of their job involved parent training facilitation. The rest of their time was dedicated to supporting children and families in need and they were sometimes required to alter their daily schedule at short notice to work with a child or family in crisis. When this occurred it could be very difficult to adequately prepare for that week's parent training session. Secondly, the issue of numbers of trained staff was raised by several facilitators. Some indicated that there were more clients wanting to

attend an Incredible Years parent training course than spaces available on courses. Facilitator training must be conducted by a trainer authorised by the Washington Parenting Clinic, therefore training sessions for New Zealand facilitators were infrequent. All of the participants in this research had received training from a member of the Washington Parenting Clinic team in 2004 and/or 2005. The training enabled facilitators to access the wealth of knowledge and experience of the certified trainer. One facilitator stressed the importance of attending these formal training sessions and cautioned that the programme could be run inadequately by untrained facilitators. Properly trained facilitators of this programme are far more aware of the programme format, requirements, topics, and philosophy, and are able to work together more effectively to meet the needs of the group. One facilitator commented:

**Lee:** We hadn't had the proper training to begin with and we tried to do it following the guidelines. It's quite different from after you go to the training. We didn't do a bad job, but we've improved considerably I think.

Lastly, participants identified barriers preventing parents from attending the programme, including transport, access to childcare services, and work commitments.

#### **How appropriate is the Incredible Years parent training programme for the diverse New Zealand society, particularly with regard to New Zealand's bicultural commitment?**

As an empirically-supported programme, it is essential that the Incredible Years parent training programme is delivered in accordance with the instruction manual. However, the programme acknowledges the unique needs of each parent as well as valuing cultural differences, and it has been designed to enable the facilitators to tailor the delivery according to the needs of the parent group. One facilitator commented:

**Robin:** Personally speaking, because I come from another culture as well, this [programme] doesn't need to be changed because it's applicable to every culture. It's been developed in a way that is culturally friendly.

The amount of cultural sensitivity present in the programme is determined by the facilitator. The facilitator is able to deliver the programme in a culturally appropriate manner as described by this facilitator:

**Rangi:** I think it can meet all ethnic groups in terms of content ... there are some really good things in there for Māori. If it's a particularly strong Māori group, then I will start with a karakia. I will make sure that protocol is upheld. I will probably use a bit more Māori language in the way I deliver things. I may use a lot of comparison to Māori protocols or phrases.

The facilitators' opinions on the appropriateness of the American families portrayed in the vignettes shown throughout the course were varied. Five facilitators commented that, in their experience, having American families portrayed was an advantage for New Zealand participants because they were not distracted by the way

the family was portrayed, and there was no emotional attachment to the people shown. This enabled the participants to watch the scenarios objectively without feeling that stereotypes about their culture or ethnicity were being presented. Television channels in New Zealand frequently screen American programmes which may explain the acceptance of American families in the vignettes. On the other hand, three facilitators felt that New Zealand clients would more easily relate to the scenarios given if the families and settings were clearly New Zealand. As there is a lot of group sharing throughout the programme, the facilitators stated that they sometimes used families' experiences as "real life" examples of the parenting principles being discussed. In this way, parents were able to have their individual needs met by getting ideas from the programme to address their specific concerns.

#### **DISCUSSION**

The comprehensive range of parenting skills covered in the Incredible Years parent training programme empowers parents by enabling them to cope effectively with present as well as future parenting difficulties. These skills provide parents with alternative models of parenting which are likely to reduce the use of coercive parenting practices as outlined by Patterson and his colleagues (Reid, Patterson & Snyder, 2002). At least half of the facilitators in the research outlined in this article commented that the concepts presented in the parent training programme were simple and easy to grasp.

A key purpose of the Incredible Years parent training programme is to intervene early in a child's life. This concept was strongly supported by the facilitators interviewed. Many believed that referrals to their services would reduce if more parents of children, particularly in the early childhood age bracket, were able to access and participate in the programme. Wider accessibility to the parent training programme for these parents could be considered a form of primary prevention which can be universally applied (Albee, 1999). In this way, all families would have access to the Incredible Years parent training programme, rather than it being a programme to which parents are referred following behaviour difficulties being displayed by their children. Families who need to wait to access an agency and receive a referral to the parent training programme are likely to be experiencing severe difficulties with their child which are more difficult to reverse than if they had easy access to the programme earlier.

Webster-Stratton's (1997) research found that the parent training programme reduces parents' feelings of isolation because the group becomes an important support network. The importance of the group for parents was also observed by the Tauranga facilitators. They noted that parents encouraged and supported one another during the parent training sessions and that the group became a valuable support network. In the opinion of the Tauranga facilitators, the Incredible Years parent training programme is relevant and suitable for all cultures and family styles. Their observations concur with the research findings of Reid, Webster-Stratton and Beauchaine (2001), who found that the Incredible Years parent training programme was effective for

a broad range of families including African American, Asian American, Caucasian and Hispanic, as well as low income and single parent families. Although some facilitators believed that it would be more appropriate to have New Zealand families on the vignettes which are shown throughout the parent training programme, a larger number of facilitators disagreed. The American families shown are so far removed from the New Zealand culture that many parents are able to take the message from the vignette without feeling threatened, targeted, or stereotyped.

While the parent-child relationship is the focus of the Incredible Years programme, the facilitators in this study found that parents' relationships improved in many unexpected ways. Couples reported developing a closer relationship between each other, relationships between themselves and their child's teachers have improved, as well as the relationship between themselves and siblings of the target child. Webster-Stratton's team have spent over 20 years researching and developing the Incredible Years parent training programme which is part of a wider series, including a child programme and a programme for classroom teachers, that is now recognised by the American Psychological Association's Division of Clinical Psychology (Division 12) as a "well-established treatment" for children with conduct problems (Webster-Stratton, 2000). In order for facilitators to replicate the results of numerous studies, it is important that the programme is followed accurately and with fidelity. Many of the Tauranga facilitators were concerned that because the programme was flexible in its ability to accommodate diverse groups, it would be easy for an untrained or unskilled facilitator to "water the programme down", and thereby make it far less effective. For this reason, Webster-Stratton's team insists that facilitators attend training run by a certified trainer. Tauranga facilitators who had attended the authorised training sessions placed a high value on the training they received.

#### AFTERWORD

The Incredible Years parent training programme is now routinely offered by a number of social service agencies and community groups in Tauranga and other New Zealand cities. The Werry Centre for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Workforce Development, located in Auckland, is actively supporting the programme and is providing official training for facilitators. The training is currently being offered in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch and it aims to enable the programme to be offered as widely as possible throughout New Zealand.

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## RELEVANT WEBSITES

[www.incredibleyears.com](http://www.incredibleyears.com)

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