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# **Moving from the *I* to *we*: Effective Parenting Education in Groups**

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# I Abstract

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*Parenting education has a role to play in helping people positively parent and nurture their children to ensure children experience a warm and loving childhood and reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect. However, there is no clear picture about the critical elements necessary for parenting education to succeed, specifically those elements which would ensure successful attendance, retention and positive learning outcomes for parents, particularly from 'hard-to-reach' families.*

*To help parenting education providers plan effective programmes, this research investigated three programmes regarded as good exemplars of parenting education in New Zealand. There were:*

- Nurturing the Future, which delivers programmes to low socio-economic families on the West Coast of New Zealand;*
- the national SPACE programme which is delivered through early childhood sessions where mothers learn alongside their babies;*
- Te Aroha Noa parent educator model which is delivered within the context of Te Aroha Noa's community development organization.*

*A bricolage approach using multiple research methods was taken to collect data and stories from the organizers, facilitators and parents and included parent focus groups, semi-structured interviews with organisers and observations of the programmes being delivered.*

*Analysing parents' stories revealed that positive transformative learning and change occurred in group settings. Allowing parents to reflect and dialogue together in these social settings was more important in achieving learning and positive change than the programmes' delivery methods and curriculum. The relationship skills of facilitators were critically important. Programmes were enhanced by both child development content (which resulted in deepening parents' understanding of their children) and opportunities for parents to reflect on their own childhood and how this linked to the way they parented their children (which increased their understanding of themselves).*

*All three programmes had overcome problems commonly reported by other parenting education programmes in the recruitment and retention of parents and in achieving short and long-term benefits. They achieved this by embedding their programmes within their communities, delivering the programmes in groups, weaving through other means of support and enriching them by continually*

*consulting and involving the parents for whom they were intended. This is in contrast to many other parenting education programmes delivered in New Zealand which are universal programmes that have been developed without consulting the communities they are aimed at and which are delivered as short courses without multiple or ongoing methods of parent support.*

## II Acknowledgements

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I want to particularly acknowledge the organizers of the three amazing parenting programmes in this research and all the parents who generously shared their stories with me – often difficult stories to tell and sometimes difficult stories to hear. Without those stories this study would have been very dry indeed.

I want to particularly thank Trish Hunt for allowing me to be a part of her life over the past two years and for the use of part of her quotation for the title of this thesis.

*“We would reconnect communities so they could move from the ‘I’ to the ‘we’. We are herd dwellers and were never meant to live in isolation.” (Trish Hunt)*

### **My family:**

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# Chapter One

## Introduction – in search of a research question

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*“Glad to have you aboard.....*

*For the next 18 years you will be personally responsible for the care and well-being of another human being. You're on your own. Good Luck!” Popkin (1986)*

This chapter begins by introducing the context and rationale for this study. It presents the researcher’s assumption about parenting and parenting education. It discusses why the research is important and provides a short description of parenting in the 2000s as a context for modern parenting education. It outlines the main questions surrounding parenting education on which it aims to cast some light. A short overview of the research design and its limitations is given. Finally the structure of this report is outlined.

In this study the term ‘parent’ includes any caregiver who provides considerable care for children within a home or family – those who foster all facets of children’s growth. These are the people who nurture and provide support for babies, young children or youths and not only include biological parents but also adoptive, step and foster parents, grandparents and other relatives.

Parenting is defined as the activities and processes of nourishing, protecting, and guiding new life to ensure the survival and development of children. “To ensure survival is the chief task of parenting” (Potts and Short, cited in Hoghughi and Long, 2004, p. 1). Parenting activities are those “specifically aimed at promoting the child’s welfare” (Hoghughi, 2004, p. 6) – their care and development. Parenting is also a process of interactions between parents and children which usually occur in family settings (Brooks, 2006).

### I. Introduction

*“How could we get it so wrong?”*

This question was asked by the organiser from one of the parenting education programmes during this research. She had just finished telling the story of a young father whose memory of his childhood home was that it had a red floor in the kitchen. He remembered it this way because he had regularly mopped his mother’s blood up off that floor as a young boy.

She asked the question because many children in Aotearoa New Zealand do not experience the warm, loving parenting they need. For example:

*“... the infants with broken limbs and the neglected, the children who are left alone, whose illnesses go untreated because their parents don’t take them to the doctor, who have to get themselves up and to school, whose emotional development is stunted by being constantly anxious about all the violence around them” (John Angus, Children’s Commissioner, presentation to Forum on the Family, Auckland 18 September, 2009).*

Increasing numbers of people are parenting in isolation, where communities have grown further apart, streets no longer echo with the sound of children’s voices during the day and where neighbours barely know one another (Whitfield, as cited in Mulvey, 2002, p. 13). People parenting in isolation without support can become overwhelmed, especially if they do not know where their basic needs will come from because they are living in relative poverty. Relative poverty refers to poverty experienced by people within a developed country who are considered to be relatively poor compared with most of the population. What can follow is neglect of children. John Angus states that neglect and emotional abuse are an increasing problem in New Zealand while physical and sexual abuse is gradually declining. He describes neglect.

*It is a failure to meet minimum standards of care, to meet children’s basic needs for supervision, treatment for illnesses and injuries, support for schooling. It includes, commonly, a failure to provide the consistent affection and attention that is vital for children’s emotional development. (John Angus, Children’s Commissioner, presentation to Forum on the Family, Auckland 18 September, 2009).*

With reduced traditional community support available, increasingly parenting education and family support programmes are expected to fill the gaps.

Parenting education is considered to be any planned and purposeful attempt to help parents and caregivers become more effective in caring for children usually by providing information, knowledge and skills about child-rearing (Mahoney, Kaiser, Girolametto, MacDonald, Robinson, Safford and Spiker, 1999) with the aim of improving children’s health and development outcomes (Brown, 2000).

Parenting education emerged from white middle-class communities (Doherty, Jacob and Cutting, 2009) where it developed to meet the needs of mothers from those communities. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century social agencies and governments began using parenting education with other cultures and low socio-economic groups. This proved very difficult. Parenting education in New Zealand is haphazard, fragmented with little known about which programmes are actually making a difference (Hendricks and Balakrishnan, 2005).

In 1994 Garbarine and Kostelnv wrote that formal parenting education and government provided family support would become unnecessary if people were living in fully functioning and supportive communities. However in the 2000s parents still feel unsupported (Families Commission, 2008).

## **Rationale for this research**

The Royal New Zealand Plunket Society recognises the importance of supporting parents – especially first-time parents. Over 300 neighbourhood support groups operate under its umbrella together with 120 playgroups and a national parenting education programme which reaches over 14,000 parents (mostly mothers) a year (Royal NZ Plunket Society, 2008). The researcher's role as National Parenting Education Advisor for Plunket (see Appendix I for biography and description of role) is to oversee these national programmes. While undertaking this work key challenges have emerged.

Children in New Zealand appear to experience two different childhoods. Many children “have loving, dedicated parents with “good enough” resources, support and skills to give their children a great start in life” (Hanna and Hassell, 2006, p. 1). But others are being raised in chaotic families. Chaotic families are defined as ones where there are high “noise levels, crowding and ‘traffic’ (people coming and going, all the time), lack of predictability and family routines” (Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant and Reiser cited in Deater-Deckard, Mulineaux, Beekman, Petrill, Schatschneider and Thompson, 2009, p. 1301). They often live in relative poverty and face conditions that place them at risk.

As with many other parenting education and support programmes worldwide, Plunket's programmes are mostly successful in engaging parents from high socio-economic groups. Although Plunket does not undervalue the support its group parenting programmes can bring to *all* parents – no matter their socio-economic circumstances – it has a stated aim of achieving “the best start for every child” (Royal NZ Plunket Society, 2008a). The question looms large – how do we reach those parents most in need?

The family support and community development movements have shown the best programmes are collaborations within communities. Many have realised that the future for parenting education lies not so much in programmes designed elsewhere and imported into communities to be delivered by strangers over short periods but rather with programmes that are developed *with* and embedded *in* the communities they are serving (McNeill, 2009). This approach is more complex, more expensive and more time-consuming to implement and governments and social agencies often seem unwilling to embark on them, preferring to use short-term, fixed-curriculum universal programmes (Wellington, White and Liossis, 2006) even though the efficacy of these is largely unproven.

Given these issues, this study set out to find out how Plunket could provide parenting education that would meet the needs of New Zealand's diverse population of families and asks the research question:

**What elements are present in a selection of group parenting education programmes already operating successfully in New Zealand that have resulted in the attendance, retention and positive learning outcomes for parents and caregivers – particularly those from high deprivation areas?**

## **II. Researcher's assumptions**

### **About parenting**

1. Parents care deeply about their children, want to be good parents and do the best for their children. The emotional bond between parent and child is intense, deep and complex. However, many parents struggle with knowing how to express this caring and often lack confidence about how to approach parenting and what strategies are the most appropriate for their child.
2. All parents grow and learn through the challenges of parenting. Many aspects of parenting are a challenge to many new parents. Most parents have developed some capacity for caring for their child before the child is born, and others learn it through the experience of parenting.
3. Parenting provides a unique opportunity for growth and development of cognitive and emotional skills in parents (Campbell and Palm, 2004). Parents as individuals have the

potential to grow into more caring, empathetic adults as they take on the role of caring, guiding and nurturing their children (Palkovitz and Palm, 1998).

4. When people become parents they bring with them issues from their own past (often from the way they were parented) that influence the way *they* parent.
5. Parents represent diverse family and community contexts, with similarly diverse beliefs about parenting and cultural values.

### **About parenting education**

1. Parent learners are adult learners who have had a range of experiences – some of them negative – with formal education while growing up. Sometimes this results in a belief that any form of education – including parenting education – is not for them.
2. The best parenting education involves parents as active participants in their own learning. It should not be ‘expert’ driven, should encourage the co-construction of learning between participants and should enhance family relationships and the emotional needs of the parents and their children.
3. Parents bring a unique combination of experiences and strengths to parenting and therefore to group parenting courses where they can learn from each other.

## **III. The importance of this study**

Discovering what constitutes effective parenting education is important for children, parents and society.

### **Importance for children**

People have intuitively believed in the importance of children’s experiences in their early years for a long time. Research over more recent times has provided the evidence to back up this intuition as more becomes known about human growth and development – in the neurobiological, behavioural and social sciences. Research also shows the effect early experiences have on determining outcomes



for children (and ultimately for them as adults) (Hanna and Hassell, 2006; Waldegrave and Waldegrave, 2009).

The environment in which children live, learn, develop and grow is the major determinant of their development (Benson and Haith, 2009; Coote, Dawson, Harpham, Jaemieson, Pryde and Saxby, 2009). Poor social, health and educational outcomes later in life can often be tracked back to what happened in a person's early childhood.

*“A fundamental paradox exists and is unavoidable: development in the early years is both highly robust and highly vulnerable. Although there have been long-standing debates about how much the early years really matter in the larger scheme of lifelong development, our conclusion is unequivocal: what happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or a fragile stage for what follows” (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000, p. 4).*

A study by Deater-Deckard, Mullineaux, Beekman, Petrill, Schastschneider and Thomson (2009) found that high levels of 'chaos' in family households result in lower children's IQ and more behaviour problems. Chaos includes “noise levels, crowding and 'traffic' (people coming and going all the time), lack of predictability and of family routines” (Deater-Deckard et al, 2009, p. 1301). They state that chaos correlates with other important parent and household characteristics such as parental stress and dysfunction (Evans, Lepore, Shejwal and Palsane cited in Deater-Deckard et al, p. 1301), maternal depression (Pike, Iervolino, Eley, Price and Plomin cited in Deater-Deckard et al, p. 1301), lower parental positivity (Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant and Reiser cited in Deater-Deckard et al, p. 1301), and harsh reactive discipline (Dumas, Nissley, Nordstrom, Phillips Smith, Prinz and Levine cited in Deater-Deckard et al, p. 1301).

Crucial to providing optimal development is the parent-child attachment relationship. Attachment theory says the child forms a strong emotional bond with parents during childhood with lifelong consequences. “Secure attachments occur when children have consistent, emotionally attuned, contingent communication with their parent,” according to Siegel and Hartzell, 2004, p. 103. Insecure attachment occurs when parents are not responsive (physically or emotionally) to their children's needs (Siegel and Hartzell).

Children's development "is influenced by many things including genetics, temperament, physical health and experience" (Siegel and Hartzell, 2004, p. 4). However research clearly demonstrates that their "intelligence, self-esteem, cognitive abilities and social skills are built on this early attachment relationship" (Siegel and Hartzell, p. 5).

Perry and Pollard (1998) explain the 'parenting effect' thus: if parents provide a safe, nurturing, repetitive and predictable environment attuned to the child's developmental stage then their development can proceed in an optimal fashion. But if the environment they are living in results in experiences which are chaotic, extreme or mismatched to the child's developmental stage, their development is disturbed.

Effective parenting has been found to moderate poor outcomes for children living in families with risk factors such as poverty, low levels of parents' education and high birth rates (Akai, Guttentag, Baggett and Noira, 2008). Siegel and Hartzell (2004) report encouraging research which shows that with the right intervention parents who have themselves had quite traumatic childhood are not necessarily fated to repeat "negative patterns of family interactions passed down through the generations" (Siegel and Hartzell, p. 1).

## **Importance for parents**

Families and societies are always changing and evolving. However in the twentieth century, it is the sheer pace of change that has had an unparalleled impact on families transforming their organisation, living arrangements and personal relationships. In a 2008 research report, the Families Commission comments: "They have emerged, changed in form and smaller in size in many cases, but also enduring" (p. 40).

Historically, new parents learned their parenting skills from "informal family and community networks, affiliations and experiences" (Zepeda and Morales, 2001, p. 4). However because societal changes means many people become parents at an older age, have less contact with extended families and have more demands on their time (because of work commitments) they have less time to parent so the way people learn to become parents has also changed (Zepeda and Morales).

"In many communities, parents are on their own, learning by doing, making adjustments as they go, without the benefit of older, wiser, and more experienced caregivers in their midst" (Grant and Yang, 2003, p.7). Gonzales and Rodriguez-Ruiz (2007) believe that as parents have lost other people

as parenting role models they have become confused about methods for raising children and this has led to a search for guidance and information about what will help their parenting.

Research suggests that what parents believe and have experienced (what they know) has a strong effect on the way they will parent (Reich, 2005) but parents are often unaware of the vital part they have to play in their children's development (Invest in Kids Foundation in Canada, 1999). Paradis (2008) discovered that around one-third of parents had a surprisingly low knowledge of child development. Although they know they influence their children's emotional development in particular they are unsure how to be a positive influence (Paradis). Studies have shown that parents want to learn about parenting, are keen to gain information and skills and generally do not feel they are adequately prepared to become a parent (Centre for Community Child Health, 2004; Mockford and Barlow, 2004; Paradis 2008).

## **Importance for society**

*"If we do not attend to the needs of children we risk paying a terrible price in our children's later behavior – drugs and anti social and violent acts. Our grandchildren will live together in a society with the offspring of neglected families. So will yours" (Brazelton, 2000, p. i).*

Major international reports stress the now irrefutable evidence that the quality of nurturing and environment children experience in their early years has lifelong effects on all aspects of their education, development and health - and ultimately in the wellbeing of the nation (Smith, Gallop, Taylor and Marshall, 2004; Brooks, 2006; Zielinski, 2009).

Most people agree that children's well-being is important for society's future (Logan, Moore, Manlove, Mincieli and Cottingham, 2007). Economically and socially, "the cost to society of poor child development is significant; the cost of interventions to promote positive outcomes is also significant" (Hanna and Hassall, 2006, p. 2).

For example, Infometrics (2009) reports that child abuse costs New Zealand \$2 billion per annum in dealing with the immediate consequences, the ongoing criminal, education and health consequences and the loss of productivity as "victims fail to meet their potential" (p.3).

- In 2004, 20% children lived in poverty (212,000 children) and 38% were living in "some degree of hardship" (Ministry of Social Development, 2006a, p. 63).

- Crengle (2009, p. 101) states that Māori children are “more likely to experience adverse social determinants of health such as inadequate or crowded housing, poverty, poorer educational outcomes and lower living standards”.
- The health of children born into Pacifica families living in New Zealand is poorer than that of other New Zealand children (Ministry of Health, 2008).
- The Ministry of Health (2008) reports that each day 20 new cases of child abuse or neglect are identified. A United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) report in 2003 showed that New Zealand has the third highest rate of death from child homicide in the OECD. Of New Zealand children aged 0–14 years, longitudinal studies suggest 4–10% experience physical abuse and 11–20% experience sexual abuse (Craig, Jackson and Han, 2007). Injuries to children are most often caused by those people who should protect and nurture them.

Society as a whole pays the economic and social costs of these poor outcomes for children.

## **IV. Modern parenting – a context for parenting education**

With the new millennium’s rapid technological, economic and social change parents face new challenges which have combined to transform the family as a social institution (Hoghughi, 2004; Families Commission, 2008).

### **An increase in relative poverty**

The Child Poverty Action Group reports that poverty is still a major issue for New Zealand (St John and Wynd, 2008) and that between the years “2000 and 2004 the proportion of all children in severe and significant hardship increased by a third” (St John and Wynd, p. 4)

### **Changed birth patterns**

Fewer babies are being born and to women at an older age resulting in smaller families (Pool, Dharmalingam and Sceats 2007). Today’s smaller families often means a more ‘intensive’ style of parenting with some parents focusing more staunchly on the children they have (Pryor, 2005) sometimes producing the ‘helicopter’ parent who is over-involved with and ‘hovers’ over their child (Cline and Fay, 1990).

## **A change in work patterns and gender roles**

Today more women than ever (and mothers with young children) are employed outside the home (Families Commission, 2008). Daily they face the challenge of balancing the demands of their work and the demands of family life. Hoghughi (2004) states that some families may have little paid work (they are “work-poor”) while others may be “work-rich” but are spending long hours working. When both partners work outside the home, traditional gender roles within the family are challenged, particularly as women become less economically dependent on men (Walker, 1999).

## **Diverse family structures**

New Zealand families today have more diverse structures compared with 50 years ago. Children are now more likely to be parented by solo or step parents or be raised in blended families and, as a result, are more likely to be moving between families and to experience a number of different family arrangements (Families Commission, 2008). Today, there are more single-parent families in New Zealand than in the 1970s, and this appears to be a continuing trend (Families Commission, 2008). Almost a third of families with dependent children have only one parent in the household.

## **Loss of extended families and support networks**

“In the past, families generally learned about childrearing from relatives and friends, but this became more difficult as they began to move farther and farther from their extended support networks. Women learnt from other women’s experiences, by attending births and taking part in helping rear babies and small children,” (Nolan and Hicks, 1997, p.180). This ‘women’s network’ allowed them “to become competent in baby care skills and they were empowered as mothers and women through processing knowledge which was accessible only to their own sex” (Nolan and Hicks, p. 180). Common experiences, practical advice, and homespun wisdom were shared with mothers and fathers seeking advice. In the last generation, however, these traditional sources of help and support have become less available as society and family lifestyles changed (Smith, Perou and Lesesne, 2002).

The dispersal of extended families has seen the emergence, particularly in the West, of societies where there are no longer clear standards or central models of parenting. This has gone hand-in-hand with an increasing lack of acceptance for traditional means of corrective discipline and rising uncertainty about appropriate boundaries of children's behaviour (Hoghughi, 2004). Only a small

number of New Zealand parents think that parental methods such as smacking are effective and many believe that they do not work well in today's society (Lawrence and Smith, 2009).

## **Changed status of children**

The assumption that children either could or should have rights of any type is a relatively new idea (Colon and Colon, 2001). However, the concept that children should receive at least a culturally assigned minimum level of care, positive developmental opportunities and freedom from abuse, is now enshrined in the United Nations Charter of Children's Rights (1989). Parents are seen as the main agent for delivering these rights with the state in a "policing" and support or backup role.

## **V. Questions surrounding parenting education**

### **Uncertain outcomes**

Research literature has shown that programmes which provide parenting education can have short-term positive impacts on parenting and families (Richardson and Joughin, 2002; Baydar, Reid and Webster-Stratton, 2003; Bunting, 2004; Hendricks and Balarkrishnan, 2005; Bloomfield and Kendall, 2007; Kendrick, Barlow, Hampshire, Polnay and Stewart-Brown, 2007; Barth, 2009; Stolz, Brandon and Wallace 2009).

The issue of whether parenting education induces long-term change has not been clearly answered by research. Despite the huge increase in the amount of parenting education over the past two decades (Shulruf, O'Loughlin and Tolley, 2009), there are few indications of improved outcomes for children (Dovey, 2003). The literature is also unclear about which forms of parenting education are effective and for whom (Gibbs, Underdown, Stevens, Newbery and Liabo, 2003; Hendricks and Balarkrishnan, 2005; Moran and Gbate, 2005; Zeedyk, Werritty and Riach, 2008).

Over the past three decades most western governments have become concerned that the costs and risks generated from children living in poor parenting environments have become too high both for individuals and for society. They have sought ways to provide better support to parents, children and families in an attempt to overcome these challenging social problems and improve outcomes for children and families (Shulruf et al., 2009). Parenting education is a common initiative used by governments to achieve these goals (Shulruf et al.). Government and social agencies use parenting education as a way to address simple issues (for example, a mother acquiring information about

breastfeeding) to more complex issues (for example, addressing patterns of inappropriate parenting which may lead to child abuse or neglect).

*“More than 12,000 parents of violent or misbehaving children will be sent back to school in an effort to crack down on bad behaviour. The Government will announce today that parents will be sent on courses lasting between 12 and 20 weeks that include homework assignments on how to play with children, and teaching parenting skills such as rewarding good behaviour, setting boundaries and discipline. Officials hope the \$45 million Education Ministry-led project will help to save billions of dollars by preventing an unchecked slide into unemployment, mental health problems, substance abuse, crime and prison” (Beaumont, report in The Dominion Post, 30 September 2009, p. 1).*

Yet despite OECD countries spending large and increasing sums of government money on social and health outcomes for children (New Zealand 20% of GDP in 2008/2009 (Rea 2009)) the result has been “escalating dollars for deteriorating outcomes”, particularly for families and their children from poorer communities (Dovey, 2003, p. 10).

## **Engaging the ‘hard-to-reach’**

Brackertz (2007) writes that “there is a lack of clarity about what exactly is meant by ‘hard to reach’”. Young employed males, migrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, solo parents, victims of domestic violence, people living in isolated rural communities, those who abuse drugs and alcohol and low socio-economic groups have all been described as being ‘hard-to-reach’ (cited in Brackertz, 2007, p. 1; Burhansstipanov and Krebs, as cited in Brackertz, 2007, p. 1).

“The problem with using the term ‘hard-to-reach’ is that it implies a homogeneity within distinct groups, which does not necessarily exist,” (Brackertz, 2007, p. 1). Smith (cited in Brackertz, p. 1) says ‘it defines the problem as one within the group itself, not within your approach to them’. As such the term ‘hard-to-reach’ is a potentially stigmatising term. Freimuth and Mettger (cited in Brackertz, 2007, p. 1) summarise these prejudices: “Hard-to-reach audiences have been called obstinate, recalcitrant, chronically uninformed, disadvantaged, have-not, illiterate, malfunctioning, and information poor”. Health and educational outcomes are often poorer for ‘hard-to-reach’ people, which is why they are often targeted in social programmes (Earthman, Richmond, Peterson, Marczak and Betts, 1999; The Reading Agency, 2006).

