

**The Incredible Years Parent Training Programme in Tauranga, New Zealand:
A research summary.**

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The Incredible Years parent training programme is a research based therapy which aims to help families change the behaviour of children with conduct difficulties in the early years, while the behaviour is malleable (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). The short term goals of the series, of which the programme is a part, are to reduce conduct problems in children; promote social, emotional, and academic competence in children; promote parental competence and strengthen families (Webster-Stratton, 2000). This programme is part of a larger combination of programmes developed by the University of Washington's Parenting Clinic, USA. In 2002, the Incredible Years parent training programme was introduced to the community in Tauranga, and because of its success, was rapidly embraced by agencies and community organisations.

The research outlined in this article posed the following questions:

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?
3. In what ways, and to what extent, has the Incredible Years Guardian Group Tauranga fostered interagency relationships, communication, and cooperation?

This article explores findings of the answers to the first two questions. Answers to the third question are beyond the scope of this article.

In order to find answers to the questions above, the researcher took the unusual approach of interviewing the deliverers of the parent training programme in Tauranga, rather than

the recipients. The perspective taken was that the programme facilitators are usually highly qualified psychologists and social workers who collectively have an enormous amount of knowledge, experience and insights. The Incredible Years parent training programme has been found to be highly successful in Tauranga as it provides a supportive group environment in which parents can share concerns and ideas, and it is adaptable to different cultural and individual needs.

Introduction / 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 (e.g. unemployment rates in Ministry of Youth Development [MOYD], 2003; truancy rates in Cosgrave, Bishop, & Bennie, 2002; suicide statistics in Currie, 2002; educational attainment in Ministry of Education [MOE], 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 (MOE, 2004b). In 2002, 18% of students left secondary school with no formal qualification (Ministry of Social Development [MOSD], 2005). The Ministry of Youth Development website shows a steady decline in the personal income of youth aged between 15-24, over the past decade (MOYD, 2002). Therefore, many youth are struggling to gain financial independence upon leaving school and are entering adulthood economically, as well as educationally, disadvantaged. Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death for New Zealand youth aged between 16-24 years, followed by suicide (MOYD, 2002). In the 15-24 year age group, New Zealand ranked among the highest of the OECD nations for rates of suicide in 2002 (NZHIS, 2002).

Suggested causes of difficulties faced by New Zealand youth

Walker (1999) commented that the United States society has a tendency to minimize 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 model of human development, known as the ecological theory, provides a framework for understanding the effects of environment on the individual (Santrock, 2006). According to the theory, the individual is in the centre of a series of 'nested' systems: the microsystem; mesosystem; exosystem; macrosystem; and chronosystem (Figure 1). One suggested ecological risk factor is family income level. 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.

