

Parent Training to Reduce Behavioural and Emotional Problems in Children with Developmental Disabilities

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Children with developmental disabilities have an increased risk for developing behavioural and emotional problems, with parents reporting difficulties at a young age and at rates 3-4 times higher than for typically developing children. Left untreated, behavioural and emotional problems in childhood tend to persist into adulthood (Einfeld, Piccinin, Mackinnon, et al., 2006). For individuals, these problems are associated with restricted educational, occupational, social, and community participation. Parents report higher levels of stress and depressive symptomatology, along with increased costs of care (Einfeld, Ellis, Doran, et al., 2010; Einfeld et al., 2006). However, only a small percentage of families indicate that they access evidence-based help. There is a need for affordable, effective support for children and their families that is available in accessible community settings.

One approach to managing behavioural and emotional problems has been the implementation of parent training programs tailored for parents of children with developmental disabilities. These programs are designed to target both the child's behavioural problems and the concomitant parent stress and problematic family functioning (Einfeld, Tonge, & Clarke, 2013).

Currently, the program with the strongest evidence base is Stepping Stones Triple P (SSTP; Sanders, Mazzucchelli, & Studman, 2004). Stepping Stones Triple P has been adapted for families who have a child with a disability from the evidence-based Triple P – Positive Parenting Program. It introduces parents to a range of proven strategies to encourage positive behaviour, teach new skills, and to more effectively manage challenging behaviour, within a disability-specific context. Stepping Stones programs are available at a variety of levels so that families can choose the format and intensity which best suits their individual needs and preferences.

The Stepping Stones programs are supported by an extensive body of research. Randomised-controlled trials have shown decreased parent-reported child behavioural and emotional problems and increased parent confidence after participating in a Stepping Stones program (Plant & Sanders, 2007; Roberts, Mazzuchelli, Studman, & Sanders, 2006; Whittingham, Sofronoff, Sheffield, & Sanders, 2009). A recent meta-analysis found moderate to large effects of

the combined SSTP program levels on child problems, parenting styles, parent satisfaction and efficacy, and parent relationships (Tellegen & Sanders, 2013). Children with a range of developmental disabilities, including intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders, cerebral palsy, acquired brain injury, and Down syndrome, have shown improvements in child behaviour, indicating the applicability of the program across a broad population (Brown, Whittingham, Boyd, et al., 2014; Roux, Sofronoff, & Sanders, 2013).

Despite the promising evidence for Stepping Stones programs, they have primarily been delivered in clinical research settings, limiting the widespread uptake of the program by parents and families. A recent trial conducted by the Children's Hospital at Westmead expanded Stepping Stones implementation to community settings. The Group Stepping Stones program was delivered to 151 families of children with an intellectual disability or autism spectrum disorder, by trained school staff within 23 school settings across New South Wales (including mainstream and specialist schools). The results of this trial replicate those of earlier clinical trials, with reduced child behaviour problems and parent stress, and increased parent confidence found after participating in the program. School staff also reported improved parent-school relationships following program delivery (Dossetor, Ray, Caruana, & Saleh, 2014). This trial



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paves the way for future community delivery of Stepping Stones programs.

To further increase the availability of evidence-based parenting help, The University of Sydney has launched a new project that will offer free Stepping Stones programs to parents and caregivers of children with a disability aged 2 to 12 years. The Stepping Stones programs will be available across New South Wales in 2015 and 2016, alongside free training for professionals. The SSTP Project will focus on the implementation of the brief Stepping Stones levels – Seminar Series and Primary Care.

The project's first step is a 2014 survey of parents and professionals across NSW to benchmark families' experiences and the need for parenting support. Parents and caregivers who have a child with a disability aged 2 to 10 years, and professionals working with families, can register their interest in the project by completing the My Say survey at www.mysay.org.au.

For more information, please contact the research team on (02) 9114 4060 or fhs.steppingstones@sydney.edu.au. You can also visit and 'like' us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/SteppingStonesTriplePProject>.

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