In this research, the term ‘hard-to-reach’ generally refers to parents who are living in high deprivation areas and those who have special parent support needs – such as teen, solo and step parents, parents who have had poor childhood experiences themselves, parents from families with violence or drug and alcohol issues and parents who are isolated (such as those living in sparsely-populated rural communities or those with English as a second language). These parents are usually *not* Pakeha, middle-class, well-educated or earning a reasonable income.

International studies have shown that it is the white, well-off and well-educated middle classes who attend parenting education while parents from ‘hard-to-reach’ groups are more difficult to engage (Johnson, Harrison, Burnett and Emerson, 2003; Petersson, Petersson and Hakansson, 2004).

A review of ante-natal education by Dwyer (2009) confirmed similar issues for New Zealand. This review revealed that of the “only 41% of pregnant women who attend childbirth education in New Zealand, most are first time mothers, tertiary educated, Pakeha and higher income earners” (Dwyer, p. 6). She reports that Māori and Pacifica women were significantly under represented and younger, single, less educated women and those from lower socio-economic groups were less likely to attend.

Different studies have reached different conclusions as to why this should be so. McGrath (2007) believes the mere stress of their living situation often makes attending parenting education a low priority. Brown (2000) agrees saying that parents cannot even consider attending parenting education before they look after their children’s physical and safety needs first. Johnson et al. (2003) say non-participation is often for more practical logistical reasons – lack of transport for example. However Webster-Stratton (1998) argues that these groups have been ‘unreachable’ not because of their ‘characteristics’ but because the programmes offered have not matched their needs.

## **High attrition rates**

Many studies show high attrition rates or parents only attending parenting education programmes spasmodically. Snow, Frey and Kern (2002) report attrition rates as high as 49% and Clayton (2007) reports a 25% to 50% attrition rate of low-income parents who do not complete the parenting education programmes in which they enrolled.

The parents most likely not to complete programmes are those whose children are perceived as having more behavioural problems, mothers under great stress, ethnic minorities and families at greatest socio-economic disadvantage – generally families with the highest need (Gibbs et al., 2003).



Snow et al. (2002) found that the “more educated the participant, the greater the likelihood that he or she would complete” (p. 373) the parenting education programme in which they were enrolled. These studies seem to partly support Webster-Stratton’s (1998) argument that programmes do not meet the needs of the groups who choose not to complete them.

## **VI. Overview of this research**

### **Literature Review**

The literature review is in two parts. In Chapter Two there is a review of the history of parenting education and in the modern era and an overview of modern parenting as a context for parenting education. This is followed in Chapter Three with a review of research on ‘what works in parenting education’. Other aspects of the literature review are woven throughout this report.

This review is based on published literature from mostly New Zealand, Australia, England and America using the following electronic databases – JSTOR, ERIC, SAGE Journals online, Questia online library and Web of Science

For much of the review, search terms included: “parent\*” combined with words such as “education”, “training”, “support” and “intervention”. Searches for information on the history of parenting and the modern context of families, search terms used included: “history of the family” “family and social change” and derivations of these.

The literature review was generally limited to articles and books published after 1998 except:

1. When studying the history of parenting education;
2. In the case of books, authors and articles considered of high importance or seminal in the field.

Part way through the research, it became clear from the parents’ early stories it would be useful to read about what processes happen in groups of adults that help their learning. This was because it appeared the process of shared learning and support played a crucial role in parent’s transformative learning and were, perhaps, more important than the content. An article search was carried out on adult group learning processes. Since this study used a transformative learning theoretical framework a search of recent articles on this topic – particularly those with a neurobiological perspective – was also conducted.

## **Transformative learning theoretical framework**

In New Zealand, there is a national programme run by the Ministry of Social Development called SKIP (Support Kids, Inform Parents). It is a programme which promotes positive parenting messages. Positive parenting is an approach to raising children that fosters a relationship between parents and children based on mutual respect. There is an emphasis on praising good behaviour, setting clear boundaries, taking time to listen, working as a team and using positive discipline instead of punishment which is physical (such as smacking) or emotional (such as shouting or blaming).

At the core of the SKIP framework is the concept of 'conscious parenting'. Conscious parenting describes parents who have become deliberate and intentional about what outcomes they want for the children they care for and who are making thoughtful and reasoned choices about their parenting practices (Ministry of Social Development, 2006b).

To become a 'conscious' parent and to improve parenting skills, parents need to make the decision to self-reflect on their current parenting behaviours and question their effectiveness. This in turn can lead to a transformation in those behaviours – hopefully to their children's benefit.

Siegel and Hartzell (2004) support the concept of the benefits of conscious parenting when they state that in the absence of this self-reflection, history often repeats itself, and parents will pass on to their children "unhealthy patterns from the past" (p. 4).

This research was particularly interested in exploring whether parenting education in general and the subject parenting programmes in particular could help parents transform the way they parent in the long-term to improve the outcomes for their children.

As such, this study was undertaken within a framework of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) using a modern neurobiological perspective of this learning theory (Taylor, 2008). In constructing transformative learning theory, Mezirow built on the social constructivist idea that people make meaning of their worlds in response to their experiences. "What happens once, they expect to happen again," Cranton (2005, p. 631). As a result they develop "habits of mind or a frame of reference for understanding the world, much of which is uncritically assimilated" (Cranton, p. 631). Neuroimaging of the brain in the past two decades has informed theories of cognitive psychology (Ward, 2010) and, as a result, of adult learning.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory contends that when people experience the unexpected, or something out of their normal frame of reference, there is the opportunity for them to question their previously held knowledge, values and beliefs. This in turn can lead to a transformation in their understandings and, in turn, their behaviours. New findings using brain imaging demonstrate how the brain learns and changes during this process and appear to match the concepts of Mezirow's theory but from a new neurobiological perspective.

Of equal interest in this study was that if change was indeed being made, what processes were taking place within groups of parents that led to this transformation. Evidence shows that learning in parenting groups results in more successful outcomes than learning one-to-one with a social, health or education 'professional' (Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Barros, Kitson and Midgley, 2007; Zeedyk et al., 2008). This suggests that examining the processes occurring among parents within groups might reveal *how* transformative learning was occurring. Neuroscience confirms that the human brain is a 'social brain' and learns best with others (Cozolino and Sprokay, 2006) when people are able to observe each other and dialogue and reflect together. These findings fit with the concept that transformative learning theory is "grounded in human communication" (Taylor, 2008, p. 5).

As such, parents' narrative data was analysed to see how much and to what level parents were using the three levels of transformative critical reflection originally described by Mezirow (cited in Cranton, 2006, p. 34). These levels – content, process and premise critical reflection – are described in more detail on page 35. This analysis might uncover what was happening in these parenting groups that led parents to reframe their meanings about parenting.

## **Research process**

From the outset it was felt using interpretivist methods would be the best way to reveal the stories and authentic voices from those most knowledgeable about the programmes – the organisers, facilitators and parents. This meant parents and programme organisers would be both interviewed and observed making meaning in their natural settings – in their own communities. For this reason a bricolage approach using multiple methods was used to uncover the richness of the parents' stories especially since naturalistic inquiry was being used and this meant new research opportunities would emerge during fieldwork. Kincheloe (2004) says that bricolage "is typically understood to involve the process of employing these methodological strategies as they are needed in the unfolding context of the research situation" (p. 1). Semi-structured interviews with organisers, focus groups with parents and observations of the programmes in action were undertaken.

The criteria used to select the subject programmes were that they:

1. used group parenting education sessions as a delivery method. A group parenting education programme was defined as one that is delivered to groups of parents, usually with a group leader such as a facilitator. This compares with parenting education delivered one-to-one, usually between, for example, a health professional (such as a Plunket Nurse) and a parent.
2. had a variety of structures compared with each other and were preferably being delivered (or could be delivered) in high deprivation areas as measured on the current deprivation index used by the Ministry of Health in New Zealand.

The Deprivation Index is used by the Ministry of Health and other health and social organisations in New Zealand. It measures at a particular point in time and relative to the whole of New Zealand, the average level of deprivation people living in a particular area (White, Gunston, Salmond, Atkinson and Crampton, 2008). Deprivation refers to areas (based on census mesh blocks from Statistics New Zealand) rather than individuals. Nine indicators - including income, home ownership, family support, employment, qualifications, living space, communication and transport - are combined to reflect aspects of material and social deprivation. Deprivation 1 areas are least deprived and deprivation 10 areas the most deprived scores (White et al).

Given time constraints, resources available and because the parenting education programmes were located around the countryside, it was felt no more than three programmes could be examined in depth. Five programmes were approached initially after recommendations from Ministry of Social Development people who had a national knowledge of which parenting programmes were regarded as successful. Two were unable to take part because of other research commitments, leaving the following three participating programmes (all of which agreed in writing to be named in this study).

### **Supporting Parents Alongside (Their) Children's Education (SPACE)**

A national programme with its national office based in the Hutt Valley. This programme provides a 30 week programme for groups of mothers and babies within an early childhood education context. Generally SPACE is not accessed by many 'hard-to-reach' parents but its unique model of delivery whereby parents and babies learn together offered the opportunity to explore whether this model could have wider appeal to more diverse families.

## **Nurturing the Future**

A programme on the West Coast of New Zealand which delivers a group parenting education programme interwoven with awahi (to embrace or to cherish) community support. Nurturing the Future generously allowed the researcher to ‘walk alongside’ its facilitators over a 12 month period. Since much of this programme’s work was in high deprivation areas among families with violence and drug and alcohol issues, this offer was accepted and consequently it was examined in much more depth than the other two programmes. Findings from this single programme make up two-thirds of the results.

## **Te Aroha Noa Parent-Education Model**

Based in the high deprivation Highbury suburb of Palmerston North, this model is one part of a community development and counselling organisation. The outcome for some of those parents taking part in this programme was that they became parent-educators in Te Aroha Noa’s Early Childhood Centre, working as equals alongside teachers with early childhood diplomas.

## **VII. Limitations**

1. The participation by parents in this study was made possible with the cooperation of the organisers of each programme in either providing parents’ contact details to arrange focus groups or facilitate the researcher attending group meetings to ask the research questions. Sometimes organisers were present when those questions were asked – but not always. This may have affected some answers by parents.
2. Parents were invited to attend focus group discussions to give their opinions and stories. Since parents knew in advance they would be presenting their views openly in groups, it is unknown whether those with more critical viewpoints attended or not.
3. Some of the parents interviewed from the Te Aroha Noa parenting programme had (as an outcome of their participation in the programme) become part-time employees in the Te Aroha Noa’s early childhood centre.

4. Adopting a bricolage approach meant that when the opportunity arose to study Nurturing the Future programme over an extended period of time (beyond that originally planned) this was taken. Consequently data from this programme were more extensive and deeper than from the other two programmes. There was concern that presenting an imbalance of findings between programmes might privilege one programme over the others. However, the data revealed useful lessons from all three and it was felt this outweighed this concern and that all the findings should be presented.

## VIII. Structure of the thesis

*Chapter two: Lessons from history* summarises the history of Western parenting education generally and New Zealand parenting education in particular. It describes the various formats of parenting education in the 2000s and attempts to clarify the differences between the terms 'parenting education', 'parenting training' and 'parenting support'. It finishes with a short discussion about what the implications are for parenting education to meet the needs of modern parents.

*Chapter Three: What works in parenting education?* Begins by looking at whether parenting education *does* actually work – are there short and long-term benefits? It then focuses on what the literature says about the most problematic areas of parenting education. These are recruitment and retention of parents (particularly among 'hard-to-reach' families) and what structures, delivery methods and content lead to learning and positive change for parents.

*Chapter Four: The Research process – a voyage of discovery* outlines the transformative learning theoretical framework of this study and the research processes used. It provides background on what the objectives were and offers the theoretical rationale for the approach taken. There is a brief discussion of ethical considerations. It describes the study design, including how participants were selected and explains how data were collected and analysed.

*Chapter Five: Findings – stories of lost potential and hope regained* reports the results of this study. Descriptive data from each programme, drawn from documents, semi-structured interviews with organisers and observations by the researcher, is given. Retention and attrition data from the programmes is presented. Findings from the focus group questions are detailed and complimented

with narratives from parents. These are also analysed through a transformative learning lens with a neurobiological perspective. The chapter concludes with a summary of findings.

*Chapter Six: Discussion and conclusion* argues that universal parenting education programmes developed outside and without consultation of the communities they are intended for and which do not include multiple and ongoing means of support will not improve New Zealand's overall standards of parenting and therefore outcomes for children. It discusses the five common themes found among all three programmes, summarises the findings from a transformative learning perspective and makes recommendations for further study. The conclusion describes the 10 elements that should be present for a group parenting education programme to effect transformative change in parenting behaviour.

## Chapter Two:

# Lessons from history

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*“Parenting, as a process, is as old as humanity. While parenting is not rocket science, it is probably the most overwhelming and important endeavour many of us undertake in our lifetime. It would be reasonable to expect that so primordial an activity would have accumulated implicit knowledge and explicit practice as to become bullet-proof by the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has not” (Hoghugi, 2004, p. ix).*

### I. History of parenting education

Parents have been ‘educated’ in one way or another from the beginning of civilization to accept prevailing principles of childrearing. Every historical age had its beliefs about children and how they should be trained, disciplined and prepared for good citizenship in the society in which they live (Heath, 2004). The history of parenting education reflects the political, social and economic state of the times, promoting the prevailing ideas on women, children and the family (Weissbourd, 1994).

The history of modern parenting education really began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when in 1815 groups of mothers in New England in America formed “maternal associations” (Snow et al., 2002). These provided a place for mothers to talk and share problems and strategies about parenting. By the mid-1800s, church and state were collaborating to “ensure that children were raised according to standards that would enhance the community at large” (Duncan and Goddard, 2005, p. 3).

According to Auerbach (cited in Campbell and Palm, 2004, p. 14) the Child Study Association began in America where small groups of mothers “came together to get the best information they could find to help them understand and deal with their children” (p. 14). At this time, the fields of academic psychology, child development and psychoanalysis were beginning to develop a knowledge base that was shared with parents to improve their understanding of child development and to suggest effective parenting techniques.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the new science of child development emerged and was increasingly seen as a tool to parent successful children (Schlossman, 1983). Parenting education



“shifted to a middle-class, individualistic movement, committed to transmitting empirically based child development knowledge,” (Doherty et al., 2009, p. 303).

The study of small group behaviour in the 1940s and 1950s influenced approaches to group parenting education and promoted a more active role for parents when discussing parenting issues (Auerbach, as cited in Campbell and Palm, 2004, p. 15).

From the late 1960s governments became increasingly involved in family support initiatives and directed parenting education at targeted populations of parents, who ‘needed’ parenting education. Bavelok and Bavelok state that at this time parenting education began to be used as a primary prevention strategy to combat child abuse and neglect (cited in Campbell and Palm, 2004, p. 16).

More recently the emergence of universal-access parenting education and support programmes led to it becoming more prevention-oriented and increasingly regarded as a more normal thing for parents to do (Campbell and Palm, 2004).

## **II. History of parenting education in New Zealand**

The history of parenting education in New Zealand is tied closely with three unique grassroots organisations – Plunket, Playcentre and Parents Centre.

In New Zealand there is little mention of any formal parenting education until well into the twentieth century aside from acknowledgement that “women’s” organizations such as the Country Women’s Institute and the Women’s Division of Federated Farmers offered ‘classes’ on home science topics such as baking, flower arranging and millinery (Thompson, 1945).

### **Plunket**

Plunket and Karitane nurses of the Royal NZ Plunket Society were the main source of parenting education for many new mothers. Plunket had been founded by Sir Frederick Truby King in 1907 primarily in response to the high infant mortality rate due, he felt, to children not being breastfed and the standard of artificial feeding being so poor that many babies failed to survive the first year of life (Parry, 1982).

Effectively he began a social movement with one of its core goals being to educate parents on children's health. This was similar to what was occurring in other parts of the world at the time – especially with the emergence of paediatric specialty in medicine (Bryder, 2003). By 1945, Thompson was to describe Plunket as “one of the most important agencies for infant and parenting education” (p. 132).

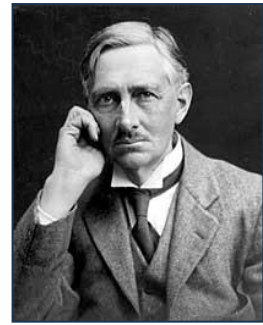


Figure 1: Truby King

However, although in terms of baby care, Plunket was the undisputed authority by the late 1940's, its nurses were mostly unmarried and older women who promoted strict feeding, sleeping and toilet training routines for babies. Bell (2006) reports that although “many mothers appreciated the support they received from Plunket, they found it difficult to measure up to the strict Plunket nurse's instructions and expectations of how their baby should develop and behave” (Bell 2006, p. 13).

One of the major benefits of Plunket to parents was that throughout its history branch committees of women worked together to organise and fundraise to establish Plunket clinics and support the nurses. An obvious benefit of these committees was that their members provided social networks and support for each other.

In the late 1970s local Plunket committees recognised the value that support groups of mothers could bring one another and began to form groups for cohorts of mothers who had given birth to new babies and who lived near one another enabling them to meet regularly with others from their communities (Bryder, 2003). During the 1980s this became a nationwide initiative and Plunket in Neighbourhoods (PIN) groups were established (Sullivan 2007). These provided (and continue to provide) a rich forum to share parenting information informally.

Early parenting education in Plunket centred on Truby King's highly popular parent craft book *The Expectant Mother and Baby's First Month* together with the advice given by Plunket Nurses. Later mothercraft talks were given at Plunket Mother Clubs and followed by, in more modern times, talks by Plunket Nurses and Karitane health workers usually in Family Centres on topics such as ‘dealing with crying and sleep’ and ‘switching to solids’.

In the early 2000s, Plunket developed a national parenting education programme with around 15,000 parents attending each year – mostly first-time parents. Through its Education in Schools programme it also delivers parenting courses to around 6,000 students in colleges annually.

Additionally it runs support groups (300) and play groups (120) for parents. It has one of the largest and longest running Parents as First Teacher contracts in New Zealand with over 50 PAFT educators delivering to over 2,000 families through home visits and parent groups. It has a network over 170 facilitators, educators and community karitane and kaiawhina delivering its portfolio of group parenting education programmes throughout the country.

## Playcentre

In the 1940s a number of events, attitudes and changes occurring in society resulted in the formation of Playcentre which was to become a major provider of adult and parenting education in New Zealand for the ensuing 60 years (Stover 2003).

In 1938 Doreen Dolton was brought out from the UK in 1938 on a Carnegie grant as an adult education tutor in child development. She established nursery schools which allowed high school students to observe and develop understanding of child development and ‘mothercraft’. Her method combined parenting education, support for mothers and progressive education practices (May, 2001).

That same year Gwen Somerset, along with her husband Crawford Somerset, established the Feilding Community Centre. The Somerset’s were stalwarts of the New Zealand Workers Education



Association and the centre became celebrated for its progressive community and adult education (Williams 1978). Somerset established a children’s nursery which mothers not only helped run but also participated in discussions (Stover 2003).

**Figure 2: Gwen Somerset**

In 1937 members of the New Education Fellowship (NEF) visited New Zealand. This was a British-based international organization founded in 1915 to improve ways in which children were educated (Densem 1980). NEF exponents believed in social reform and education which “must release the creative powers of individuals and awaken their social conscience” (May, 2001).

When the international delegation of NEF came to New Zealand, one of the speakers was Susan Isaacs who was a major innovator in working with young children and their families. In her speeches “she drew on her study of Freud and her encounters with Piaget plus her experiences with organizing young children in institutional learning” (Stover, 2003, p. 19). She repeatedly expounded

the value of educating parents in child development. Although her beliefs were to shape practice in New Zealand kindergartens and infant classes in schools, they also established the major themes for shaping Playcentre pedagogy and practice (May, 2001).

In 1941, three women in Karori, Wellington joined forces to form the first nursery centre to support women during the war to give mothers a break from “the tedious and demanding tasks of parenting, often done without support, as the usual systems had fallen apart with mobilization for the war” (Stover 2003, p. 47).

In 1944 the link between the Nursery Schools as espoused by Somerset, Dolton and Playcentres was made when one of the three founders of the Karori centre, Beatrice Beeby, observed Somerset’s nursery school in action in Feilding.

Stover (2003) says it was the necessity of rosters to support teachers at Playcentre sessions that first stimulated parenting education. Playcentre also found kindergarten teachers were unavailable to continue running Playcentre sessions (as they had been at the beginning of the movement). The decision was made to offer training, both to train supervisors and to ensure that the parents rostered on to help understood how Playcentre worked.

Rather than access kindergarten training, it was decided to work in conjunction with existing adult education organizations and develop their own training systems. The groundwork for Playcentre’s adult education had already been done by the Worker’s Education Association’s network of community-based adult education (Somerset’s influence). What the adults would be ‘taught’ initially came from Isaac’s work and child development would become the main focus of Playcentre parenting education. Interwoven with this would be learning associated with running centre and group dynamics (working with parents) (Stover, 2003).

Training initially resembled WEA courses – Beatrice Beeby’s first course was a classic WEA mixture of lecturing and discussion. But these formal methods soon relaxed and Playcentre was one of the first organizations to adopt workshops, discussion groups, audio-visual aids and other continuing education methods. Alongside this, parents were learning informally as they worked alongside their own and other people’s children on Playcentre sessions (Stover, 2003).

Playcentre's equal emphasis on adult and child was described by Gwen Somerset as being "like the two wings of a butterfly" (cited in Stover 2003, p. 30). There are no other known organizations in the world which train parents to become educators of their children, while at the same time expecting them to take responsibility collectively for the education of young children, plus administering and managing centres and running sessions (Stover).

## Parent's Centre

Commonly in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the majority of New Zealand mothers (around two-thirds) gave birth either in their own homes or in small, unlicensed birthing homes with midwives or maternity nurses in attendance. Doctors were only called if there were difficulties (Bell, 2006).

By the beginning of the Second World War however Bell reports (2006) a rapid change with over three-quarter of births occurring in maternity hospitals with doctors present. This huge change was driven by a desire to reduce the child maternal and infant mortality rate.

*"Care was impersonal and hospitals were run on rigid, authoritarian lines. Birth was a nightmare for many women and their time in hospital following the birth was disastrous in terms of either establishing breastfeeding or nurturing any bonds between mother and baby," Parents' Centre New Zealand (History, Parents Centre's Origins, 2009) .*

In the 1950s Dr Maurice Bevan-Brown, a New Zealand-born psychiatrist, and Dr Enid Cook, began a movement promoting a more relaxed approach to birth (and ultimately to parenting) and educated expectant parents about natural birth Parents' Centre New Zealand (History, Parents Centre's Origins, 2009). Their ideas, although not welcomed by the medical profession (Bell, 2006), were taken up by the founders of the Parents Centre movement.