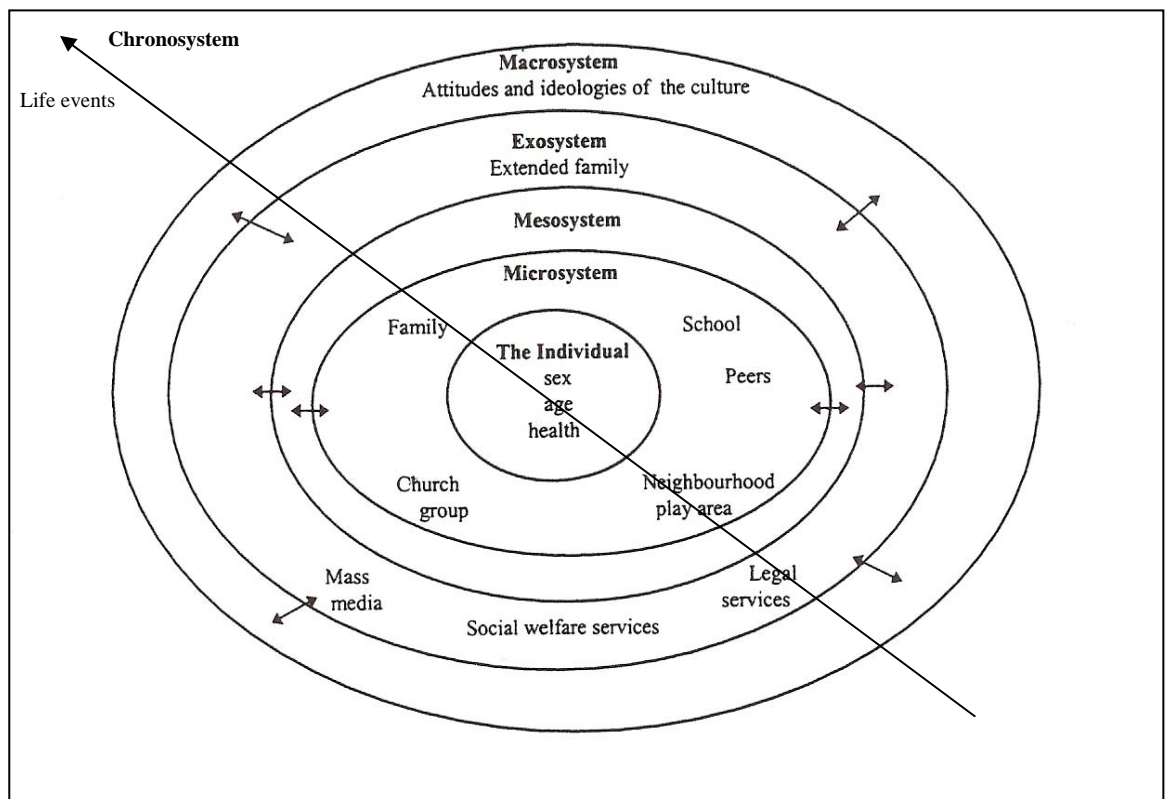


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (represented in Stanley et al, 2000, p. 6). [Chronosystem line and related headings added].

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 are inadvertently negatively reinforcing the child's behaviour (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Reid & Eddy, cited in Reid, Patterson, & Snyder, 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, which are 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 parent training programme explored in this study was the Incredible Years Parent Training Programme. This parent training programme operates a weekly two hour session for around twelve weeks, depending on the target age group. It is an interactive

programme which involves the group watching a video vignette as a discussion starter. From the discussion, ideas are shared, strategies evolve then are 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. Webster-Stratton 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 (Webster-Stratton, 2001).

Methodology

Sixteen of the nineteen facilitators of the Incredible Years parent training programme in Tauranga participated in the research. Each was interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview format. The interviews were taped, transcribed and sent to the participants for verification of accuracy. Each participant completed a brief questionnaire about their qualifications and experience. One participant from each agency completed a brief questionnaire about their agency's involvement with and future plans for the Incredible Years programme. The interview transcripts were analyzed in accordance with the procedures recommended in Dr. Wendy Drewery's notes, *Working with qualitative data* (Drewery, 2005).

Results

Five main themes emerged from the data analysis, and within each were many sub-themes. It was decided that the themes would be most clearly expressed in question form, those questions being:

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?

4. In what ways is the Incredible Years Guardian Group Tauranga a model of interagency collaboration?
5. What are the facilitators' hopes for the Incredible Years series in New Zealand and for the Incredible Years Guardian Group Tauranga?

Themes one to three are relevant for discussion in this article.

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

More than half of the participants 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. In the experience of the facilitators interviewed, the Incredible Years parent training programme has been very empowering for parents. Participants found that the supportive nature of the group environment reduced parents' feelings of isolation and enabled them to help, support and encourage each other. One research participant 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.

It has been their observation that this parent training programme focuses on improving the parent-child relationship which in turn has a positive impact on the child's behaviour. As well, couples have reported developing a closer relationship between one another, and individual parents have experienced improved relationships with their children's teachers. 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 how the programme would be delivered 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 research participant:

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?

Time constraints were identified as a common issue for facilitators. Some respondents were in positions in which they were expected 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 closely related to the concern about time, and was raised by several facilitators. Some indicated that there were more clients wanting to attend an Incredible Years parent training course than they could adequately support. Thirdly, participants highlighted the need for all course facilitators to be effectively trained. All of the participants in this study received training from a member of the Webster-Stratton research team in 2004 and 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 participant 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?

The design of Incredible Years acknowledges the unique needs of each parent and allows the facilitators to tailor the delivery accordingly. One participant 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 awareness or sensitivity present in the programme is determined by the facilitator. The facilitator is able to deliver the programme in a culturally appropriate manner by adjusting their delivery style and techniques used, depending upon the needs of the clients.

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 ha 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 demonstrated mixed opinions on the appropriateness of the American families portrayed in the vignettes which were shown throughout the course. 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. New Zealanders are used to watching American actors on television and movies, 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 may use 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 / Conclusion

The comprehensive range of parenting skills covered in the Incredible Years parent training programme empowers parents by enabling them to cope effectively with future as well as present 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 and Snyder, 2002). At least half of the research participants in the current study commented that the concepts presented in programme were simple and easy to grasp.

A key purpose of the Incredible Years parenting training programme is to intervene early in a child's life. This concept was strongly supported by the facilitators in the current research. They went on to note that they expected referrals to their services to reduce if more parents of children in early childhood were able to access the programme. Wider accessibility to the parent training programmes for these parents could be considered a form of primary proactive prevention which can often be universally applied (Albee, 1999).

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, & Beauchaine (2001), who found that the Incredible Years parent training programme was effective for African American, Asian American, Caucasian, and Hispanic mothers, as well as low income mothers. 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.

Throughout the parent training programme the parent-child relationship is the focus, but 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 the non-target child. Webster-Stratton's team have spent over twenty years developing and researching the Incredible Years series which is now recognized 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; www.incredibleyears.com). In order for facilitators to replicate the results in the numerous studies done on the programme, it is important that the programme is followed accurately and with skill. 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 that training placed a high value on the training. As a result, some facilitators modified their delivery of the programme and suggested that peer supervision needs to occur in Tauranga to ensure programme integrity is maintained.

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