Many people involved in Playcentre were also involved in establishing Parents Centre New Zealand. These people commonly believed that the new progressive ideas of the time about education should also be applied to educating people about childbirth and the care of children – a philosophy shared by both organisations.

Beginning with meetings of the Natural Childbirth Group, Parents Centre emerged in 1952 due to this demand for improved birthing practices for women and ante-natal and post natal care for parents (Bell, 2006). Since then it has gone on to become New Zealand's biggest provider of antenatal and childbirth education. It also provides more general parenting education.

From the 1940s and 1950s, the Playcentre and Parent Centre movements provided parenting education for hundreds of thousands of New Zealand parents. An interesting comment on New Zealand society's view of parenting could be deduced from the fact that neither organisation barely rate a mention in many of the texts written about New Zealand adult education (texts consulted: Boshier 1979 and 1980; Williams 1978; Hall, 1970; Benseman, Findsen and Scott (eds.) 1996).

## **Shared themes**

All three organisations were 'products of their times' and grew in response to the rapid rise in knowledge of science, child development and education in the first half of the twentieth century. Plunket grew from concerns about child mortality and the new science of paediatrics. Playcentre (1940s) and Parents' Centre were born from the time following the second world war of "high energy and high ideals" (Stover, 2003, p. 5) which included the new knowledge about child development and the idea that parents could be educated about this knowledge.

Considered innovative when it first began in 1903, Plunket was a well established institution by the time Playcentre and Parents Centre were founded – partly as an antidote to what was seen as the strict, authoritative methods and routines promoted by Plunket Nurses (Bell, 2006). Over the past 50 to 60 years, Playcentre and Parents Centre – once considered revolutionary and anti-establishment (Bell, 2006; Stover, 2003) – have themselves become part of everyday society.

However, the three have survived because initially they were built by parents who actually used their services in the communities in which they operated. Because all three are 'community owned and driven' and decisions are made by committees of 'user parents', they have been able to adapt to changing needs of society and parents. Yesterday's parent committees provided services in a way that supported yesterday's parents. Today's committee of parents provide them in a way desired by today's parents.

Parenting education is and has always been a common activity of all three organisations and all three provide this in strong social settings (Bell, 2006; Stover, 2003; Bryder, 2003). Importantly the survival of all three organisations hinges on the active contribution of volunteer parent learners who can grow within supportive environments alongside their peers and are empowered to take on organisational and decision-making roles within the organisations.

Stover (2003, p. 7) could well be speaking of all three organisations when she describes the effect of this community ownership thus: “Playcentres have taken on the flavours of their communities and the experiences of Playcentre over the past 50 years reflect the concerns and interests of their time.”

## **Modern era**

In the modern era of parenting education, New Zealand has followed the same course as other western countries as governments began to intervene more in an attempt to improve outcomes for families and children by introducing direct intervention with families – parenting education being one type of initiative used to achieve these outcomes (Statham 2000). A stock-take in 1996 by the Government identified 140 existing family support programmes costing approximately \$300 million (Evaluation Management Group (MSD), 2003).

However, unlike Playcentre, Parent Centre and Plunket – which can be described as community-generated social movements – many of these are parenting education programmes have been devised and imported from overseas. The first of these was Parents As First Teachers (PAFT), introduced by the Ministry of Education in 1993 (but now administered by the Ministry of Social Development).

It was modelled on the American programme Parents as Teachers (PAT) which had been originally developed by Mildred Winter and colleagues at the University of Missouri, USA, and known as the Parents as Teachers programme. It was a home-visitor programme designed as a remedial intervention to reduce deficits in language, behaviour, and other areas of development (Livingstone, 1998; May, 2001). The programme was introduced to New Zealand by the National Government in 1992. It was targeted for families with children aged under 3 years of age who were identified as at-risk for health and language outcomes, and the programme was piloted in four regions of New Zealand. Initially it was implemented amidst considerable controversy, partly because it was an

imported programme that diverted funding from 12 existing early childhood services, and partly because it appeared to be a deficit and targeted model (May, 2001).

Examples of other imported programmes include:

- Home Interaction Programme for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) (from America)
- Roots of Empathy (from Canada)
- Toddlers Without Tears (from Australia)
- Earlybird for families with autistic children (from the United Kingdom)
- Incredible Years (Webster Stratton's programme from America)
- Family ROI (from America)
- Triple P (from Australia)

### **Parenting Education and Māori**

The white, middle-class model of parenting education does not necessarily sit comfortably with Māori who generally prefer a whole whānau approach and have developed programmes of their own. The Kohanga Reo movement has provided support and information for Māori whānau about their children since its rise in the 1980s. Whānau Toko I Te Ora has been delivered by Te Ropu Wahine Māori Toko I Te Ora (the Māori Women's Welfare League) since 1999. It is now offered in six regions throughout New Zealand (Livingstone, 2002). Other programmes are offered by local iwi providers and organisations such as Tairāwhiti REAP. Māori programmes tend to integrate Māori tikanga with a holistic and whānau-focused approach to parenting.

In a review of New Zealand parenting programmes in 2005, Hendricks and Balakrishnan reported a "broad range of support" including "services originating from the commercial or community and voluntary sector" and extending to "universally provided government services aimed at families caring for children and young people."

In 2003/04 the key government-funded programmes covered in Hendricks and Balakrishnan's 2005 review totalled \$30.5 million but they also point out that there is little research on their cost-benefits and uncertainty remains "about the causal links between such interventions and the outcomes for parents and children over time" (Hendricks and Balakrishnan).

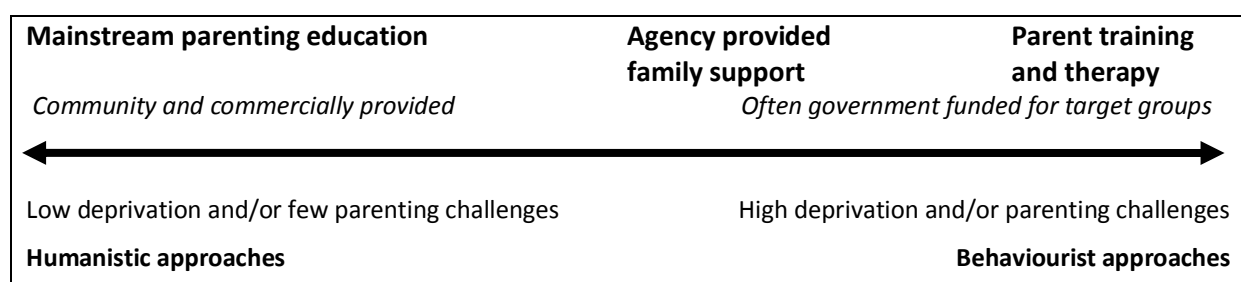


### III. Parenting education in the 2000s

From their beginnings, group parenting education programmes have grown greatly both in quantity and variety to reflect a vast array of formats, philosophies and diversity of parents. Modern parenting education is an umbrella term where people use the terms ‘parent training’, ‘parenting programmes’, ‘parenting education’ and ‘parent support’ interchangeably (Cheng Gorman and Balter, 1997).

#### Group parenting education programmes

Figure 3: Parenting education, support and training programmes - theoretical approaches



#### Mainstream parenting education

Figure 3: Parenting education, support and training programmes - theoretical approaches presents a model which places parenting education in the 2000s as a mainstream activity usually attended by white, middle-class parents, usually with good standards of education (Johnson et al., 2003). These courses in New Zealand would normally be provided by commercial providers such as Parents Inc and non-governmental organisations such as Parents Centre, Plunket and Barnardos (Hendricks and Balakrishnan, 2005). They are delivered by health workers, educators, facilitators and sometimes volunteers. These types of programmes are universal (not specifically designed for any target group) “that are geared toward generally well functioning parents who desire increased knowledge on how to handle everyday occurrences in rearing normally developing children,” Cheng Gorman and Balter (1997, p. 341).

In modern times there has been a move away from the idea that people need to be ‘taught’ to be better parents (Robson, as cited in Gray, 2001, p. 3) toward a more humanistic approach with facilitated group discussions where participants are supported and encouraged to be active in their own learning. This has shifted thinking away from parenting education as being expert driven to a new perspective of parents as people thinking critically and making decisions about the direction and tone of their interactions with their children (Heath and Palm, 2006). Marienau and Segal (2006)

added to this perspective by describing parents as adult learners, a perspective often neglected in the work of those delivering parenting education.

Parenting education groups are conceived of as a place where there is an exchange of information among groups of parents and where there will be an opportunity for peer group discussion often on participant-initiated topics.

However, there is a great deal of diversity in desired outcomes, styles of delivery and content among different parenting education programmes and some can still be very content focused and didactic while others focus on social support (Underwood, 1998; Wolfe and Haddy, 2001).

Many modern parenting education programmes grew from early childhood education, which in turn sprang from developmental psychology (White, 1981; Smith, 1997; Cannella, 2002). Generally, modern parenting education programmes teach parents child development, communication and relationship skills (which have come from developmental psychology) and strategies to 'manage' children's behaviour together with other practical parenting technique (Tilsen, 2007).

Cannella (2002) has critiqued parenting education as 'lacking cultural context' and this could well contribute to the lack of diversity in those attending. Tilsen (2007) says content usually reflects "European, middle-class ideas of family, discipline, child development and parenting" (p. 72). Tilsen, Smith (1997) and Cannella (2002) state that parenting education can be an attempt at social control in trying to assimilate poorer people and those from other cultures into "middle-class, white notions of family" (Tilsen, p. 73). Studies also indicate that parenting education is typically provided to mothers (Snow et al., 2002).

Mockford and Barlow (2004) found sometimes there are unintended consequences for some women who attend parenting education courses. They found that one parent may change their approach to parenting and this can result in an increased difference in the way the parent who attended the programme parents and the one who did not. This in turn can result in parental conflict.

### **Agency provided family support**

Most studies have found that parents categorized as 'hard-to-reach' will generally not attend mainstream parenting education programmes. If they do participate in formal parenting programmes, it will mostly likely be within targeted programmes which are government funded.

Western governments began a policy in the post-war era of introducing national initiatives targeting families and children. These programmes were strongly influenced by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model which suggests that a child's environment extends well beyond the context of their home. The model is like a set of nested Russian dolls with the child and his or her immediate environment at the centre and the other levels, which also influence the child's well-being, progressing outward – the child's immediate community, informal social networks, the nation's beliefs about children, etc. (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Influenced by this model, there was an acknowledgement that families are complex systems and that each functions as part of a larger community. As a consequence, there was a move away from the policy of separating children from families with welfare issues – particularly in Britain and Australia (Gray, 2001). Instead agencies tried working with the whole family to overcome difficulties.

Family support programmes can target specific groups of parents (such as solo parents or teen parents); be targeted interventions for specific parenting issues (such as alcohol dependency or drug abuse) or be targeted programmes for children with special needs or problems such as low literacy or learning disabilities (Colosi and Duniform, 2003). Parenting education can be a component within family support programmes – along with health care services and job skills training (Gray, 2001).

Family support and intervention programmes do not operate in a vacuum. Some see them as a bandaid applied to families who are living in societies where there are inadequate (and an inequitable spread of) income, jobs, services and health, education, welfare, employment, housing and transport infrastructures (Munford and Sanders, 1999; St John and Wynd, 2008).

### **Parent Training and Therapy**

Parent training is more intense than group parenting education. It recognises that although some parents need minimal help, others require more intensive interventions (Sanders and Ralph, 2004). Parent training represents a therapeutic approach which focuses on teaching parents how to increase 'desirable' behaviour and decrease 'misbehaviour' in their children while at the same time improving the quality of interactions between parents and children all of which is aimed at producing a happier and more positive family environment (Sanders and Ralph). Parent training is often based on cognitive or behavioural theories and usually involves behavioural models.

Therapists and clinicians working in this area focus on conduct disorder in children and on changing parent behaviour – teaching parents specific 'child management' skills to 'rectify' children's

antisocial behaviour (Kotchick, Shaffer, Dorsey and Forehand, 2004). “Conduct disorders are characterised by a repetitive and persistent pattern of antisocial, aggressive or defiant conduct. Such behaviour is more severe than ordinary childish mischief or adolescent rebelliousness, and it goes beyond isolated antisocial acts” (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2006).

Although studies have shown cognitive and behavioural therapies are effective in reducing behaviour problems (Briesmeister and Schaefer, 2007), other psychotherapy approaches (including person-centred approaches such as those promoted by Carl Rogers) have been shown to be equally effective (Shechtman and Pastor, 2005).

There are a number of critiques of the behaviour and cognitive therapy approach to parenting training:

- It positions the therapist as the expert (Tilsen, 2007).
- It is too Eurocentric and presents norms of child development where children should all develop the same way at the same pace regardless of contexts such as gender, culture, social location, family structure and temperament (Tilsen, 2007; Gielen and Roopnarine, 2004). As such, there is a danger that children and their behaviour are viewed from the perspective of what adults find inappropriate but which may only be temporary behaviour, or be part of a child’s normal growing up and which may disappear over time.
- Behavioural models leave little room to understand a child’s impact on their own development or on parents’ thinking and experience.

## **IV. Implications**

Since the 1960s, with governments increasingly using parenting programmes to support ‘harder-to-reach’ families, the pressure has increased on parenting education – “a field with white, middle-class roots” (Powell, 1993, p. 2) – to be relevant to more diverse families. It still needs to adjust to the increasingly diverse and complex face of parenting in the modern age and address the fundamental question of whose needs are being served when programmes are offered.

Providing the resources required to operate the increasing number of programmes becomes a challenge in itself (Layzer, Goodson, Bernstein and Price, 2001). The surge in numbers attending has also resulted in the professionalisation of parenting education (Heath and Palm, 2006) and this presents resource and quality issues around training educators and facilitators – including agreement on a consistent set of standards based on sound theories of parenting and adult learning. Whether parenting education should even be professionalised is another question. Professionalisation often brings with it certification. Where would this leave the "parent mentor" or volunteer who delivers parent-led support groups?

Advances in technology mean there is a massive amount of information available through technology and the mass media. How parents and facilitators might be helped to identify which information and advice might actually be harmful? What about the diverse and contradictory advice given to parents that is based on different interpretations and different methods of research? As Connell-Carrick (2006) points out, there are different views about topics like infant sleeping, and research is used to bolster all these different and sometimes opposite, views.

## **V. Summary**

Historically, the content and delivery of parenting education reflects society's prevailing beliefs about children and how they should be raised (usually from a white and middle-class perspective). Until the 1960s, parenting education was a middle-class activity, often provided by parent mentors themselves and operating outside government purview and its content and methods of delivery reflected this (Powell, 1993).

In New Zealand the most influential parenting support and education movements – Plunket, Playcentre and Parents' Centre – were grown and developed from grassroots communities in response to local needs. Because they are 'community owned and driven' and decisions made by the parents who use them, they have changed to reflect the needs of each successive generation of parents, even as they lost their innovative edge and became accepted institutions. Parenting education is offered within a framework of support from peers and learning is provided in social settings. Parents are often given room to grow within these three organizations and take on decision-making and organizational roles.

Since the war Governments have become more involved in parenting issues and the care of children. As a result universal programmes, some of which were developed overseas (such as Triple P and The Incredible Years), have increasingly been used in parenting education with behavioural models used for families with more complex problems. Both these forms of parenting education are sometimes embedded in family support services.

Following the rapid demographic and social changes, which greatly affected both the structure of the family and how its members interact, the level of public interest in parenting issues caused an upsurge in all forms of parenting education (Utting and Pugh, 2004). This has created pressure for parenting education to adapt and become relevant to today's diverse population of parents and raised implications around professionalisation, resourcing and content.

## Chapter Three:

# What works in parenting education?

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*“While parenting education is widely acknowledged as potentially useful, it has proved very difficult to pinpoint the elements necessary for its success” (Wolfe and Haddy, 2001).*

### I. Introduction

Virtually all research on parenting education has been conducted within the context of modern Western culture (Bennett and Grimley, 2001). Researching parenting education is difficult since researchers “tend to measure what is easily measurable rather than what we really need to know,” Moran and Ghatte (2005, p. 331). They go on to say of researchers of parenting education:

*“They choose qualitative methods because these are generally less challenging to implement than rigorous quantitative designs, rather than because the issues lend themselves best to qualitative methods. They sample parents, rather than children, because children are harder to reach. They sample mothers because fathers are harder to reach, and they use either pre-existing tools that may not always fit the purposes fully, or untested new instruments rather than invest time and money in developing reliable and valid tools” (Moran and Ghatte, 2005, p. 331).*

Evaluation is also made difficult because programmes vary greatly in terms of their focus, delivery methods, content and intensity (Zepeda, Varela and Morales, 2004). There is wide variation within individual programmes themselves because of differences in facilitator expertise, “program intensity and duration and the participants’ predisposition to change” (Dembo, Sweitzer and Lauritzen, cited in Zepeda and Morales, 2001, p. 6).

The situation is further compounded by the bias against publishing results that are negative or inconclusive (Stoiber and Kratochwil cited in Moran and Ghatte, 2005, p. 331) although much of value could be learned from failures.

All these complications make evaluating and interpreting outcomes from parenting education programmes in a systematic way very difficult.

## II. Is parenting education effective?

Most research examples of effective programmes focus on short-term outcomes for specific programmes usually in the American context (Fowler, 2002; Moran and Gbate, 2005). Formal programmes are evaluated often by examining changes in parents' and children's observable behaviour.

The programmes being evaluated might be universal and international while others might have been designed as a one-off to test a research hypothesis, perhaps with a specific target group. (See for example Huebner, 2002; Gibbs et al., 2003; Sanders and Ralph, 2004; Bateson, Delaney and Pybus, 2008; Stewart-Brown, 2008; and Fergusson, Stanley and Horwood 2009.) It is not uncommon for there to be an association between the researcher undertaking the evaluation and the programme being evaluated (see for example Bateson et al., 2008; Olchowski, Foster and Webster-Stratton, 2007; Sanders, Markie-Dadds and Turner, 2003).

Despite the wide variation between programmes (Barlow and Stewart-Brown, 2000), there is not enough evidence to show that one approach is superior to another (Dretzke, Davenport, Frew, Barlow, Stewart-Brown, Bayliss and Taylor, 2009). However, according to Linke (2004) and Clayton (2007) research has been consistent in showing that parents who take part in *any* type of parenting educational programme will demonstrate improved parenting behaviours compared with those who have not participated in any at all. However:

*It is probably fair to say that whilst we now have a reasonable idea of some of the approaches that 'work' or at least look 'promising', we do not always know exactly why they work, or why some services work for some parents but not others, or how long-lasting the effects are" (Moran and Gbate , 2005, p. 335).*

Zepeda et al. (2004) point out that one reason parenting education programmes might result in benefits for people is that a 'selection bias' is at work. That is, programmes tend to attract parents predisposed to change. Parents who are not are more likely not to complete or attend few sessions. Thus, selection bias results in more positive attitudinal or behavioural change. It may simply be that sitting in a parenting group presents parents with the opportunity to take time to focus and reflect on their parenting.



The issue of what parenting education induces change long-term has not been clearly answered by research. There are some studies which do suggest long-term change can be gained from parenting education (Barlow and Stewart-Brown, 2001; Zeedyk et al., 2008) but Zepeda et al. (2004) state that few studies have demonstrated “sustained positive results” but this is because the majority have not measured results over time.

Complicating the measurement of sustained change is the acknowledgement that long-term changes in the way people parent will be occurring anyway since parenting is part of the "curriculum of modern life" (Kegan, 1994, p. 5). Brooks (2006, p. 53) cites Galinsky as describing the experience of taking care of a “small, dependent, growing person” through to teenage-hood is a transforming process in itself. Miller and Sambell (2003) note while raising children to teenage-hood, parents became more self-reflective about their own behaviour. Also, parents (particularly from the ‘hard-to-reach’) may be involved in other types of family support interventions.

### **III. Recruitment and retention of parents**

A common theme in all parenting education literature is that not only is it difficult to recruit participants but once enrolled, people often attend inconsistently or indeed ‘drop out’ entirely. Berlin, O’Neal and Brooks-Gunn (1998) stress the importance of engaging participants over a long enough time to ensure there are positive outcomes. Also, often it is those parents from low socio economic groups and with children with more complex problems who are least likely to enrol in parenting programmes (Brown, 2000; Snow et al., 2002; Sanders and Ralph, 2004; Barlow, Parsons and Stewart-Brown, 2005; Moran and Gbate, 2005). It is also very difficult to attract fathers to participate in parenting education programmes with most attended by mothers (Philliber, Brooks, Lehrer, Oakley and Waggoner, 2003).

#### **Methods of recruitment**

Parents are usually recruited into parenting education by one of the following methods:

- Publicity and marketing including the use of leaflets, preview sessions, advertisements in newspapers and through posters on community notice-boards (Bateson et al., 2008).
- Referrals from a range of voluntary, community and government agencies – these referrals may be compelled (mandated) or come as a recommendation from professionals such as doctors, social workers and health workers.

- Recommendations from friends and relatives (some of whom may have previously participated in the programmes themselves) – in other words ‘a trusted other’. One study (McGrath, 2007) describes this process as one where parents have already classified themselves as needing some support but require the personal input of at least one other person to encourage them to join. They join because they heard about the programme by word-of-mouth from friends, other parents or a professional they trust. Conversely, discouragement from family or friends can prevent them from enrolling.

## **Motivation to participate**

Rather than focus on barriers, Wellington et al. (2006) looked at parents’ motivation to participate. Using Ajzen and Maden’s (cited in Wellington et al., p. 1) theory of planned behaviour (which is a framework which states that “what a person plans or intends to do is the most immediate determinant of their behaviour” (White and Wellington, 2009, p. 173)), their research examined parents underlying beliefs related to their intention to participate in a parenting programme.

They examined the behavioural beliefs of two groups of parents responding to their survey – those who intended to participate (intenders) in a parenting education programme and those who did not (non-intenders). They discovered that the two groups’ behavioural beliefs differed significantly regarding the benefits and costs of participating in the programme.

The intenders were more likely to focus on the benefits – reporting that they believed that attending would improve their relationships with their children and they would experience a supportive environment at the group. They were also more likely to report that friends and relatives thought they should participate. However, non-intenders were more likely to focus on the perceived costs of participation, for example ‘feeling embarrassed’.

The suggestion is made that promotion of parenting programmes should therefore emphasise the likely benefits and address the perceived costs (Wellington et al., 2006).

## **Barriers to participation**

Many reasons have been offered for the difficulty of recruiting and retaining parents to parenting education. Barlow et al. (2005) suggest that for some there may be a stigma attached which deters participation. Zepeda et al. (2004) say because often programmes in the past were focused on

improving the parenting of 'hard-to reach' families, there was sometimes a stigma attached to participating in the minds of some parents from that group. "Given that a vast majority of parents express a need for information about parenting, parenting education programmes need to take a comprehensive approach that avoids a social stigma" (p. 14).

Brown (2000) believes parenting education is of no use to those families who are struggling to provide for the basic needs of their children because of relative poverty. Parents who are continually worried about providing for their children's basic needs – food, clothing and shelter – do not make good candidates for parenting education (Brown, 2000; Drummond, Letourneau, Neufeld, Steward and Weirs, 2008). Hence low participation rates from 'hard-to-reach' families.

An additional barrier alluded to by Tilsen (2007) is related to power. Sometimes the agencies offering parenting education programmes or demanding that parents attend them are seen by the target parents in a negative light because the agency has a power relationship over them. An example of this in New Zealand might be WINZ which controls access to the payment of benefits.

A number of studies identified the most common barriers which appear to deter participation (Wood and Baker, 1999; Brown, 2000; Johnson et al., 2003; Clayton, 2007; Drummond et al., 2008). These include:

- Lack of confidence. This includes lack of confidence and learning self-esteem issues; no encouragement from friends or family; low levels of education, income and unemployment were associated with a higher lack of confidence to participate.
- A perception that the course lacks relevance. Ghate and Hazel (2002) discovered that the most frequent reason why parents did not use any parenting service was because they did not see it relevant to their needs. Some groups may not find the content offered as relevant or the way it is delivered acceptable. This may be caused by language issues or differences in child-rearing practices and values.
- Personal issues. These include transportation, child care (and the cost of this), family problems, lack of money for expenses. However, studies show that providing financial incentives do not significantly increase retention rates (Gross, Julion and Fogg, 2001; Snow et al., 2002). One study found that while monetary incentives attract parents' participation initially, but is not enough to prevent parent participation over (Gross et al., 2001).

- Institutional barriers. These include not being able to afford fees, inconvenient location, inconvenient time, and not being aware of the courses.
- Lack of time. The more children in the home (and the younger they are) increases the impact of this barrier. Parents may also have 'competing commitments' (Barlow et al., 2005) that interfere with their being able to attend, such as having to work or attend job interviews.

## **IV. Structure, content and delivery: what is good practice?**

Research shows some benefit for parents no matter the structure or the content of the programmes. It does not seem to matter whether they use didactic teaching methods or whether they are focused on providing social support; whether they are behavioural, cognitive-behavioural, humanistic, client-centred or multi-model programmes (Barlow and Stewart-Brown, 2000).

### **Structure**

Programmes are more likely to be effective if they have a clear purpose and concrete aims (Moran, Gbate and van der Merwe, 2004). These may be built around critical transitions in family life. For some parents transitions are particularly challenging and can be daunting. Examples of transitions can include becoming a first-time parent, the arrival of a sibling, parent returning to paid work or a developmental change (such as emerging autonomy in a young child – sometimes referred to as the 'terrible twos'). It is at these times that parenting education groups may be most beneficial (Bengtson, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson and Klein, 2005). Mockford and Barlow (2004) found that the earlier in parenthood people attend parenting education the better – especially to prevent small problems becoming major difficulties and before adverse parenting practices become habits. Parenting educators anecdotally talk about the most stressful moments for parents with new babies occur around 'sleeping, crying, eating and pooing' and help with coping with these new routines early on can build good parenting practices and ensure good relationship are established.

Most agree that short parenting education programmes benefit parents dealing with mild difficulties. Evidence suggests intervention over a longer period of time demonstrates greater benefits (Zepeda et al., 2004) and is essential for programmes addressing more entrenched problems (Riley and Bogenschneider, 2006).

Programme structures need to be flexible. If parenting is seen as relational, then each parent and child relationship is unique and child rearing strategies can vary from one child (and one time) to another (Riley and Bogenschneider, 2006). This means that programmes should not be rigidly dogmatic but should be able to adapt to these individual differences. They should be strength-based and recognise the parent as the last word in deciding which advice fits best for their child, culture and family values.

## **Delivery**

One thing the professional literature does agree on is that parenting education in *groups* produces the most useful outcomes for parents (Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Barros, Kitson and Midgley, 2007; Zeedyk et al., 2008). Lawes (1992) and Cunningham, Bremner and Boyle (cited in Pomerantz, Hughes and Thompson, 2007, p. 190) found that while individual parenting education is effective (when compared to a control group) no individual parenting education achieved the same change generated by group-based programmes. Wellington et al. (2006) report that studies have shown that group programmes are more successful in the long term in changing parenting behaviour and, as a result the behaviour of their children, compared with one-to-one programmes.

Miller and Sambell (2003) interviewed parents who had experienced different types of support (for example, informal support, expert advice, drop in services, and facilitator-led groups) and found that parents attending a group with a facilitator tended to be the most reflective about their situation.

Parents like learning in groups. Barlow and Stewart-Brown (2001) conclude that support and feedback from other parents is a primary way that parents feel parenting education programmes are helpful. A study by Smith (2000) showed that disadvantaged parents preferred having other adults to talk to over and above the availability of expert advice. Oakley (1993) found groups were valued by parents almost as highly as support they received from their own families.

Parents value having other parents as a resource for problem solving (Miller and Sambell, 2003). Parents-supporting-parents in groups not only strengthen and create social networks, but change the way that parents conceptualise support (Ghate and Hazel, 2002). When parents are in crisis they tend to look to professional sources for support, but once they feel more in charge of their situation, they are able to access informal networks of family and friends (Zeedyk et al., 2008).

Barber (1992) evaluated four different group parenting education programmes. Despite considerable variation in the content of the programmes, all produced comparable outcomes. Barber pondered: “Perhaps it is the (group) process that is important” (p. 36).

An added benefit of parents learning in groups is that this is more cost effective than one-to-one parent training (Wellington et al., 2006). Gill says of group parenting education: “Profound changes can take place in a relatively short period of time and at relatively little expense” (1998, p. 3).

### **Why is learning in groups effective?**

Smith (cited in Richardson and Joughin, 2002, p. 3) suggests group learning works because it:

- “Helps socially isolated families meet others;
- Builds a sense of cohesiveness;
- Provides opportunities to share views and learn from each other;
- Provides appropriate role models;
- Provides support;
- Can be powerful in developing confidence and self-esteem.”

Gill (1998) discovered that in parenting groups the amount of support received from others rises in each session and with this increasing participation and contribution comes increasing parental confidence. He describes this as, in some cases, parents almost taking on the role of therapists for others. This leads to greater confidence and a positive parenting self-image where the parent feels in control rather than out of control and powerless. Furthermore, Reid and Webster-Stratton (2001) found that parents go on supporting each other, long after the group has ended.

Adult education in the modern era has long promoted the principle of peer group discussion of participant-initiated topics. Fellow learners are thought to provide a “powerful stimulus for individual self-scrutiny through group exploration of contrasting perspectives on a topic” (Powell and Eisenstadt, 1988, p. 166). Pugh, De’Ath and Smith agree and say that group discussion is particularly valuable for the opportunity it presents for drawing on the personal experiences of members of the group and using these to relate directly to any educational input (cited in Pomerantz, Hughes, and Thompson, 2007, p. 190). Being able to explore, discuss and reflect on one’s own parenting experiences and compare it with others in the group allows parents to create their own personal

meaning within their own every day, real contexts. The ability to make personal meaning increases learning and retention.

The skills of the facilitator are crucial in ensuring how well group learning processes occur – they play a vital role in ensuring participants feel safe to discuss, tell stories, co-construct learning and share experiences. Hogan (2002) says effective groups should be fewer than 10 people and the optimum size is seven.

Recent neurobiological findings give a new perspective on why learning in groups is effective. Cozolino and Sprockay (2006) describe how the human brain is a “social organ innately designed to learn through shared experiences” (p. 11). Findings suggest that the brain develops best if it is experiencing an environment where other people are showing “interest in us, help us feel safe, and encourage our understanding of the world around us” (p. 11).

However, a group format may not work for everyone – especially for the ‘most crisis-ridden, suspicious families’ (Scott, 2006, p. 485). Others stress that multiple approaches to providing parenting education should be taken to meet everyone’s needs (Mertensmeyer and Fine, 2000).

## **What content matters?**

In 1988 Powell asked the question: Who should make decisions about what parents need; parents as consumers or parent educators as experts? In the 2000s designers of parenting education still grapple with the task of blending parents’ needs and programme’s desired outcomes and whether they are indeed the same thing (Campbell and Palm, 2004).

Seemingly, specific content does not seem to influence how successful programmes will be (Moran et al., 2004). Child development, relationship building, behaviour management, practical advice on health, safety, nutrition and general care, interpersonal communications are all examples of content included in parenting education programmes (Shulruf, 2004; Zepeda et al., 2004).

Reich (2005) reports that both the way mothers choose to parent and the environments they provide are affected if they have an understanding of child development. Where programmes have aimed at increasing parents’ knowledge of child development and linked this knowledge to effective parenting strategies, there were better outcomes for children including less stress for parents and a

reduced incidence of child abuse (Honig and Wittmer, 1991; Culp, Culp, Blankemeyer and Passmark, 1998).

Other programmes train parents “to use specific techniques to control undesirable behaviour in their children” and typically do not have strong philosophical views of parenting to guide their content (Cheng Gorman and Balter, 1997, p. 341). Shulruf (2004) found in a survey of 39 New Zealand programmes that a common focus was helping parents develop better relationships with their children.

Both these approaches have been criticised. Some assert (Thomas cited in Brown, 2000, p. 10) that simply learning facts about children’s development and a collection of parenting strategies does not lead to parents thinking reflectively or deeply about the way they parent. This more superficial approach will only be successful with a narrow range of parents (Thomas).

Given that most parenting education programmes do have benefits – no matter their content – evaluations of individual programmes often conclude that their content is the best for parenting education. Programme manuals may then exhort people to follow these ‘exactly’ without deviation to ensure consistency and benefits (see for example Moran et al., 2004; Bateson, et al., 2008) although other studies have shown parents have an intense dislike for manuals (McGrath, 2007)!

## **Different learning goals**

Parents have different views of what ‘education’ is and enrol in groups with different learning goals and different information needs. Miller and Sambell (2003) found that parents expectations of parenting education fall into one of three models.

1. *The dispensing model:* Children were viewed as a problem and parents were asking “what can I do to change my child?” These parents will expect facts, knowledge and strategies to apply to their child and promote their development. They will come expecting to be told what to do by an ‘expert’.
2. *The relating model:* Parents are eager to explore their feelings about being a parent and how being a parent is affecting them as a person. They will expect a supportive environment where they are listened to and are encouraged to express their feelings, opinions and



anxieties. They will want to hear other parents' stories and experiences and will want to be in an environment where these stories can be told with no judgment.

3. *The reflecting model:* These parents want to explore their relationships with their children – why they are like they are and how they themselves can help them develop. They will want to spend time unpacking their own values, attitudes and behaviour. They see the parent educator as a critical friend who guides them through this process and other parents in the group as helpers in the group process.

Interestingly, Miller and Sambell (2003) discovered that only parents who had teenage children (and therefore had progressed further along the 'parenting process continuum') or who had already attended other parenting education programmes fell into the reflecting model. This model has strong links to Mezirow's (1990) transformative learning processes discussed in Section II in Chapter Four.

### **Different information needs**

Parents' perceived information needs often match the stage of children's development (Jacobson and Engelbrecht, 2000). In most studies discipline and managing children's behaviour, contributing to their self-esteem and social learning is usually on (often at the top of) most parents' lists (see for example DeBord, 1995; Wood and Baker, 1999; Jacobson and Engelbrecht, 2000; Centre for Community Child Health, 2004). Parents' perceived information needs change depending on where parents are "along the long trajectory of parenting" (Marienau and Segal, 2006, p. 768).

### **Reflecting on own childhood as content**

Early work by Garbarino (cited in Brown, 2000, p. 4) showed that "A parent who was not nurtured as a child may not know how to nurture or how to build social support networks which can relieve stress" (Brown, 2000, p. 4).

Yet Siegel and Hartzell (2004) offer the assurance that those who have had a difficult childhood are "not bound to re-create the same negative interactions" with their own children (p. 1). But they stress that research shows that without the opportunity to make sense of these experiences "history will likely repeat itself, as negative patterns of family interactions are passed down through the generations," (Siegel and Harzell, p. 1).

*“By clearing away early tensions and struggles, many of the present difficulties faced in parenting are brought into sharp relief (for example, feelings about play, learning, physical affection, and discipline). It is postulated that as parents work through their own childhood distresses, they can better discriminate between their children's feelings and their own, begin to see their children's lives as unique and distinct from their own, and better adapt their parenting to meet the needs and demands of their particular family situation” (Wolfe and Haddy, 2001, p. 78).*

Recent neurobiological findings show that the human brain *is* capable of adapting and readapting to new experiences (Cozolino and Sprokay, 2006). For parents who have come from traumatic childhood themselves, brain imagining techniques have shown that brain “self-repair” is possible (Ross, 2006). Perry (2006) says although trauma does change the brain and this in turn effects people’s attitude to learning, it is possible for all people to continue to learn throughout the life span if learners are placed in optimal learning environments where they feel safe and where there is an empathetic facilitator who is in tune and paying “sensitive attention to the learner’s state of mind” (Perry, 2006, p. 27).

## **Facilitators**

Having the right people to facilitate the courses is crucial. One study of 48 parenting education programmes found that who led these was more important than the specific programme or curriculum used (Riley and Bogenschneider, 2006).

The degree to which families feel they can ‘trust’ those who are delivering parenting programmes strongly affects parent satisfaction with programmes. If they feel educators empathise with them and are not judging them they are more likely to attend programmes regularly. (Forehand and Kotchik, 2002). Conversely, if facilitators are judged by parents as being judgmental, unsympathetic and having poor relationship skills, they are will stop attending, especially if they are already feeling vulnerable and highly stressed (Moran et al., 2004). Using facilitators drawn from a shared cultural and social experience may help in the recruitment of participants (Brown, 2000).

Some programmes try to match staff characteristics to parent groups (e.g., employ young parents to work with teen parents, fathers to work with fathers or to match facilitators and parents ethnically), but there is no strong evidence that this is effective in recruiting, retaining and engaging parents. Parents’ perception of ‘what makes a good educator’ tends to focus on the facilitators relationship

and communication skills. Moran et al (2004) says studies suggest it is not necessary to match parents and facilitators by age, sex and ethnicity. "Rather, the ability of the individual staff member to form constructive relationships seems to transcend this (Moran et al., 2004, p. 98).

Neuroscience explains why empathetic facilitators and teachers help people to learn better. Cozolino and Sprokay (2006) explain how important it is for people to be able experience an environment which enables "brain-altering learning" (p. 12). They describe the facilitator and teacher role as being one of offering "a safe haven, emotional attunement and a scaffold to support the learning process" (p. 15). They say from a neurobiological standpoint this approach maximises the brain's 'neural plasticity' (the ability of neurons to change their structure) as the brain learns.

## **Consulting parents**

Perhaps the most promising solution lies in consulting parents about what barriers are preventing them from participating (Barlow et al, 2005) and also on the content and method of delivery they would prefer (Webster-Stratton, 1998; Brown, 2000; Zeedyk, Werritty and Riach, 2003). Zeedyk et al. (2008) suggest parents should be involved in every aspect including facilitating the groups.

Lengua, Roosa, Schupa-Neubergk, Michaels, Berg and Weschler (1992) and Dumka, Garza, Roosa and Stoerzinger (1997) carried out projects which began with focus groups of the target population to identify sources of motivation and barriers to participation and what could be done to overcome them. Parents from both these studies suggested that families be contacted and recruited face-to-face. Other suggestions were that children and parents be included together whenever possible, refreshments be provided, community issues be included in the parenting curricula (e.g., drug use, gang involvement), and social support be encouraged among the parents. Parents said meetings should be held close to their homes, should not take place more than once a week and child care should be provided for younger children.

Unlike Lengua et al. 1992, Dumka et al. (1997) actually ran a parenting education programme using the focus group parents' suggestions. They had a 'significantly higher' recruitment and retention rate than that usually reported. Both studies found far less interest in parenting education programmes among fathers than mothers. Dumka et al. suggest there is an 'upper threshold' to recruitment and retention rates. They conclude:

*Prevention programs ... cannot address all parents' particular needs, accommodate all work schedules, change negative life events, prevent sickness, stop moves, keep parents out of jail, alter travel plans, resolve substance abuse or relationship problems, or reorder parents' priorities. Even with huge expenditures of resources, some people are not recruitable"* (Dumka et al).

## **V. Limitations of parenting education**

There is a limit to how much parents' behaviour can be changed through parenting education programmes (Hoff-Ginsberg and Tardif, 1995; Brown, 2000). Often the influences of parents' larger social structure and individual personality are substantial and can prevent a change in parenting.

Thomas (cited in Brown, 2000, p. 10) cautions that it is very difficult for parents to change entrenched behavior, especially when they are under stress, even after they have learned new ways to parent and gained child development knowledge and even if they want to change. "Deeply-placed, frequently unconscious ideas about parenting are derived from beliefs about the world, the self, and others; they are not easily changed" Thomas writes (cited in Brown, 2000, p. 10). Writers such as Cranton (2006) and Mezirow (1991) stress the importance of providing learners with ongoing support if learners are undergoing transformative change and the harder the change, the more support is required.

## **VI. Summary**

Based on what we know works in parenting education, is it possible to develop a universal group parenting education programme that is effective in diverse communities? The answer may lie in universalizing aspects which are known to work (for example, including child development content and delivering programmes in groups). But providers will always need to adapt their programme according to the specific needs of specific communities and even those of individual parents.

Defining the programme's intended participants should be the first step. A programme for parents of teenagers will obviously be very different from one for first-time parents. The parents in the community may wish to deal with a specific issue – such as learning to positively guide their children's behaviour. It may be the programme will be offered to a specific cultural group – for example Pacifica parents, or parents in a specific situation – such as grandparents as parents or step

parents. A one-size-fits-all programme is unlikely to work across the wide diversity of parents. This collaboration also helps ensure the programmes are delivered to meet practical logistical needs – that they are held at the right times and in the right places to reduce barriers to participation. Collaboration will help recruitment, especially if the facilitator is from the community itself.

To engage ‘hard-to-reach’ audiences, parenting education may need to be packaged into shorter sessions and not necessarily require regular attendance at weeks in a row but rather delivered at various intervals. However, this creates a dilemma when considering findings which suggests that those with more issues (or children with more entrenched behavioural problems) need longer programmes.

Programme content should not only provide parents with the information and skills they are seeking but also provide for their social and support needs as well – take cognizance of the ‘social brain’. Participation should be pleasurable and relevant to parents’ lives.

The skills and the attributes of the facilitator are crucial. After all, programme structures and content are of no benefit until they are brought to life by the facilitator and their ability to encourage parents to participate. Facilitators need to master the growing and diverse areas of knowledge around parenting and child development; they need to have good relationship skills and be adept at processes that encourage social learning in groups of parents and which truly strengthen families and, often because of ever-decreasing dollars, they have to produce dramatic results in short periods of time.

It is difficult to find studies which have examined *how* parents learn and benefit from participation in a group parenting education programme. In other words, the product (the individual parenting programmes) is more often evaluated rather than the process which led to the positive change in parenting practice. Illumination into what makes effective parenting education therefore may lie in investigating the transformative learning processes that occur when parents gather in groups to learn about parenting together and then finding ways to maximise this effect.

## Chapter Four:

# The research process – a voyage of discovery

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*“Social process is not captured in hypothetical deductions, co-variances and degrees of freedom. Instead, understanding social process involves getting inside the world of those generating it” (Rosen cited in Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991, p. 14).*

### I. Research objectives

The research question for this study was:

**What elements are present in a selection of group parenting education programmes already operating successfully in New Zealand that have resulted in the attendance, retention and positive learning outcomes for parents and caregivers – particularly those from high deprivation areas?**

Some of the objectives of this study seemed straightforward – that of finding out what practical organisational elements help achieve positive outcomes from parenting programmes. These included discovering if it mattered where they were held and when they were held and also how parents attending found out about them.

Other more complex objectives centred around finding out why parents decided to attend, what kept them there, what did they experience to cause change in their parenting behaviour and how had this affected them and their families. It looked for evidence that transformative learning had occurred in parents who had attended the programmes studied – since this might indicate that both short and long-term benefits had occurred.

### II. Transformative learning theoretical framework

This research was particularly aimed at exploring whether parenting education in general and the parenting programmes studied in this research in particular could help parents transform the way they parent in the long-term to improve the outcomes for their children. Consequently it was

undertaken within a framework of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) using a modern neurobiological perspective of this learning theory (Taylor, 2008).

Developed by Mezirow over 34 years ago transformative learning theory attempts to explain how people make meaning and interpret the world as it changes about them. Rooted in social constructivism, Mezirow built on work by Habermas (cited in Mezirow, 1991, p. 25) and Paulo Freire (described in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970) to portray a theory of adult learning in *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: a Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning* (1990).

The theory describes how people's experiences cause them to form 'habits of mind' made up of "uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values and perspectives" (Cranton, 2006, p. 2). Cranton says that the values, beliefs and assumptions (which determine behaviour) are in great part "uncritically absorbed from family, community, and culture" (p. 19). She describes these frameworks as being based on "formative childhood experiences" which "continue to act as a filter for understanding life" (p. 19). These habits of minds or filtering frameworks are described by Mezirow as 'meaning perspectives'.

Mezirow contended that transformative learning can occur when people begin to critically question their habits of mind, often because new experiences or events in their lives fail to match what they previously held to be true. Cranton (2006, p. 23) says: "If a person responds to an alternative habit of mind by reconsidering and revising prior belief systems, the learning becomes transformative" (p. 24).

Mezirow originally named three types of habits of mind - epistemic (how we learn), sociolinguistic (the way we use language within our social and cultural settings) and psychological (how people see themselves). Cranton (2006) has since described three more - moral/ethical, philosophical and aesthetic.

Transformative learning theory also considers what triggers the desire for change. This could be either a single, sudden dramatic and sometimes traumatic event or "more cumulative, gradual and incremental forms of transformative learning" (Cranton, 2006, p.23). Either might lead a person to question their habits of mind which could then, through a process of self-reflection, lead to transformative learning and change.

Mezirow named three levels of reflective questioning. These are (Cranton, 2006):

- Content reflection – during this process the (possibly new) information, data and facts are examined or the problem described
- Process reflection – whereby ways the problem might be solved is considered
- Premise reflection – during which the issue or problem itself is questioned. Cranton believes that it is premise reflection “that has the potential to lead people to the transformation of a habit of mind” (p. 35).

Mezirow (1990) believes these processes of critical reflection are the means by which people learn technical knowledge (through instrumental learning) and acquire communicative (or practical) knowledge to enable people to live and learn in a social world. Cranton (2006), citing Habermas, describes a third knowledge – emancipatory – when people learn to become “self-determining and self-reflective (p. 13) and which is centred on “self-knowledge, growth, development and freedom” (p.13).

## **Neuroscience and transformative learning**

Taylor (2008) describes Mezirow’s perspective on transformative learning as being the most dominant over the past 35 years. However, over time, new perspectives have emerged particularly in response to new research and criticisms that the original perspective was too individually centred without enough focus on social transformation (Cranton 2006). Taylor (2008) states that a neurobiological perspective of transformative learning theory is one of the most recent to emerge.

A prevailing criticism of transformative learning theory has been that almost all research carried out around it has been qualitative (Taylor cited in Brock, 2010, p. 122). However findings enabled through MRI scanning seem to support that the adult human brain *is* capable of transformative learning and the learning processes occurring in the brain match those described in transformative learning theory.

These new discoveries show the brain has been “shaped by evolution to adapt and readapt to an ever changing world” (Cozolino and Sprockay, 2006). This suggests that people are able to reinterpret their habits of mind in response to new experiences throughout their lifetimes. Taylor says “there is no age of finality for any learning” (2006, p. 7). Neuroscience has shown that learning *is* change



since the brain structure physically changes while people learn (Cozolino and Sprokay, p. 9). In a study whereby adults learned to juggle, MRI scanning showed that “the brain changes physically as we learn” (Zull, 2006, p. 4) and changes again as people forget some of their newfound skills. This very much fits with the view in transformative learning that constant change challenges people to reinterpret their understandings, beliefs and knowledge.

Neuroscience also confirms the transformative learning contention that humans learn best with others – theirs is a ‘social brain’ (Cozolino and Sprokay, 2006). This supports the idea that transformative learning is “grounded in human communication” (Taylor, 2008, p. 5) and that dialogue is central to critical reflection. Cranton (2006) states that transformative learning is helped when it takes place in a “good, warm and helpful group” (2006, p. 179). She explains that having a “connectedness with others, experiencing oneself as part of something larger, contributing one’s voice to a collective endeavour, and recognising that collective awareness and thinking transform the sum of their parts” (p. 179). This is very much in line with neuroscience findings that people learn best when they are able to observe each other and dialogue and reflect together (Cozolino and Sprokay, 2006).

Cranton (2006) also notes the importance of continuing supportive social networks within and outside of groups because the process of transforming ones learning and habits of mind can be difficult and painful so “people may need ongoing support to retain these changes” (p. 179).

MRI scanning has shown where in the brain learning occurs and the brain processes used. From these findings Zull (2006) describes four “fundamental pillars of learning” which correspond to the four neurobiological processes. These are (Zull, 2006):

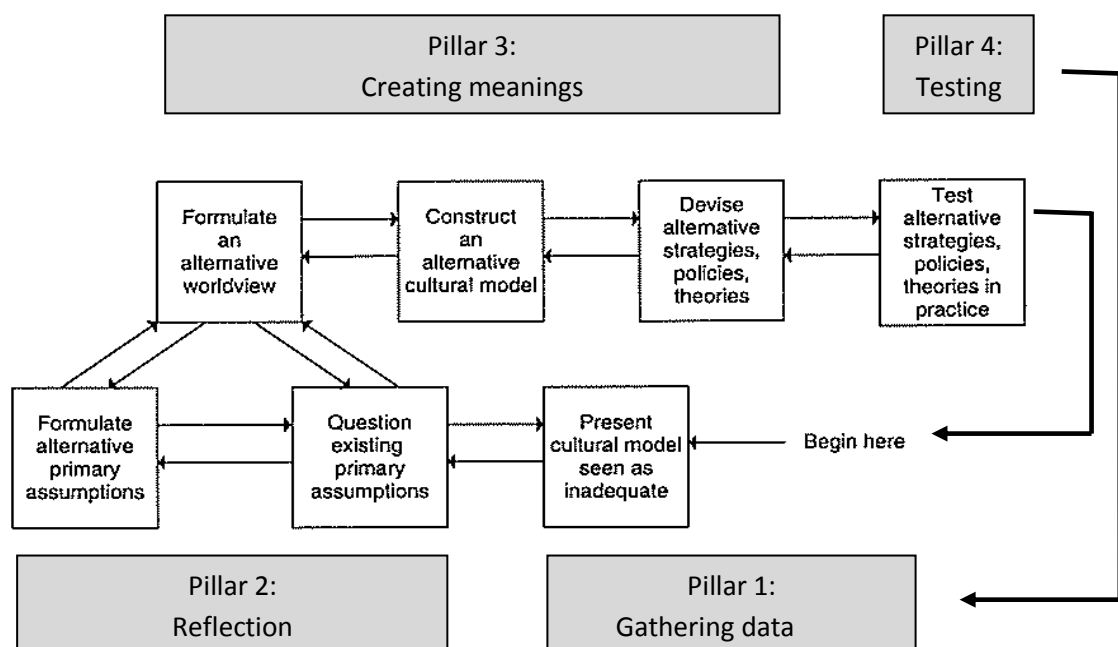
1. Gathering data: Data is gathered through use of the brain’s sensory processes. Zull describes gathering data as “essential for learning” although it does not immediately lead to understanding (p. 5).
2. Reflection: Zull describes this neurobiological process where data flows toward the association regions in the back of the brain and as it occurs “data are merged into combinations that begin to produce a larger, more meaningful image” (2006, p. 5). During this process people label and categorize the data and make relationships and associations. Zull describes this process as

comprehending new information by assembling the “images in the back association cortex” and using them as “tools in thought” (2006, p. 6).

3. Creating: Meanings and data from the “back association cortex” flows to the “front association cortex” where it becomes the “basis for conscious thought and planning” – what is described as working memory. “Such plans, theories, and abstractions consist of a combination of images and language. It involves intent, recall, feelings, decisions, and judgements. They are all required for development of deep understanding.” (Zull, 2006, p. 6).
4. Testing: Zull says this “must be active; it must use the motor brain” (p. 7). Action completes the learning process to “discover how understanding matches reality” (p. 7). Writing and talking are forms of active testing.

These brain processes appear to align to Mezirow’s three levels of reflective thinking (content, process and premise) and the transformative learning processes as described by Jackson (2008).

**Figure 4: Relationship of Jackson's (2008) transformative learning process (p. 35) and Zull's (2006) neurobiological learning pillars**



*Figure 4: Relationship of Jackson's (2008) transformative learning process (p. 35) and Zull's (2006) neurobiological learning pillars shows how the two concepts might align. Gathering data can trigger the beginning of the transformative learning process. The data remains ‘only the facts’ until the*

brain allows these new experiences to flow to the association areas where it can be compared with past experiences. This reflection includes weighing it against past habits of mind. Constructing alternative views and theories matches the third pillar which finally tests these new strategies, beliefs and theories.

A recent study by Brock (2010) showed learners were more likely to report experiencing transformative learning and following this up with changed behaviour if they had progressed through many of the steps shown in Jackson's diagram.

Zull (2006) points out that it is impossible to separate emotions from the learning process. He describes how the brain's neurons secrete emotion to all regions of the brain and these "chemicals of emotion act by modifying the strength and contribution of each part of the learning cycle" (p. 7).

It is worth noting that people may choose *not* to embark on this self-reflective process if they believe the journey may be too painful or disruptive to their lives (Cranton, 2006; Jackson, 2008).

### **Parenting education and transformative learning**

Research suggests that parenting education can be a mechanism for transformative learning that will result in changed positive parenting practices which in turn improve outcomes for children (First and Way, 1995; Huebner, 2002).

Interestingly, Mezirow's three levels of reflection – content, process and premise – appear to link harmoniously with Miller and Sambel's three parenting education learning goals (2003) which themselves require increasing levels of critical reflection. The dispensing model focuses on facts, knowledge and strategies, the relating model is about exploring feelings about the process of being a parent and in the reflecting model and parents unpack their own values, attitudes and behaviour.

Group parenting education provides a social setting within which parents can transform personal perspectives so that they do not unreflectively rely on hidden assumptions when making important decisions such as those associated with parenting. It offers a place where parents discover that they are uncritically following the way they were parented. This is a process of developing conscious parenting.

It can provide a place whereby data can be presented to start the questioning process. It can offer the 'social brain' a place to dialogue with others in a community of learners and enable reflection to occur. Mezirow (1990, p. 357) believes: "Every adult educator has a responsibility for fostering critical self-reflection and helping learners plan to take action."

### **III. Ethical considerations**

This research was planned in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Massey University. Particular attention was paid to full disclosure and consent. A detailed ethics application was submitted to Massey University's Ethics Committee. This was approved in September 2008. (See Appendix III for relevant documents.)

Since Māori parents were involved in the study, consultation took place with Plunket's Maori Health Services Team and informal conversations continued with team members on different aspects of the study (see Appendix III). All participants were given information sheets explaining the study and its purpose and consent and confidentiality forms were available for them to sign (see Appendix III).

Written permission was received from organisers to name all three programmes in this report, findings were shared with them while it was in draft form and their comments taken into consideration in the final version. Anonymity was preserved for individual parent participants.

Ensuring that parents were aware that they were participating in a research study was relatively simple during the organised focus group and interviews. But for the continual conversations and observations that arose while 'walking alongside' staff from the Nurturing the Future programme was a challenge since we moved between different venues and individual families in a short space of time and these settings were often informal. It is recognised that this is an issue when researchers are observing people's daily lives, talking to them, watching them, asking questions, writing down what they are saying and analysing what they are doing (O'Reilly, 2005). The researcher took the responsibility for ensuring people conversed with were aware of the study and its purpose. No individual was audio-taped without the researcher seeking their permission first. This was particularly important for some of the personal histories and stories parents shared which were very revealing and often very personal. No stories were used in this report unless parents were aware the research was taking place, they had received the information about its purpose and had given their consent that their story be used.

## IV. Research design

An interpretivist approach was taken with the research because this seemed most in harmony with its transformative learning theoretical framework. Central to interpretivism is the belief that people are constantly interpreting the world as it changes about them (Williamson, 2002). This is in alignment with the core principle of transformative learning that “there is an instinctive drive among all humans to make meaning of their daily lives” (Taylor, 2008, p.5). In interpretivist research “naturalistic inquiry” is favoured with field work and observation taking place in the natural setting where the activity or subject being researched normally takes place.

Naturalistic inquiry meant research would take place among the parents and programme organisers – observing and interacting with them in their own communities, their own natural settings, as they took part in the programmes which were the subject of the study.

An in-depth understanding of the topic was required and from a practical viewpoint this was best obtained by exploring a limited number of programmes (three were chosen) from all key people’s perspectives (or key informants as Burgess (1984) describes them). These were the organisers, facilitators and parents. An in-depth understanding also meant a single research method was not sufficient to obtain data from multiple and complex sources.

It was decided a bricolage approach to the research design would be taken using multiple methods to uncover the richness of the parents’ stories and enable a flexible response as new research opportunities emerged during fieldwork in the parents’ own settings. Kincheloe (2004) says that bricolage “is typically understood to involve the process of employing these methodological strategies as they are needed in the unfolding context of the research situation” (p. 1).

Using a bricolage family of methods enabled the direct involvement and “sustained contact with human agents within the context of their daily lives (and cultures)” (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 3).

Descriptive information about each programme was gathered. But deeper information was also needed about each programme. Descriptions of the history and structure of each organisation provided the ‘how’, but the ‘why’ was of huge importance. The philosophies behind each programme’s design impacted on how they were delivered. Organisers’ and facilitators’ opinions and stories needed to be heard to tease out patterns about what was effective in their particular parenting education programme. For this reason both qualitative semi-structured and unstructured

interviews were part of the research design. Informational leaflets and other documentation, including any previous research that had already been carried out on the programme were also synthesized.

Gathering the rich, authentic narratives about parents' experiences, it was felt, was the best way to discover if transformative learning had occurred as a result of participation in the programmes. These stories and anecdotes became data. An assumption was made that if transformative learning had led to positive change it was reasonable to expect long-term benefits were more likely to follow.

Listening to parents discuss their experiences in groups was considered a good way of exploring how learning took place when parents shared meanings and dialogue. To achieve this, parents' focus groups from each of the three programmes were included.

Opportunities to observe key events (where something happens that is likely to be revealing) were also taken - such as observing facilitators running groups as part of their normal programme delivery. O'Reilly (2005), when describing observation, says it is "watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions" (p. 3). Observation in naturalistic settings was important because, coming from an interpretivist point of view, human behaviour is best understood in the context of people's own particular social setting.

It was highly likely that other opportunities for collecting data would emerge during the seven months allocated for data collection (it turned out to be 12 months). For this reason a journal was kept throughout the process. A digital recorder and copies of the study's information sheet and consent forms were kept to hand to enable the recording of any spontaneous unstructured interviews that emerged.

## **V. Selection of participants**

The selection of participants fell into two categories:

1. Parenting education programmes to be studied.
2. Within these selected programmes, parents for the focus groups.

### **Selection of parenting education programmes**

In choosing the programmes, the following criteria were used. The programmes:

- Used group parenting education sessions as a delivery method;
- Were regarded as being successful;
- Had different structures from each other (so a range of structures could be researched);
- Were delivered, or were able to be delivered, in high deprivation areas as measured on the current deprivation index used by the Ministry of Health in NZ; and
- Were willing to take part.

Initially the criteria of finding programmes which could be described as ‘successful’ seemed a challenge. If this project was to discover what elements needed to be present in a successful parenting education programme, it appeared that this question needed to be answered before selecting the programmes containing these elements – a seeming Catch 22!

It was decided to consult people from the Ministry of Social Development’s Family and Community Services. They work with other government, non-governmental agencies and communities to give families information and coordinated social services, provide funding and support to parenting programmes and conduct own research in the field. They therefore had a lot of knowledge and experience of programmes throughout New Zealand. In mid-2008 the Ministry hosted an event and invited the organisers of programmes it felt were good exemplars of parenting programmes in New Zealand to present their stories to each other and people from other parent support services. Five of these exemplar programmes present which also met this project’s criteria were asked to take part. In the end three agreed. These were:

### **1. Nurturing the Future**

Based in Greymouth (West Coast) much of the work of this programme is in high deprivation areas among families with violence and drug and alcohol issues. The organiser of Nurturing the Future, Trish Hunt, offered to be involved in this research over a period of a year – an offer which was accepted and consequently it was examined in much more depth than the other two. Findings from this programme make up two-thirds of the results.

### **2. Supporting Parents Alongside (their) Children’s Education (SPACE)**

Developed and based in the Hutt Valley, this is now a national programme. At the time of selection it was understood that parents taking part in this programme did not generally meet the high deprivation criteria. However since it was the only model which provided parenting education

alongside children's play and early childhood education it was decided to include it. It had also recently begun to explore how it could have more diverse appeal to a broader range of parents.

### **3. Te Aroha Noa Parent-educator Model**

Based in Palmerston North, the research participants were the parent educators who had emerged through this community organisation's playgroups and parent groups.

### **Selection of parents for focus groups**

Parents from each of the three programmes were invited to take part in the focus group conversations. Participation was voluntary and self-selecting. There were two ways parents became involved:

1. Organisers from one programme provided a list of past and present parent members and their email addresses to the researcher. The researcher contacted them, supplied an information sheet about the study and an invitation to participate in a group.
2. The researcher went to actual groups at their normal meeting time and at their normal venue. The programme organisers had provided the information sheet about the study and issued an invitation to parents at these groups the week before and parents were given the option of attending the following week's focus group.

## **VI. Research methods**

Fieldwork was undertaken between November, 2008 and October, 2009 in Palmerston North, the West Coast and Wellington areas of New Zealand.

### **Semi-structured interviews with programme organisers**

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the organisers of the parenting education programmes studied. These interviews were seen as important both to collect descriptive data about each programme and to explore the beliefs, philosophies, feelings and other subjective subtleties. These interviews were one to one-and-a-half hours in length. The following questions were asked of organisers and digitally recorded to be later transcribed and analysed by the researcher:



- a. What is the history of your programme?
- b. How would you describe the philosophy of the programme?
- c. Who is the programme's target group?
- d. How is the programme delivered?
- e. How successful is the programme?
- f. From your perspective, how might the programme be improved in the future? What is your vision for the programme in the future?

*(A full description of the data these questions were intended to collect is included in Appendix II.)*

## **Unstructured interviews**

These took place after the researcher had been accepted by organisers, facilitators and parents. Some were organised after initial fieldwork – particularly with organisers – to gain clarification and deeper understanding of data already collected. Others took place with facilitators and parents during the fieldwork, particularly during observations of groups (at the end of sessions or during refreshment breaks).

Other unstructured interviews (conversations) occurred with parents and people from other social agencies involved in parents' lives while the researcher spent a week 'walking alongside' the facilitators of Nurturing the Future. These interviews were often informal, opportunistic questioning and other people involved in the programme often joined in to offer their perspectives.

## **Focus groups**

Focus groups are formed to discuss a specific topic, usually in small groups of six to twelve participants. Participants may have similar characteristics or be quite varied, depending on the research design. Groups can consist of strangers but in this study, except for one group, the parents taking part in the groups knew each other well. Focus groups aim to uncover a broad range of opinion, experiences and generate different responses (O'Reilly, 2005).

O'Reilly (2005) says one of the great advantages of focus groups are "that they generate conflicting ideas, making people change their mind and think again," (p. 133). This can result in ideas emerging which the researcher might not have considered.

There were 11 groups with 80 parents who were current or past participants in the three programmes. The majority of the groups and participants came from the Nurturing the Future Programme and that was also the only programme which included fathers. Most of the focus groups were held during normal group meeting times in the group's normal venues. These focus groups equated to the programme's normal groups and therefore the parents who made up the groups knew each other very well. In one case, a SPACE focus group of parents was especially organised and held in a private house. These parents were drawn from different groups within the programme and so they did not all know one another.

Groups comprised between 4 and 12 participants and were between one-and-a-half hours and two hours duration. Each was facilitated by the researcher and digitally recorded for later transcription by the researcher.

At each focus group, after introductions and an icebreaker, the following format was followed:

- The researcher gave a brief outline of the research project and an explanation that they did not have to participate or answer any of the questions if they did not want to. Parent participants had already received a copy of the information sheet and consent form which explained the project and their rights fully (see Appendix III).
- The questions were displayed on a whiteboard or on a large poster
- A round was conducted of all parents present and each one had the opportunity to answer or decline to answer each question. Often this was interspersed with general discussion within the group.
- A general group discussion followed the completion of the round. At this point, many parents added to what they had said during the round.

At the first focus group meeting the following questions were used:

1. Why did you choose to join the programme?
2. What difference has being part of the programme made to your family and your parenting?
3. What do you like about the programme?
4. What would be your ideal if you were designing a programme for parents?

As a result of the first focus group where parents asked for clarification of these questions and also gave feedback on their wording, these questions were replaced for the remaining focus groups. The new questions were:

1. What brought you here?
2. What have you learned?
3. What have you changed?
4. What did you like?
5. What could have made it better?

**Table 1: Number of parents participating in study by programme, location and gender**

<b>Nurturing the Future (West Coast)</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Total</b>
Westport (evening)	4	0	4
Westport (afternoon)	0	7	7
Reefton	0	6	6
Hokitika (evening)	3	8	11
Hokitika (day)	0	9	9
Greymouth (evening)	5	0	5
Greymouth (evening)	2	4	6
Greymouth (day)	0	9	9
<i>Totals</i>	<b>14</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>SPACE (Wellington Area)</b>			
Johnsonville		12	12
Hutt Valley		6	6
<i>Totals</i>		<b>18</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Te Aroha Noa Parent-educators (Palmerston North)</b>			
Parent-educators		5	5
<i>Totals</i>		<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>TOTAL PARENTS</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>80</b>

## Observation of programmes in action

Interviews – even unstructured ones – are usually from the researcher’s perspective. Observations were used to find out about aspects of people’s lives from their own perspective and within the context of their experiences.

During the course of the study, the researcher was allowed unlimited access to on the Nurturing the Future programme – to ‘walk alongside’ the organiser and facilitators as they went about their work. Groups from the other programmes studied were also observed.

A field journal was kept throughout. This involved writing down notes about what the researcher observed and what people said. But it also consisted of noting – at the end of each field work day – thoughts, ideas and questions for follow-up.

Where permission had been received by participants, the observed groups were also digitally recorded for transcriptions by the researcher later.

### **Nurturing the Future**

Observations took place over three visits. The first visit lasted five days during which the researcher was able to walk alongside the programme’s initiator and Kaitiaki (vision holder) Trish Hunt and her staff. Two further visits took place – one over two days and another over four days. During these visits all aspects of the programme’s work was observed. This included:

1. Eight parenting education group sessions (at Greymouth, Hokitika, Reefton and Westport);
2. The programme’s weekly playgroup;
3. Home visits to individual group members;
4. Advocacy meetings for group members with a range of people from government and social agencies (some of which occurred formally and others spontaneously in places like the supermarket car park);
5. Discussions with staff from other local organisations with which Nurturing the Future works;
6. A baby shower for a group member organised at the home of another group member;
7. Planning sessions by staff of the Nurturing the Future programme as it prepared to become an independent charitable trust.

### **Supporting Parents Alongside (their) Children’s Education (SPACE)**

One SPACE session was observed over the course of two hours and there was a visit to its national office to interview the organisers.

## **Te Aroha Noa Parent-educator Model**

One day was spent with one of the programme organisers and facilitators observing group sessions and touring the programme's community premises, including its licenced early childhood education centre. One of the group sessions was of the programme's parent-educators who, as a result of participating in this programme, worked in the centre for at least one session a week. The other was a workshop delivered to a large group of mothers about children's behaviour. The parents attending the workshop were not asked the research questions formally as a focus group, but rather took part in individual informal conversations during morning tea.

## **Synthesis of written documents**

Written information provided by all three programmes was read and analysed. This included brochures, manuals, annual reports, website content and reports from other research.

## **VII. Analysis of data**

Informal analysis began as soon as data began to be collected which enabled the researcher to go back and ask people in the programmes more questions. Tapes were transcribed so that data was in printed form. This was read through a number of times and notes made of key themes.

Some statistical counting occurred – for example how many had become aware of the parenting programme through word-of-mouth compared with those who had seen advertising brochures or who had been mandated to attend. Descriptive summaries were prepared of each programme – using information from both the organisers and from a synthesis of collected documents. Statistics and more quantitative data were, where possible, compiled and formatted into tables.

Data collected were categorised under the most common themes which emerged from each question asked (see Table 2: Categories for data sorting and analysis).

**Table 2: Categories for data sorting and analysis**

Research question	
What brought you here?	<i>How found out about programme</i> <i>Reasons for enrolling</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For children</li> <li>• For improved family relationships</li> <li>• Because of new life challenge</li> <li>• Resolve issues from own upbringing</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>
What have you learned?	<i>Content</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child brain development</li> <li>• General child development</li> </ul> <i>Strategies</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For managing children's behaviour</li> <li>• For building family relationships</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>
How have you changed	<i>Changed/improved relationships</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With children</li> <li>• With partner</li> </ul> <i>Improved parenting</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased confidence</li> <li>• Changes in parenting and ways of disciplining children</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>
What did you like?	<i>Supportive groups</i> <i>Facilitator attributes</i> <i>Safe environments</i> <i>Convenient programme organisation</i> <i>Relevant and useful content</i>
What could have made it better?	<i>Inconvenient programme organisation</i> <i>Structure, content and delivery not suitable</i>

Once responses were categorised they were analysed for common viewpoints and perceptions using the following questions:

- “What patterns and common themes emerge in responses dealing with specific items? How do these patterns (or lack thereof) help to illuminate the broader study question(s)?
- Are there any deviations from these patterns? If yes, are there any factors that might explain these atypical responses?
- What interesting stories emerge from the responses? How can these stories help to illuminate the broader study question(s)?
- Do any of these patterns or findings suggest that additional data may need to be collected? Do any of the study questions need to be revised?
- Do the patterns that emerge corroborate the findings of any corresponding qualitative analyses that have been conducted? If not, what might explain these discrepancies? “

(Berkowitz, 1991)

Parent's narratives were analysed to see what triggered their questioning their current habits of mind around the way they parented – these were closely linked to their motivation to participate in

parenting programmes. Examples were looked for which demonstrated that parents were moving through the three levels of reflection and, as a result of this process, had changed their beliefs and ultimately their behaviours around parenting.

## Chapter Five:

# Findings – stories of lost potential and hope regained

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*“I’ve noticed a difference in my kids. Before (I) used to pull up and they would run a mile. It was like rats on a sinking ship – they would be gone in opposite directions. Now they actually come out to meet (me). They are pleased to see (me) because I don’t harm my kids anymore” (Father at focus group).*

### I. Introduction

This study of parenting education programmes was conducted by researching and describing characteristics of three programmes. Both organisers’ and participating parents’ perspectives were gathered. Two-thirds of the research data came from one single parenting education programme – Nurturing the Future – since the researcher was allowed full access to this programme in all its aspects over 12 months.

The parenting education programmes’ descriptive data presents findings from interviews with organisers and the synthesis of documents. Snapshots are presented to depict the everyday work of the programmes. Data from each the five questions asked at the focus group is presented in the order they were asked and supplemented with appropriate findings from organisers. Narratives from all participants are used as illustrative examples throughout with authentic language retained. The results are reported and analysed under the following headings:

- I. Programme descriptive data;
- II. Recruitment of parents to programmes;
- III. Retention of parent participants;
- IV. Parent data on benefits of programmes – learning reported;
- V. Parent data on programmes’ strengths;
- VI. Parent data on suggested improvements to programmes.

An analysis is then given through a transformative learning lens to identify if learning resulted in changes to beliefs and parenting behaviours as a result of parents participating in the programmes.



## II. Programme descriptive data

### Supporting Parents Alongside (their) Children's Education (SPACE)

The Hutt Playcentre Association established the SPACE programme in 2002 primarily as a support to first-time parents and their babies. It was developed and implemented in Hutt Playcentres where it operated for some years before being offered nationally to other Playcentre Associations. Now it is delivered by 19 Playcentre Associations around the country. At the beginning of 2009, there were 80 SPACE programmes operating nationally and the organisers reported a big demand for further programmes with waiting lists particularly in the cities (L. Dawson, SPACE National Team, personal interview, December 2, 2008).

Recently in partnership with other social service providers, SPACE began a programme for Māori whānau in a higher deprivation area in rural New Zealand and another for teen parents in an urban setting.

The SPACE programme:

- Is aimed mainly at first-time parents and babies.
  - Meets for 30-40 weeks, depending on the age of babies.
  - Enrolls babies usually between two weeks to three months of age.
  - Is delivered in two-and-a-half to three hour sessions by two facilitators who have completed SPACE facilitator training and who have completed Playcentre qualifications to a required level.
  - Is usually run in Playcentres (although SPACE is working in partnership with organisations beyond Playcentre and exploring providing it in other venues such as marae and community halls).
- (S. Pattinson, SPACE National Team, personal interview, December 2, 2008)*

Parents and their babies enrol in SPACE groups and are provided with:

- Opportunities for parents to meet, eat, talk, and learn reciprocally with trained facilitators and in a social group setting;
- Facilitated discussions on a range of parenting and child development topics;
- Heuristic play opportunities for babies which with age appropriate equipment provided in 'treasure baskets'. Heuristic play allows babies to personally select and handle objects and construct their own understandings. Treasure baskets were an approach pioneered by Elinor Goldschmied. Heuristic play materials – such as natural, household and recycled objects – are

collected in the baskets and then offered for exploration to babies who are not yet able to move independently (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994).

- An introduction to rhymes, music and books for infants.

*(See Appendix IV for description of programme and content)*

SPACE philosophy is an extension of Playcentre philosophy which is based on ideas of child-initiated play and parents as first teachers. It emphasises the importance of supporting parents alongside their children's learning and that the programme is community-based and driven.

Funding is obtained through Ministry of Education bulk funding (for SPACE's early childhood education sessions), small fees from parents and grants from government and philanthropic organisations.

## **Foundation and development of the programme**

The SPACE programme was started by a dedicated group of mothers from the Hutt Playcentre Association. Sue Pattinson, one of the founding team members, when working with first-time parents from the community felt that there was very little available for first time parents who wanted to provide their babies with some form of early childhood education in a group setting but who did not want to leave their babies in childcare. Although mothers were able to enrol their babies at Playcentre they tended not to do so until they were over 18 months old unless they were the younger siblings of older already-enrolled Playcentre children (Podmore and Te One, 2008). Sue Pattinson has a Playcentre and PAFT background and a strong interest in child development.

*"I saw a huge need and a huge gap and felt we could do something unique that concentrated on 0-1 year olds" (S. Pattinson, personal interview, December 2, 2008).*

A founding group was established to identify the philosophy, vision and objectives of the programme. They wrote an operation manual and oversaw the piloting and development of the programme. This group has since been developed into a national team as the programme expands throughout the country. This team reviews and develops the curriculum and offers training and support to Playcentre associations running the programme in their centres throughout the country.

Throughout its development the programme has been continually evaluated and organisers have responded to what they have been told by facilitators, parents and their own experiences in developing a new programme. The core objectives of bringing groups of first-time parents together to support them fulfil the early learning needs of their babies has not changed but other aspects of the programme have emerged.

*“The baby’s education alongside their parents support still remains at the core of the programme. But the degree of socialisation between the babies was never anticipated. Nor the importance of the support parents gained from being in the groups. These aspects became greater than the provision of the education and play modules” (L. Dawson, personal interview, December 2, 2008).*

The way the educational aspects are presented has changed as well.

*“We thought we would be educating parents on the topics right from the outset but we realised that parents come with a huge knowledge base, ideas and experiences. It very quickly changed to drawing out what they knew” (S. Pattinson, personal interview, December 2, 2008).*

As a result, SPACE organisers continually adjust aspects of content and delivery to match emerging needs. For example they are rewriting the content of their manuals to incorporate the parent support aspects which have emerged.

*“It doesn’t make what we had there obsolete in any way because all of those things are relevant. What we are doing is extending and adding on in response to parents needs” (L. Dawson, personal interview, December 2, 2008).*

## Snapshot of a SPACE session

Eleven mothers sit on the floor in a large circle, their babies (aged 6-8 months) lying either on individual cushions in front of them or held in their arms. Two facilitators are at one end of the circle. Within the circle sit heuristic play treasure baskets filled with a range of everyday objects for babies to explore.

The group begins with the “Hello Song”, greeting everyone in the group by name. Then the facilitator introduces the topic for the day – ‘becoming a mum’. Mother’s Day is approaching and so the theme for the session is to celebrate being a mother and to emphasise the importance of the mothers remembering to take time to care of themselves.

Conversation becomes animated as they share, firstly in pairs and then with the whole group, questions such as “What have you enjoyed about being a Mum?”; “What have been some of the hardest things for you as you have become a Mum?”

Near the end of the discussion some of the babies become unsettled and the facilitator suggests that they all sing a song – they select “Twinkle, twinkle little star”. Like magic all the babies quieten down, their eyes fixed on their mothers faces as the mothers gaze down at them singing and smiling.

The group disperses for a shared afternoon tea – the conversation level rises as they chat to one another in pairs and small groups dotted around the Playcentre. Some mothers remain with the babies or return to occasionally check on them. The babies are either lying on their tummies or sitting up, exploring the objects in the treasure baskets (often handed to them by their mothers) or are staring intently at each other, reaching out little fists to try and touch another little face. Following afternoon tea, the mums gather around tables which have been set up for them to make ‘bath bombs’ as a mother’s day gift for themselves.

*(Researchers’ journal, April, 2009)*

## Nurturing the Future

The Nurturing the Future charitable trust provides a parenting education programme for parents on the West Coast of New Zealand. It is based in Greymouth but delivered in other West Coast towns as well. It began as a programme which provided 10-week group parenting sessions free-of-charge to parents with children under five years old. Between 2005 and 2008 it operated under the local REAP but in 2009 was formed into an independent charitable trust in response to demand for more support from within the community (particularly in Greymouth), and enable it to broaden what the programme provided (P. Hunt, personal interview, December 10, 2008; NZ Council of Christian Services, 2009). In February 2010 it opened a community hub in the Cobden suburb of Greymouth. Besides its group parenting education programme, Nurturing the Future also operates awhi support centred in the hub along with play and health programmes. Trish Hunt states the organisation's philosophy as:

*"I want every child on the West Coast to have the greatest childhood ever – every child; I want every child in Aotearoa to have that. (P. Hunt, personal interview, December 11, 2008).*



Photo used with permission of Trish Hunt.

**Figure 5: Nurturing the Future Founder and Kaitiaki Trish Hunt**

Usually around 80 parents are active at any one time in the Nurturing the Future programme, although other family members and their children are included in activities (such as social events). Many of the families are from high deprivation areas with complex issues around drug and alcohol addiction and family violence. The programme believes in working with both partners in families if there are violence issues and aims to rebuild families and keep them together citing the experience that most women in violent relationships return to their partners. As such, it is quite common for adults from the same family to be enrolled in Nurturing the Future although the programme does not allow partners to be members of the same group.

*"Many parents come to group already thinking they have sandpaper babies (hard to settle, overly active, fractious, children that parents find challenging). These stories need to be heard. These are the babies that tend to get mishandled or abused as their parents are already struggling in the area of liking and developing an attachment with these babies. They also tend to be rough in their handling of them. One thing that must happen for these babies is that their parents need to fall in love with them again, and we use a variety of workshops and stories to make this happen. We call all the children the 'babies' regardless of*

*the age as they are always someone's baby and have been loved completely at some stage of their life" (Hunt P. 2008, p.22).*

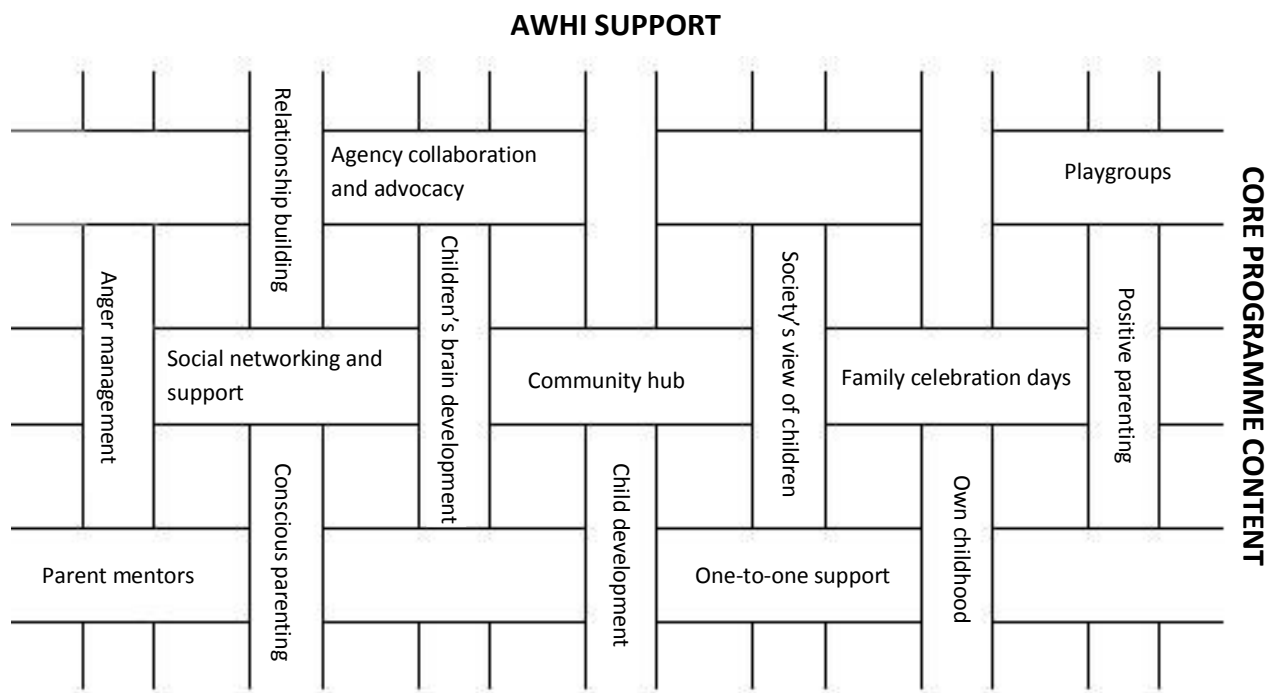
Nurturing the Future is governed by a board of trustees. Its founder Trish Hunt is the Kaitiaki (vision holder), manager and lead facilitator. She has worked in the West Coast for 20 years as a parenting educator, is a mother of four and grandmother of eight. She was the recipient of the Every Child Counts Award 2008 and Orangi Kaupapa Trust Award for Services to the Community the same year. She is a PAFT (Parents as First Teachers) educator, Brain Wave facilitator and a member of a 12 step fellowship (alcohol recovery programme).

*"What motivates me is my own children's childhood. When I was drinking, their childhood was hell. I owe them and it's the only way I can pay that back. I will be doing it until the day I die. Sometimes I think all we are doing is building parents anonymous" (P. Hunt, personal interview, 5 December, 2009)*

Nurturing the Future's team of facilitators includes three others (one man and two women) all of whom have grown into the work after attending Nurturing the Future groups as parent participants. A therapist works with its parents with some of the second stage groups. The trust tries to operate a flat management structure and also to capacity build parents from within its groups. It is funded by private donations, government contracts and grants from philanthropic organisations (P. Hunt, personal interview, February 8, 2009).

Nurturing the Future can be visualised as a woven awahi cloak (see *Figure 6: Nurturing the Future Programme visualised as a woven awahi cloak*) cast over the parents, whānau and children of the West Coast of New Zealand. The warp threads of the cloak are the core group programme. For many parents this may be the only aspect of the programme they need. Interwoven with these are the weft threads which represent the awahi community support. It is this aspect which those parents with greater needs become woven into.

Figure 6: Nurturing the Future Programme visualised as a woven awahi cloak



## Core programme content

Nurturing the Future has a core ten session programme which covers the following topics:

- Children's brain development (session 1);
- Children's place in New Zealand society and how this affects people's thinking.  
*Unfortunately in New Zealand we still have a very distorted view around how children are and how they should be handled. There is a belief that children need to be trained or made good. I believe many babies in this land are hurt often because their parents are trying to make them good" (Trish Hunt, 2008).*
- Reflection on own childhood, how this influences own belief systems and parenting practice;
- Importance of conscious parenting;
- Strategies for positive parenting and discipline (includes dealing with children's challenging behaviour in a positive way);
- Dealing with stress and anger; and
- Relationship building (strategies for building your family as a team.)

*(Researcher's journal, 2008)*

Facilitators work in pairs to deliver the 10 week core programme in Greymouth, Hokitika, Reefton and Westport to groups of four to 16 parents (though in future it wants to restrict group numbers to

no more than eight). Facilitators also pair with a therapist to deliver second stage groups for parents who want to carry on working with the programme. The facilitators provide the integrated awhi and advocacy aspects of the trust's work. Volunteers are important to the trust's operations. These volunteers sometimes emerge from the groups themselves, others come from the wider community (P. Hunt, personal interview, December 10, 2009).

Parents, with minimal needs and from lower (better off) deprivation areas, may participate in Nurturing the Future solely by attending a community brain development workshop. Others may then enrol for the full ten session core programme.

### **Awhi community support**

Parents with more complex needs usually attend the core programme and are often also woven into Nurturing the Future's awhi community support. This is made up of:

- The community hub where parents can come during the week if they need support or to attend any of the other health, play and parenting education programmes being offered
- a playgroup;
- home visits by programme facilitators to group members;
- social events of the whole Nurturing the Future community;
- advocacy on behalf of programme parents with government agencies.

This provides support for parents who have a more challenging parenting journey. Many of them have one or more of Belsky's (1984) identified risk factors preventing them parenting effectively. They may:

- Have poor developmental histories and psychological difficulties because they have not been nurtured as children, have suffered neglect and abuse or lack of emotional attachment with either parent;
- Have drug and alcohol issues
- Be living in conflict with their partners, sometimes accompanied by family violence.
- Be single parents on low incomes

*"We call them the 'O'Fucks' because we don't know what else to call them. They have all these issues going on with CYFs, corrections, other stuff in their families. They say to me "oh*



*fuck Trish what am I going to do?” because they are as messy as” (P. Hunt, personal interview, December 8, 2008).*

Nurturing the Future’s awhi system provides ongoing support for parents when they most need it. It is provided both by the staff of Nurturing the Future and also by group members to each other. Mobile phone texts provide a mechanism for facilitators and parents to remain in constant touch with each other.

*“Something happens in those groups with parents supporting each other. I don’t know what it is; they start to make human connections. It’s almost like a whole lot of whānungaunga and informal stuff. Informally the networks, the helping – it’s just amazing, nothing short of amazing” (P. Hunt, personal interview, December 8, 2008).*

The community hub is operated so that whānau members are able to drop in at anytime and efforts are made to ensure they feel it belongs to them. They take responsibility for aspects of many of the routines around cooking, cleaning and care of children. Gradually relationships are being formed with social agencies so they come to the hub to offer their programmes in a place which the parents feel they belong rather than having to go to the agencies venues. The hub has allowed the trust to implement initiatives such as small groups of young mothers with new babies spending the night there so that facilitators can give them advice and learning on how to settle crying babies and deal with sleep issues in a practical way. Ultimately it is hoped that parents themselves will take over the management of the centre. The trust is currently setting up a mentoring parents programme, whereby parents who have successfully dealt with issues (particularly family violence and alcohol and drug issues) will support and mentor new families entering the programme with similar issues). (P. Hunt, personal interview, June 8, 2009).

Plans are also underway to open a ‘men’s house’ where men can live and be supported if they have had to leave the family home because of violence issues. This will enable Nurturing the Future to work with them to allow them to be reabsorbed back into their families. Trish Hunt sees this as an approach very different from that used by government agencies where families are broken up and children removed to live in foster homes. The trust is currently exploring taking over a tourism venture in the town where the men would work, learn new skills, provide income for the trust and be nurtured through the trust’s parenting programme at the same time (Personal email correspondence with P. Hunt, June 2, 2010).

## Snapshots of Nurturing the Future

"I am sitting with a group of seven men – one is the facilitator in a church hall in Greymouth. This is a men's group, its members made up of truckies, construction works, and miners. This is a Nurturing the Future second stage group and so the men have been meeting for some time and know each other well. The facilitator tells me at the start of the group: "There's trust here, a real deep trust. A trust between the men, between themselves that allows them to ... it's almost like a therapy environment. Like a therapy group that spends a long time together." The facilitator asks each man in turn how their week has been. The men tell their stories with a lot of humour, pathos and colourful language."

*(Researcher's journal, 2008)*

"Outside the groups, Trish's cell phone is ringing constantly. People are desperate for help. Their problems are both serious and urgent and they see the parenting course as their only hope. A grandmother rings, terrified at the prospect of an impending CYF investigation, then a colleague phones to arrange accommodation for a young mother who's hit the wall with an opiate addiction. In between times, Trish is flat out, phoning and texting to fit new people into groups and helping existing group members to stay on track."

*(Scott, 2008)*

"It's nearly lunchtime. We have arrived at one of the mother's homes for a baby shower for one of the mothers from their group. People have brought food to share and gifts for the mum-to-be. The women sit in the sun conversing and sharing jokes. Many of them have never been to a baby shower before. Trish assures another mother that 'some of the boys' will be on hand the next day to help her move house. Trish's phone goes constantly with texts and calls. She takes one and then tells me we have to go to court that afternoon to see one of 'me mums' due to make an appearance."

*(Researcher's journal, 2008)*

I am sitting with nine other women listening to Trish talk. The group has asked her to talk about how they can protect their 'babies' from sexual abuse (Trish always refers to children as babies, no matter their age). She shares stories to help them learn (she uses stories a lot in her teaching). She tells them: "The three things that children find hardest to recover from in my experience is sexual abuse, abandonment and shame-based messages. Physical abuse they recover from, they can sort that. The other three leave a hole inside." As she talks, four women around the room begin to shed silent tears.

*(Researcher's journal, 2008)*

Trish and the parents talk often about how, because of their upbringing, they had their potential 'stolen'. And then she tells them that good parenting education is a "disturbance of the mind". Trish often tells them: "I'll believe in you until you start believing in yourself".

*(Researcher's journal, 2008)*

Trish says of her approach to parents: "It's not a formula, it's not a magic trick, it's not a cure. The biggest thing you have to do is love them where they are – that's probably the thing I do best. I have no judgement. I'll go and see this wee mummy who has had her babies taken from her and I will sit with her and cry with her – god knows when we'll get the babies back – so it's about sitting in the shit heaps with them and we do that all the time."

*(Researcher's journal, 2008)*

## Te Aroha Noa Parent-educator Model

Te Aroha Noa was begun in 1989 by the Palmerston North Central Baptist Church in Highbury, a low socioeconomic suburb in the city. It began as a counselling service but in the intervening 20 years it became a community development organisation offering a range of services including group and individual parenting programmes, a playgroup and a second-hand shop (Handley, Horn, Kaipuke, Maden, Maden, Stuckey, Munford and Sanders, 2009). It now offers its services to whānau in the area from its complex of buildings situated in the suburb and not far from the church. Driving much of Te Aroha Noa's development during most of that time has been Director Bruce Maden and a team which includes his wife Elizabeth.

In 2009 Te Aroha Noa provides family social services, counselling, one-to-one advocacy, adult education courses (such as adult literacy, te reo Māori and computing), crafts, budgeting, and aerobics and a range of support programmes for parents (such as the HIPPY programme, young mothers support group and parenting workshops) and an early childhood education centre. Te Aroha Noa also has a team which provides childcare for whānau to enable them to participate in the organisation's services (E. Maden, personal interview, February 23, 2009).

It is funded by bulk funding from the Ministry of Education for its early childhood education centre, government contracts, sponsorship, grants from philanthropic organisations, fee paying clients, course delivery contracts to Private Training Establishments, a Pre-loved Clothing Shop (which has raised \$350,000 over 20 years), donations and support from Friends of Te Aroha Noa and the Central Baptist Church which gives an annual donation but "has also immensely assisted with capital building and site purchases over the years" (email correspondence with Bruce Maden, October 7, 2009).

Most of its services are provided by its own staff – which now number more than 50 with over 150 volunteers and it also provides outreach services for the whole city and the wider Manawatu area.

Te Aroha Noa is a Christian-based organisation which uses a strength-based approach to community development. It blends "early childhood, child development, individual counselling, community based social work and adult education from a locally situated community place" (E. Madden, personal interview, February 23, 2009; Te Aroha Noa, 2008, Who We Are section, para. 3 ).

Paulo Freire's writings on emancipated learning as a force to enhance human development has influenced the Madens and Te Aroha Noa as has the Māori concept of 'ako' where all people are simultaneously teachers and learners. As such the organisation's philosophy is based on a belief in community development and people's potential, (E. Maden, personal interview, February 23, 2009). It has taken its community with it as it has grown, emphasising the importance of relationships and fostering a learning community "where the parents and children of the Highbury community grow in confidence in their capacity to create a safe, supportive and dynamic community" (Handley et al., 2009, p6).

It promotes the involvement of parents in all aspects of their children's lives, including their early childhood education experiences. Its parent-educator model, the subject of this study, supports this philosophy.

### **Parent-educator model**

This study focuses on the experiences of these parent-educators working in Te Aroha Noa's Early Childhood Education Centre. Throughout the 1990s counselling was provided for families and regular playgroups for parents and their children were also provided in the back room of the local church. Moving the playgroup out of the church and to the same location as the other services provided by Te Aroha Noa meant local families became more familiar and comfortable with the community centre (Handley et al., 2009). They became increasingly involved in how the playgroup operated and "a highly collaborative model emerged where parents and facilitators jointly shaped the programme" began to emerge (Munford, Sanders, Maden and Maden, 2007, p. 6).

As a result, in 2003 Te Aroha Noa developed its playgroup into a licenced early childhood education centre with parents a fundamental part of the centre. Personnel in the centre (parents and teachers) all have the title "educator". Parents "participate in the management and delivery of the early childhood curriculum alongside, and on an equal footing with, the qualified early childhood teachers" (Munford et al., 2007, p. 6).

To become parent-educators, parents are trained in areas such as observing and interacting with children. The outcome for some parents undertaking this training is that they work in a part-time paid role alongside the qualified team of early childhood teachers working in the centre. There are now plans to expand the programme and build a second early childhood education centre. (E. Maden, personal interview, February 23, 2009)

The process for becoming a parent-educator can be a gradual one and is matched to each individual. Parents are encouraged to initially stay long enough to settle their children. As their confidence increases in interacting with their own and other children in the centre they stay for longer. Gradually some take on the role of becoming a parent-educator in the centre and, along with other parents in Te Aroha Noa's programme, attend courses on child development, early childhood education and positive parenting. The whole process is a balance of increasing parent confidence intertwined with the experience of working with the children in the early childhood centre while being supported by other parents (E. Maden, personal interview, February 23, 2009)

A strength-based approach, belief in the parent's potential and the integration of good adult learning theory helps achieve positive outcomes. These factors include:

- Training the mothers as parent-educators, paying them for their work and trusting them to work professionally in a licenced early childhood centre expresses a belief and confidence in their ability and potential;
- Combining the theory and knowledge about being an educator of young children with the opportunity to try out this learning in the practical settings of early childhood setting and at home with their children.
- The learning is strongly connected to their own experiences as a parent while at the same time contributing to their own community.
- Being part of a group of educators (including the diploma trained teachers and their fellow parent-educators) gives parents an opportunity to discuss and reflect on their learning and experiences and further adapt their learning. It also enables the more experienced parent-educators to scaffold new learners.
- Being in a cohort provides friendship and support.
- There is no rush to learn (for example, as in a 10 week course). Each person is allowed to grow and develop at their own pace and the programme responds to each person's individual learning needs. It also allows time for learning to really take hold and become transformative.
- The programme is supported by staff working from a strength-based approach and who have faith in the potential of the parents.

The aim of Te Aroha Noa's parent-educator model is to build confidence and self-belief of parents by gradually enabling them to become educators. Parent educators emerge from parents participating in Te Aroha Noa's other initiatives - such as parent support groups and involvement in the early

childhood centre. Some go on to become parent educators in Te Aroha Noa's early childhood centre (this group may consist of 7-9 parents at any one time with new ones joining and others leaving all the time) and these young mothers achieve far more than they themselves thought possible.

*"It gave me a future I didn't think I could have – seeing myself as an educator. I want to go on and do more and become an early childhood teacher myself" (Mother at focus group).*

### **Snapshots of Te Aroha Noha**

Te Aroha Noa's parent-educators have gathered to talk to me about how the programme has affected their lives. They speak passionately about the journey they have taken to become parent-educators. They tell me that it has not only increased their knowledge of young children (and this has improved their parenting skills and relationships with their children) but that it has also increased their confidence and perception what they can accomplish in their lives. They identify the importance of the support and friendship they receive from each other and they speak with amazement about how far they have come.

*(Researcher's journal, 2009)*

One of the teachers from the early childhood centre shows me around the centre. It is bright, colourful and welcoming. She tells me that it is very difficult when sessions are running to identify who is the parent-educator and who is the teacher with a diploma. She says the parent-educators are a vital part of the centre's team. She shows me some of the stories the educators have recorded about the children's learning for their portfolios.

*(Researcher's journal, 2009)*

A group of 13 mothers with their young children sit in a circle in the main meeting room. Nearby staff from Te Aroha Noa provide play equipment and company for the children during the session. Today two facilitators from a specialist provider are presenting one of a series of sessions on strategies to communicate positively with young children. Firstly the mothers are asked to comment on strategies presented the previous week and if they had tried these at home. Then a new topic is introduced – turning 'don'ts' into 'do's' and emphasising the importance of parents' role modelling. After the formal session finishes, the mothers socialise over a shared morning tea and then join their children at play, trying out some of the new strategies they have learned that day.

*(Researcher's journal, 2009)*

### III. Recruitment to the programmes

#### Finding out

**Table 3: Methods of finding out about parenting education programmes**

Found out from:	Men	Women	TOTALS
Partner who had not participated in programme	4	1	5
Partner who had previously participated in programme	4	1	5
Other family member	1	3	4
Family member who had previously participated in programme	1	3	4
Friend	0	14	14
Friend who had previously participated in programme	0	10	10
Referral (by Plunket nurse, lawyer, social worker, corrections staff)	0	9	9
Programme facilitator	3	9	12
Attending other group in same venue	0	6	6
Advertising brochure or poster	1	5	6
Radio advertisement	0	2	2
Did not say	0	3	3
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>80</b>

How parents found out about the parenting programmes they chose to attend is shown in *Table 3: Methods of finding out about parenting education programmes*. This shows “trusted others” – whether family, friends or professionals working with families – are the most important source for parents finding out about parenting programmes. For 12 out of the 80 parents responding to this question, the facilitators of the actual programmes themselves were the information source. Arguably, facilitators themselves could be categorised as professional “trusted others”.

Friends were the most important source of information and encouragement for women to join programmes (24 from the 66 women in the focus groups who responded to this question). However friends did not feature at all as a source for men. For the men – all of whom were from the Nurturing the Future programme – their partners were the main source of their finding out about the programme. Many of the men felt they had been asked – sometimes forcefully – by their partners to attend. Many of their partners had already done the programme. One father was told by his mother to attend.

*“Most women send you and you haven’t got much option. It basically gets to the stage when one of youse – you’re going to go your separate ways. In a lot of ways that would be easier – go and find a different partner and carry on. But when you’ve got kids involved, you think maybe you will sort it out for the kids” (Father at focus group).*

*“My partner got involved. She pretty much commanded me to have a look at this. Women can be quite persuasive” (Father at focus group).*

Media such as advertising brochures and radio advertisements did not feature greatly as a source (9 from the 80 responding).

Organisers from all three programmes confirm that word-of-mouth is the most important source of recruiting parents to their programmes.

*“They find us through word of mouth. Over 90% of them find us that way. The scouts come and you get sussied out and you really get analysed and then 8 or 12 weeks later they all turn up. We ask them ‘why did you come to us’ and they tell us ‘oh my mate come before me and she says she knows you” (P. Hunt, personal interview, December 8, 2008).*

*“A lot of people come to SPACE by word of mouth. We do very little if any advertising” (L. Dawson, personal interview December 2, 2008).*

The parents from Te Aroha Noa were already involved in many of the activities of the organization and were ‘gradually’ recruited as they became more involved in children’s learning and development in the early childhood centre alongside the teachers.

## Motivation to attend

**Table 4: Reasons for attending parenting education programmes**

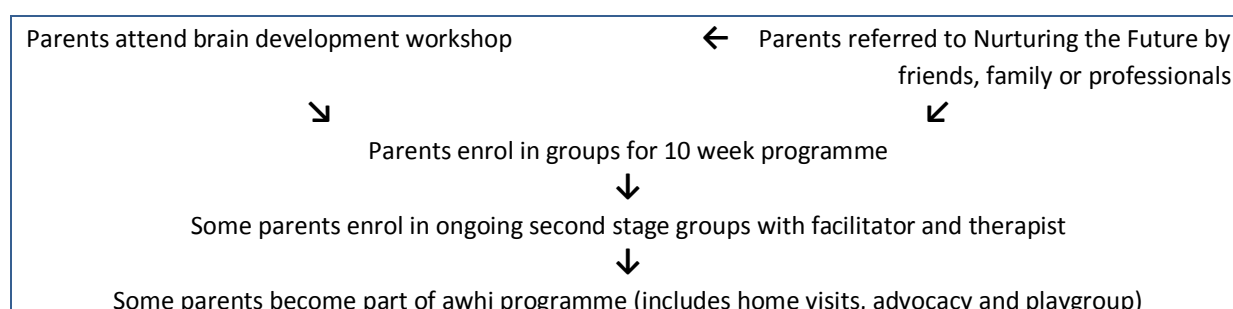
Reasons given for attending (some parents stated more than one reason)	Number times reason stated		
	Men	Women	Total
Contribute to children’s development and learning	3	13	16
Be a better parent generally	4	11	15
Difficulty managing behaviour	3	12	15
Resolve issues from own upbringing	6	5	11
For children’s benefit generally	6	5	11
Partner requested	8	1	9
Relate to children better	2	6	8
Home with new baby, looking for social group		7	7
New marriage, step parenting	2	3	5
Divorce, solo parenting		5	5
Mandated or suggested by social agency		3	3
Mother requested	1		1



Why parents were motivated to enrol in the parenting programmes they chose to attend is shown in *Table 4: Reasons for attending parenting education programmes*. The strongest motivation was contributing to their children’s learning and development. For many parents enrolled in the Nurturing the Future programme, attending an initial brain development workshop provided the impetus for them to enrol in the full 10 session programme. Nurturing the Future is sometimes invited by community organisations to present this workshop. Sometimes this generates enough interest within the community to establish a full group programme.

*“I went along and did the Brainwave first. And after I seen that, I could understand. It wasn’t about ‘this is how you should parent’ it was more about understanding them (children) from their perspective” (Mother at focus group, 2008). ( Brainwave is a workshop developed by the Brainwave Trust which focuses on the importance children’s experiences in the first three years of their lives to ensure healthy brain development.)*

**Figure 7: Nurturing the Future Programme recruitment of parents**



Many of the SPACE parents (all mothers) joined that programme because being a first-time stay-at-home mother was a new experience for them. Of the 18 mothers from the SPACE programme, five said they were motivated to join because they wanted to meet other mothers with babies the same age as their own and four said they were searching for ideas of ‘things to do’ with their babies that would contribute to their learning and development. The SPACE mothers were more likely (six of the 18) to be actively looking for a programme than parents from the other programmes, usually because of social reasons.

*“We had just moved to the area and I am a social person and I didn’t want to be alone in my house. I thought it was a good way to meet new mothers and learn about being a mother.” (Mother at focus group)*

*"I realised I would need structure in my day and when my baby was awake longer I thought 'how could I entertain her?' Going to a session meant that was two hours less I had to entertain her. My friend who had been was doing a lot of developmental things for her child and I thought if I went too I could learn to do that for my baby to" (Mother at focus group).*

*"If you have been used to working and you have a baby, it can be quite a lonely life. SPACE provides me with the opportunity to meet other adults and have fun with my baby" (Mother at focus group).*

The Nurturing the Future programme had a high number of parents who had experienced poor childhoods themselves and had family violence and drug and alcohol issues. Many were solo parents or were in blended families with step children. For many of these parents, giving their own children a better childhood than they had had, managing behaviour positively and improving relationships with members of their families were listed as motivation to attend (and to continue attending).

*"I'm growing up. I had a pretty shit sort of a childhood. Before I left home I was drinking and drugging. Basically I stayed at a real young mental age. Only in the last few years I realised I didn't have to act like that. I can have a decent life. The children changed that. I was giving them what I had as a child and I didn't enjoy that. I wanted to change that" (Father at focus group).*

*"I wanted to relate to my kids and get on with them. I wanted to improve my relationships with children" (Mother at focus group).*

*"I was having a few struggles being a single mum and I wasn't sure what being a mother was. I was still learning about my daughter and how I can be a good mum to her" (Mother at focus group).*

*"Most of us want our kids to respect us. We want them to know us at the end instead of getting to 15 years old and hating us and never wanting to come back. That's what happened to me. I couldn't wait to rock out of home. I only see my mother once a month and she only lives up the road. The relationship you have with your kids – if you have good one with them now then hopefully that will continue when you're older instead of them leaving you in an old folk's home" (Father at focus group).*

*“I have five kids – it was crazy. Someone came into my home and said I ran it like a boot camp. I wanted to better myself as a parent” (Mother at focus group).*

*“I told H (friend) that I was always angry and shouting at my children and I wanted something better. She told me about the programme” (Mother at focus group).*

For others a family crisis of some sort had caused them to seek the programme out.

*“I came because my eldest got into a fight at school and it was dealt with by men and their attitude was ‘everyone fights’. That was what I was up against. No one took it serious enough. Then I found a brochure and I came” (Mother at focus group).*

*“Me and my daughter had an argument and she attacked me and she ended up being arrested and CYFs got involved and it was a big mess” (Mother at focus group).*

*“W (programme facilitator) heard yelling and screaming coming out of my house and he came over and said ‘I know about this course’. I want to break the cycle instead of carrying it on” (Mother at focus group).*

## **IV. Retention of participants**

### **Programme retention rates**

The SPACE national team estimates 80% of parents are retained to the end of the group they are enrolled in. The primary reason most do not complete the programme is because they are returning to paid work. Organisers believe only around 2-3% do not complete because the programme does not suit them (L. Dawson, personal interview, December 2, 2008). Nurturing the Future reported a very low ‘drop-out’ rate and says often people will not complete for personal reasons only to rejoin a new group later (P. Hunt, personal interview December 11, 2008).

All the programmes recognised that being a parent is an ongoing process and, in one way or another, had mechanisms in place to allow parents to continue this journey with them.

### **SPACE**

For some parents, attending this programme is a forerunner to enrolling their child into Playcentre for their early childhood education and also to continue their own learning. Parents manage and are

the early childhood educators in Playcentres, which offer ongoing training in parenting, child development and other aspects of running a cooperative licenced early childhood centre. From the SPACE focus groups of 6 mothers who were or had attended SPACE programmes, 4 were already enrolled or intended to enroll their children in Playcentre at the end of the programme.

## Nurturing the Future

Of the 57 parents from the Nurturing the Future focus groups, 21 were attending the programme for the second, third and even fourth time. Nearly half of the parents were intending to attend the programme again. Nurturing the Future reports that increasingly as families with high needs began to access the programme, many began returning to repeat the programme.

*“What started to happen, the further you get down in the community and the more parents from the harder end came, the more work there was to be done with them. So you’d get them in group and the group would finish and they would book straight back into the next group and we started to get quite a few who would come back in the second and third runs”*  
(P. Hunt, personal interview, December 8, 2008).

As a result Nurturing the Future has established second stage groups – two of them specifically for men – with a facilitator and therapist supporting the group.

## Te Aroha Noa Parent-educators

Parent-educators become increasingly involved in working in the organisation’s early childhood centre as their confidence and knowledge grows. Some plan to train for early childhood education qualifications as a result of what they have learned at Te Aroha Noa.

# V. Parent data on benefits of programmes

## Content and learning

Table 5: Learning reported by parents

Learning <i>(Parents may name more than one learning)</i>	Number times stated		
	Men	Women	Total
Child behaviour knowledge and management strategies (positive parenting)	10	28	<b>38</b>
Relationship building strategies	3	22	<b>25</b>
Child development, brain development knowledge, ages and	2	13	<b>15</b>

stages, what's normal			
How to play with own child, activities with child		10	<b>10</b>
Anger management strategies	6	2	<b>8</b>
Child care knowledge (e.g. starting solids)		2	<b>2</b>

An increased knowledge about children's behaviour was the most common learning parents said they had gained from attending the parenting education programmes – particularly the Nurturing the Future and Te Aroha Noa parents.

*“Coming along doing this I learned to understand my kids. If you can understand them, you can live with them much better. Before everything seemed to be an uphill battle all the time. Now I’m walking on the flat or even going downhill a little. Things don’t seem as hard as they were” (Father at focus group).*

A majority of parents from all programmes said they had gained new positive parenting strategies to deal with children's behaviour and to build relationships.

*“I have more positive options to use in my family. Before I only had this rusty old spanner that had been in the family for generations – whack. Now, look, I’ve got these shiny new tools. I can try these new tools and see them work, not just with the kids but with the partner as well. It’s quite self-reinforcing really” (Father at focus group).*

Many parents gained a new understanding of child development with parents saying this enabled them to learn what was ‘normal’ in children's development which many found reassuring.

*“I learned so much about how wide normal was and how different children could be at the same age” (Mother at focus group).*

Nurturing the Future spent time teaching the fathers in their groups to practise simple anger management techniques during the day whenever fathers were in a situation that would normally anger them. The hope was that they would arrive home at the end of the time calmer and not in a state that they would take their stresses and frustrations out on their children. Nearly all the men in the second stage groups reported this had been an area of effective learning.

## VI. Parent data on programmes' strengths

Parents identified three major elements contributing to the success of the programmes for them:

Table 6: Elements parents identified as contributing to success of programmes

Element (Some parents stated more than one element)	Number times stated
Being in a supportive group environment with other parents	53
The relationships building skills of facilitators leading the group (for example, not judgmental, warmth, humour)	27
The safety of the group environment to encourage open and honest sharing	21

### Supportive groups

Most parents recognised the benefits of the support gained from the group settings of the parenting education programmes.

*"It's reinforcing to know you have people in the same situation as yourself" (Father at focus group).*

*"I like coming and meeting the other mothers. All the learning and knowledge. As kids change, so next time round something new is happening in the group and there are people worse off than you, you find. Personally it gives me more confidence as a parent" (Mother at focus group).*

*"You build up quite a close network between all of you" (Mother at focus group).*

*"It's not like going around to a friend's house to talk. It is the men getting together to focus on parenting" (Father at focus group).*

*"It's lovely having the group setting so we can all talk about things and finding everyone is having similar experiences" (Mother at focus group).*

*"I can see the others are committed to themselves and their families and their children and it makes it easier for me to be here because I am in the same boat. We all have our moments – you go 'fuck it, fuck the children, fuck her, fuck everything, fuck the job, fuck the group' and*

*then you turn up here (to the group) and tell them how you are feeling. And they tell you to get fucked and sort it out” (Laughter) (Father at focus group).*

Parents said the advantage to being in a group was that they were able to find solutions to parenting challenges from others in similar situations.

*“Not everyone is the same, so everyone tries different things and someone says ‘give this a go’ and you go away and try it. You can get 100 ideas and one will work for you. The group gives you other ways of doing things” (Mother at focus group).*

*You might come here three times and see the same thing on the board and it doesn’t click and then one day someone might say something and it’s just like a jigsaw coming together. It’s the piece that you need and it unlocks something. It scares the shit out of you; sometimes it’s like a big slap in the face” (Father in focus group).*

*“Instead of thinking ‘I’m going to kill that kid because that’s what happened to me’ someone in the group will go ‘when my kid did that I decided to do this and if you actually do this it actually uplifts you’. So you come away with a different point of view because everyone has made you look at it. So you’ve come with this thought process in your head that just goes round and round saying ‘he’s a little shit and he needs a good smack’ and your belief system says it’s ok and you justify your behaviour. But you walk out after group thinking ‘I don’t think I will kill him, I’ll just send him to his room’. You need to break your belief system somewhere and that’s what you get here with the others (in the group)” (Father in focus group).*

*Sitting on a battered sofa in the church hall which hosts one of Nurturing the Future’s men’s groups, I hear teenage father Jared (not his real name) talk about life with his partner and a new baby. He’s struggling for the words to describe being left for a short time, caring for a tiny baby, while his partner is out.*

*“Can you soothe him?” asks Trish. Jared shrugs miserably and looks at the floor. He admits the crying is driving him wild. “Incompetent,” says S., a heavily tattooed man in his thirties who is sitting across the room from Jared, “That’s how it makes you feel, incompetent”. He talks for a while about his own feelings of uselessness when he first became a father. “Ask the Missus,” he tells Jared, “She’ll know heaps. Get over it. You’ll feel like a dick but you’ve*

*got to ask her. Then get in there and do it. If you leave it till they're older, it's too late" (Sarah Scott (Ministry of Social Development) "My Visit to the West Coast", 2008).*

*"It takes everyone a while to become part of the group, for them to fit in. Some of us have been coming and going for a while. But if someone is gone for a while, he comes back in and within a couple of minutes the same as before. You can't just say 'yeah' or 'no' you have to be honest about things. I think that's where the group develops. Sometimes if there is an issue and you step over a boundary, we address it as a group and deal with it" (Father at focus group).*

For mothers in the SPACE programme, the social aspect of being a group was enriched by their babies being present with them.

*"I like seeing the way all the babies are growing up in so many different ways" (Mother at focus group).*

*"Even now you can see the babies noticing one another. I really like the way they can socialise with each other" (Mother at focus group).*

## **Skills of facilitators**

Parents recognised that facilitators played a key role in the success of group parenting education programmes.

*"The facilitator is the key. People have gone to other sessions on my recommendation and they have come back and said 'it was stink'. The facilitator at the sessions was not as good as ours. So the facilitator is key and we were very spoilt because we had someone really good" (Mother at focus group).*

It was important that facilitators leading their groups had had similar experiences to the parents themselves, were willing to disclose information about themselves and not present themselves as 'experts'. Being non-judgmental was essential.

*"She is not some guru. She's been where we have been. She realizes how she got to this point instead of being an 'expert'. She is real, she is down to earth. She makes it so it's not*



*unachievable. There is a big trust, she has told us a lot of stuff about herself and you feel you can talk about things and not feel a judgment" (Mother at focus group).*

*"You need someone who's been through ups and downs themselves – someone with street cred. Someone with some dents, life experiences and brutal honesty. You can't dance around an issue. They have to be a parent. They have to be blunt. When you have a lot of men in a group you need someone with honesty" (Father at focus group).*

*"Our facilitator was inspirational – calm and confident and a mother of five. Anything weird she has seen it" (Mother at focus group).*

*"I like the non-expert model" (Mother at focus group).*

A sense of humour was considered an attribute for facilitators.

*"Humour breaks down barriers. It gets the talking happening. But you don't want Robin Williams running things" (Father at focus group).*

The sharing of stories by facilitators and parents was considered an important learning strategy. It was also important that facilitators recognised and responded to different people's individual learning needs.

*"I like coming here because I have ADD and I find it hard to learn but she makes it very easy to learn. I have a short attention span but I have learned a lot" (Mother at focus group).*

Trish Hunt from Nurturing the Future summarises the attributes required by facilitators in her programme:

*"They've got to be able to not judge, to meet people where they are, they've got to be able to walk with them no matter what they have done to their babies regardless, because you get a lot of parents who have done some pretty awful stuff. They've got to have lots of love – they've got to be able to just love them. They've got to be able to work beyond the call of duty because that's what we have to do" (P. Hunt, personal interview, December 9, 2009).*

## Safe environments

Parents felt it was extremely important to have an environment where they felt safe to share what was, for many, difficult information. They acknowledged the important role facilitators had in setting this environment.

*“It is nothing like I thought it was going to be. It’s pretty relaxed and you can say what you want, when you want. You don’t have stuff squeezed out of you if you don’t want to say anything” (Father at focus group).*

Parents felt a crucial part of setting an environment which encouraged sharing was that facilitators leave time and space for parents to share their stories.

*“It’s the whole group thing – it creates a space. There is no judgment, no criticism. Everyone is just so understanding. The group creates a space for everything to be ok” (Mother at focus group).*

*“Its good meeting other women and hearing their stories, listening to others and learning from them. Hearing what’s going on. You get hope from them” (Mother at focus group).*

Organisers agree:

*The environment needs to be extremely safe for parents to tell their stories. The stories told by the parents reveal their belief systems about how they view the world. In my experience these beliefs need to be explored before a start can be made in learning about how to parent their babies. (Hunt, 2008, p. 22)*

Keeping groups small in number was considered essential.

*“We learned to be honest with ourselves and each other. A smaller group and knowing each other helps. It’s reinforcing to know you have people in the same situation as yourself. There is no pass or failure – it is about getting a positive result” (Father at focus group).*

*“If there was 10-12 it wouldn’t work so well, 6-8 would be the maximum number otherwise people would be reluctant to share” (Father at focus group).*

*“There’s security in that you know each other and what you say here, stays here. You wouldn’t get that with a larger group” (Mother at focus group).*

For the Te Aroha Noa parents, a large part of feeling like they were in a safe environment stemmed from them being treated as equals in the early childhood centre team.

*“I like working with a variety of people. All the parent-educators are a team. I love the early childhood centre and working with the children in the centre” (Mother at focus group).*

*“I like that our work is respected and we are paid – that we work together in the centre” (Mother at focus group).*

*“I feel valued and not judged. I like the support from everyone. I like us being together” (Mother at focus group).*

Knowing group discussions were confidential helped participants feel safe.

*The group guidelines are very tight. We work in very small communities so if confidentiality is betrayed by someone then you are asked to leave the group. We have had to ask two to leave in all my time and they’ll never get back in (P. Hunt, personal interview, May 8, 20098).*

## VII. Parent data on suggested improvements to programmes

**Table 7: Improvements suggested by parent focus groups**

Improvements suggested at Nurturing the Future focus group (some parents suggested more than one improvement)	Number times stated
Programme to last longer	6
Provide more widely in community	4
Provide programme especially for step parents	3
More handouts	2
More suitable time (e.g. daytime instead of night time)	2
Group too big	1
Provide baby sitting	1
More suitable time (e.g. morning instead of afternoon)	4
Venue nearer to home	3
Fewer guest speakers	1
Knowing what topics were going to be for sessions in advance	1

Most parents present in the focus groups had few improvements to suggest and most of those they did suggest were minor. Most suggestions were around organisational aspects of the programmes. Many of the parents from Nurturing the Future wanted the core programme to last longer than 10 weeks. For some mothers, it would have been more convenient if the SPACE sessions had been located nearer to them or had been held at a different time (mornings) to fit their baby's sleep patterns. But this had not deterred them from attending and was considered a minor inconvenience. Te Aroha Noa parents had no improvements to suggest.

## VIII. Transformative learning analysis

### Transformative learning triggers

When analysing the parents' stories about what motivated them to enrol in the parenting education programmes, a range of triggers could be identified which led them to begin the process of questioning their (often deeply held) habits of mind and their parenting behaviours. These included:

- A life change (for example, having a first baby and feeling inadequately prepared to do the best for them);
- Traumatic experiences (for example, a family crisis);
- An increasing feeling of dissatisfaction with family relationships and the sense that things could be better (for example, feeling they were shouting and smacking their children too often);
- Learning new information (for example, about children's brain development);
- An experience which led to an eventual questioning of beliefs (for example, parents who attended Nurturing the Future groups at the behest of others and not initially believing they would benefit).

*"I was forced to come, brought here by Corrections. I thought it would be a whole bunch of women talking about a whole bunch of crap and I didn't want to hear it. But I got here and my first time here someone had a big cry and I thought 'shit maybe I will learn something'. So then I looked on it as more of an opportunity" (Mother at focus group).*

## Transformative changes

**Table 8: Changes in parenting behaviours reported by parents**

Changes in own behaviour (Parents may name more than one change)	Number times stated		
	Men	Women	Total
Conscious parenting (realising they do not have to parent the way they were parented, questioning own belief systems)	5	18	<b>23</b>
Communicating, relating better with partner and/or children	4	12	<b>16</b>
Not shouting or getting angry as often	7	9	<b>16</b>
More relaxed		10	<b>10</b>
More confident	2	12	<b>14</b>
More gentle, patient and understanding with children	3	6	<b>9</b>
Not smacking any more	5	3	<b>8</b>

Many of the parents from the Nurturing the Future programme told stories demonstrating they had been through a change process and had begun questioning their personal assumptions about the way they were parented and how this, in turn affected the way they parented their own children. For many, this had caused a real change in the way they related to their children with many of their parenting practices becoming less harsh.

Parents at the focus groups were asked if attending the programmes had changed anything in their parenting behaviours. A majority of parents from the Nurturing the Future programme felt the programme had caused them to question their belief systems – created from their own upbringing.

*“You’re still changing your belief system all the time. It’s like an onion, you just peel away the first layer and there is all these other layers – most of the shit you deal with is belief systems”  
(Father at focus group).*

This had made them realise their parenting is based on the way they were parented and many had not enjoyed their own childhood experiences.

*“I have learned heaps about me and that’s made the difference because my childhood was pretty fucked up and I knew it but I didn’t really know it was affecting my parenting. It was stuff way, way back and the children were able to press my buttons. I had nothing to draw on. I had abusive husbands but with them you can leave but you can’t leave your children. So*

*I had nothing to draw on about what to do. I have learned to listen. To walk away and seek outside help” (Mother at focus group).*

*“My whānau and the childhood they gave me stole my potential. I’ve forgiven them, but I am not going to steal my children’s potential” (Mother at focus group).*

This realisation had caused them to change the way they parent. It particularly affected the way they related to their children and had resulted in a gentler approach to managing their children’s behaviour.

*“You don’t load punishments on top of punishments – that’s what we used to do. Give them a 100 year sentence for something stupid. You can make a small problem so huge. I knew I had to do something. It wasn’t easy, the smacking thing. I’m smacking this little child and I’ve learned you don’t have to smack them. My children, I don’t really discipline now, I just talk to them. I still yell now and then and get pissed off but I don’t parent the way I was parented. It’s still there – rip them out of the bath, throw a towel at them, dry them roughly, put the clothes on them, get them out of there. It’s still there. It’s still a natural thing to do because it’s the model in my head. It will be there until the day I die. But it’s not going to be there for my children” (Father at focus group).*

For many parents the programmes have enabled them to become more relaxed.

*“I’ve learned to relax more. I was probably reading every book learning to be a good parent and I learned to just relax and trust my own instinct and that it is normal to be tired and crabby. I’ve learned to go with the flow” (Mother at focus group).*

*“I’ve learned a lot about my daughter, her behaviours. I’ve learned a lot about myself and that has made me see things in a different light and has made me see my daughter in a different light. I’ve always loved her and cared for her but it’s made me respect her as a person” (Mother at focus group).*

## Transformative learning processes

There were examples of parents moving through the three levels of transformative learning processes. For many it began with reflecting on new content. This might be about children's development and brain development.

*"I've learned that half the time they are not actually being naughty. It's just the age and stage that they are at. Before I didn't realize they didn't know any better. When things go wrong we are actually able to talk about things now rather than him just doing his tanty and me shouting or smacking. For me it's the triggers that start those things – to recognise them and intervene before they get to be a drama" (Mother at focus group).*

This in turn led to a process reflection – reflecting on how they would tackle problems (such as dealing with children's behaviour) in a different way than they had in the past.

*"I don't smack any more. It comes down to your own frustration – is he actually doing something he shouldn't do or is it just me who doesn't want him to do it. You analyse it instead of going straight into 'raaaaugh!'" (Mother at focus group).*

*"Hanging around with C. (3-year-old step daughter with whom he had a difficult relationship). I treat her with respect now. Before I didn't treat her with respect at all, she was just a little kid. Things are real good with her now. It's just made life easier just understanding how little kids think. She's not afraid of me anymore. In the last few days she's started calling me daddy and it's really cute" (Father at focus group)*

*"I've changed not raising my voice at him and I realise I don't really discipline him anyway, basically before I open my mouth I think about it. Whenever he has done something wrong I think about this group first which has helped me heaps" (Mother at focus group).*

*"My boy left a hammer on a rope dangling from the trampoline. What I did I come inside and I sat down, no one else knew I was there. I was fairly angry. I just sat there eh and I just thought 'how am I going to get this out'. I sat there for 15 minutes and then I thought 'ah ... got it'. I just went ... I said 'S...' and he went 'yep?' I said 'do I leave all my tools just laying around?' And he went 'nah'. And he went 'have I left something out?' and I said 'well you*

*might have' and 'why don't I leave them out' and he goes 'cos its not safe'. And I went 'you've left a hammer swinging on a piece of rope which is tied around the trampoline and up through a tree and back down again for a little two year old to come and play with?', I said 'that's just like candy in a candy shop for him mate'. I said 'I know it's your hammer, you can leave it anywhere you want I guess but you have to be responsible. If he picks up that hammer or that hammer gets lodged in his head or something like that for arguments sake ... worse case scenario ... you've got to own that not me.' He goes 'well, ah'. I said 'you've got to go take it off and put it away and put the rope away which your mums told you three times not to tie around the tree'. No anger, no spitting, even my voice wasn't angry. You should've seen him ... he was like ... fucking good, eh" (Father at focus group).*

Some parents changed their view of themselves - overturning both their premise about themselves as parents and how they should respond to children's challenging behaviour. Often they made the link strongly back to their upbringing and what the beliefs that had been instilled in them since childhood.

*"I was brought up you ate everything on the plate – that was a core belief. It wasn't until I was challenged here and she said 'why?' I'm like 'I had to' and she kept on saying 'why?' In the end it just clicked, my kids don't have to eat it all. It goes back to that belief that came from the depression and war and you didn't know where the next food came from" (Father at focus group).*

*"The greatest thing is you are given permission to come out of those beliefs of the family. It's a difficult painful journey. My father still tells me I'm a failure – but I have left that tightly closed system of the family. I've left the whole negative, disappointment, Christian message. For me it's the wrong report – I'm not a failure, I'm not a disappointment and neither are my children" (Mother at focus group).*

The parent educators from the Te Aroha Noa programme allowed them to gain emancipatory knowledge as they changed the way they viewed themselves. They had started as young mothers who were too shy to contribute and were often from failed formal education backgrounds. They had become early childhood educators, working in a professional centre and contributing to young children's learning. They had become confident communicators who had told their stories at conferences of professionals and academics. They had become facilitators of other groups of



mothers, some of whom were older than they. These mothers expressed amazement at the journey they had made and are now setting about achieving the potential they now recognised they had.

*“I started coming to Te Aroha Noa three years ago. Initially I sat quietly on the couch waiting and wondering if I really belonged here. Then I got busy in the kitchen cooking toast and organising tea for the children. One day I was asked if I would like to become a Parent-educator and I accepted this new challenge. I enjoyed interacting with the children, attending training and participating in activities organised by the wider TANCS (Te Aroha Noa Community Services Trust) community. As my own children started school I realized I needed to educate so that I could help them with their homework. I had left school at 14 so I started with NCEA level 1 Maths. So far I have gained 14 credits. My next goal is to complete my certificate in Early Childhood Education”. (Mother’s story, recorded in Te Aroha Noa Community 2008).*

*“I am doing things I never thought I could do – I am only 19 but help run the young mothers’ group – a lot of them are older than me. When I first came here I was shy and quiet and just sat. Now I have become so much more confident as I have learned more. A few years ago I would never have spoken up in a group” (Mother at focus group).*

Data from the SPACE groups revealed changes between those starting the programme and those who had completed it. The observation of the SPACE session took place with a relatively new group and their learning centred mostly on content and data gather about ways they could interact with and take care of their babies.

*“I liked the practical ideas about things like introducing solids, and songs we can sing to our babies” (Mother at focus group).*

But those parents present at the focus group who were well into the programme, or had completed it, had begun to change are able to reflect on the way the programme had affected their parenting. The increased knowledge had changed their attitudes – particularly in terms of being more relaxed as parents.

*“What I changed was to put the books down. I was pouring over the baby whisperer and that was not really healthy” (Mother at focus group).*

*“Everything I learned about child development means I understand children better and that each child is different. I understand my own child better. I react better and our relationship is so much better. I don't get as angry and frustrated as I used to” (Mother at focus group).*

## **IX. Summary of findings**

### **Programme development and structure**

All three programmes were founded by people committed to or from the communities for which the programmes were intended. The programmes had been developed over time with organisers being very responsive to changes in the needs of the communities or as new ones emerged. The philosophies of each programme were very similar and could be summarised as:

*‘A belief in supporting parents through strength-based and community development approaches to improve outcomes for children.’*

All three programmes took a dynamic approach to reviewing their programmes, continually developing and altering both delivery and content to match the needs of their communities. Only one, SPACE, had a manual but the organisers made it plain this was a guide book and not a rule book. The focus for each programme and the way they were delivered were quite different.

- SPACE has a focus on first-time parents and babies. It is structured to deliver its programme in an early childhood education context and usually takes place in Playcentres over 30-40 weeks. It is a national programme.
- Nurturing the Future is focused on parents with children under five (although parents with older children do attend) with a strong focus on the ‘hard-to-reach’. Its 10 week programme is delivered to groups of parents in community settings around the West Coast of New Zealand. It integrates community support approaches into its programme which take place in a community hub, parents’ home, through mobile phone texts and other community locations.
- The Te Aroha Noa Parent-educator model is set in its organisation’s premises in the high decile suburb of Highbury in Palmerston North. It includes the early childhood education

centre in which the parent-educators work alongside teachers with diplomas. It operates within the context of the other services Te Aroha Noa offers its community. Although only small numbers participate in the full parent-educator model (because there is only one ECE centre in which they can work), they have emerged from the other services – including parent education – that all parents from the community are able to participate in.

Curriculum content was similar across the three programmes in that all had a strong child development focus. However, Nurturing the Future had a more overt focus on parents critically reflecting on their own parenting practices within the context of their own childhood and society's view of children.

All three used multiple means to support parents with a strong focus on helping parents build social networks. In recognition that learning and positive change takes time, they all enabled parents to continue on in the programmes in some way.

The SPACE programme had most in common with the universal model of mainstream parenting education shown in *Figure 3: Parenting education, support and training programmes - theoretical approaches* on page 30 although parents learning alongside their children in an early childhood education setting made for a richer experience. Because of its setting within a wider community development model, Te Aroha Noa's parent educator model contains elements of family support (further along the continuum). Nurturing the Future uses all parts of the continuum, based around parent need.

## **Programme recruitment and retention**

All three programmes reported high demand and low attrition rates.

Over 90% of the parents found out about and were encouraged to attend programmes by another person – a 'trusted other' such as a friend, relative or professional. One third of the mothers enrolled because of the intervention of a friend. None of the fathers were recruited this way. Rather it was their partners who either suggested or forcefully insisted they go in all cases except for one whose mother demanded he went. It was also common for parents to be recruited or encouraged to continue by programme facilitators themselves.

Only a few parents actively sought out a programme – except for some of SPACE’s first-time parents who had found themselves home for the first time with a new baby and were worried about becoming socially isolated.

### **Programme benefits (learning)**

The greatest learning cited by parents was about child behaviour and positive parenting strategies. Relationship building strategies was the next most cited learning followed by understandings about broader aspects of child development, particularly brain development.

### **Strengths of the programme**

Two-thirds of parents described ‘being in a supportive group environment with other parents’ as the biggest strength of their programme. All three programmes stated the importance of setting safe environments to allow learning to occur in a social context.

The relationship building skills of facilitators was the next most identified strength with parents describing a number of attributes that were important for facilitators to have – humour, honesty, openness and importantly an understanding of parents’ experiences. For two of the programmes – Nurturing the Future and Te Aroha Noa – the facilitators were involved with the parents in other contexts in the community.

The fathers from Nurturing the Future felt it important to have a male facilitator leading the ‘men only’ groups because they thought this was more likely to encourage sharing of difficult stories. Nurturing the Future facilitators had begun their journey as parents enrolled in earlier groups. They had come from difficult and similar backgrounds as the parents in the more recent groups. Parents felt it was important that facilitators had similar histories to themselves because they felt that facilitators would understand them better and were less likely to judge them.

### **Improvements to the programme**

Some parents wanted the programme be longer, be made more widely available or be expanded to meet specific parenting needs (such as step-parents). Overall parents from all three programmes were extremely satisfied with the programmes and most only offered suggestions for a few minor organisational improvements.

## **Transformative change**

The most common change parents reported was their increased awareness of the way they parented and the affects this has on their children. Many reported they were communicating better with all members of their families and they were not getting as angry as often nor shouting or smacking as much. Many reported they were more relaxed and confident in their parenting.

Te Aroha Noa parent-educators began with a lack of confidence and a view of themselves as education 'failures'. By participating in the programme they now saw themselves as capable learners and educators of young children.

A change in parenting practice was evident when comparing the stories of the mothers who had only been in the SPACE programme for a short while with those of the mothers who were well through or had finished the 30 week programme. None of the mothers in the 'beginning' group articulated much change to their parenting practice. Rather, belonging to the group met immediate social needs and gave them activities and ideas for things they could do with their babies – such as learning songs they could sing to them. However, by the end of the programme some had recognised they had become more relaxed and confident as parents and, in the process of learning new ways to interact with their babies, had also learned how to relate with them better as well.

Many of the Nurturing the Future parents articulated that discovering that their own parenting related to their own upbringing had made them determined to not repeat the same mistakes with their own children that their parents had made with them and this had motivated them to continue in the programme. These parents – through their stories – were most likely to demonstrate their progress through the three levels of transformative learning.

## Chapter Six:

# Discussion and conclusion

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*“We would reconnect communities so they could move from the ‘I’ to the ‘we’. We are herd dwellers and were never meant to live in isolation. Too many communities are disconnected and families are living in isolation and this leaves our youngest and most precious at risk of their potential not being reached. Something that none of us can afford to continue to gamble with” (Trish Hunt, 2008).*

### I. Introduction

Many assume that the ability to parent is innate and one which somehow automatically surfaces when people give birth (Qu and Weston, 2009). But each time the newspaper headlines report a death of a child due to abuse or unintentional injury we are reminded in dramatic fashion that sadly this is not so. Many of those working with families see children on a daily basis suffering poor outcomes because of neglect, poor attachment or because they live in chaotic homes, often with family violence. This provides a reminder that many people, often parenting in isolation, are finding it more and more difficult to connect with others in their communities to learn effective parenting skills. The worry is that with each successive generation, poor parenting practices are being passed on to the detriment of a large number of young New Zealanders and the country’s future.

Governments and social agencies are struggling to find ways to fill the gaps left by the erosion of traditional community support for parents and the passing on of parenting knowledge. One response has been to look to parenting education programmes to help. Although the literature shows that parenting education is beneficial for parents, it also shows that it does not meet the needs of all parents – usually those who need it most. There is a concern that an unreasonable expectation has been placed on what has been essentially a middle class activity to address everyone’s needs. There is a sense that many programmes are failing at this task and that many are wasteful of time, money and resources.

There is evidence that programmes are failing to provide long-term benefits because they are universal programmes with standardised curriculum which have not been developed within communities or in consultation with the parents they are meant to benefit. Often these

programmes try a simple, single approach to complex problems, usually by providing a course offered over a finite number of weeks in isolation from any other multiple or ongoing means of support.

The New Zealand Government announced in 2009 it intended to spend \$45 million on ‘sending’ 12,000 parents of violent or misbehaving school children to attend the Incredible Years programme throughout the country (Beaumont, 2009). On the face of it, this appears to be repeating the mistakes of old. The programme is developed in the United States of America, has a fixed length and a set curriculum and has not been developed with the people it is intended for. Will parents somehow be mandated to attend? Will there be any attempt to embed the programme within communities and provide ongoing and other forms of support? Given that research by Mockford and Barlow (2004) shows that parenting education is more effective for parents earlier in their parenthood than later, is it wise to target the parents of school-aged children rather than parents of very young children? Will it be yet another expensive plan with only limited benefits?

In my work, I had a salutary lesson in the inadvisability of this approach. I had asked a facilitator to consult with the community in a small, provincial town with a largely Māori population with the aim of offering a series of free short-term parenting education courses. In turning the offer down, the community told the facilitator they were ‘sick of having strangers come in with no knowledge of the community, deliver the programme and then leave never to be seen again’.

This study began because there was no clear picture about the critical elements necessary for parenting education to succeed – particularly those elements which would ensure successful attendance, retention and positive learning outcomes for parents, particularly from ‘hard-to-reach’ families.

Findings showed that despite different approaches, all three programmes in this research had beneficial outcomes for parents in the short-term and probably, given the transformational change that took place for some, in the long-term too. Not only that, it showed these programmes had overcome problems commonly reported in the literature by other parenting education programmes. This chapter explores the reasons for this.

## **II. Critical elements for successful programmes**

Five themes emerged as critical elements that contributed to the programmes’ success:

1. The importance of the programmes being embedded in the communities in multiple ways
2. The supportive nature of groups
3. The importance of the facilitator's role.
4. Content that transformed the parents' view of the child (helped parents see children from the viewpoint of the child, rather than that of the adult).
5. Content that helped parents link their parenting practices to their own upbringing.

## **Importance of communities**

In common with the historically most successful parenting programmes in New Zealand – Plunket, Playcentre and Parent's Centre – all three programmes studied were well embedded and responsive to their communities. They achieved this in a range of ways:

- Asking questions and listening to the answers of parents who attended their programmes so they could continually evaluate their content and structure to ensure it matched changing community needs. As a result the programmes were especially tailored for the groups of individuals they know and work with. Because their focus remains fixed on improving the outcomes for these people, they are flexible enough to adjust and change their curriculum as required to meet emerging needs and were not focused on retaining a fixed curriculum with written manuals. This confirms Riley and Bogenschneider's findings (2006) that programme structures need to be flexible to have relevance to parents who will come with a range of habits of mind around child rearing and from a range of situations.
- Programmes had a multiple presence in their communities. This might be through the programme's premises being situated in the community they are being delivered in, by facilitators living in the same community they work in (and so interacting with parents in a range of other contexts beside group meetings) or by providing support and service beyond group sessions (for example advocacy with other agencies, social events and playgroups).
- All three had relationships with other organisations and service providers operating in their communities.

Having dynamic reciprocal and responsive relationships with their communities overcame many of the recruitment and attrition problems other programmes suffer from. A very good example of this was Nurturing the Future recruitment of fathers – many with violence and alcohol and drug issues.



It is very difficult to attract fathers to participate in parenting education programmes with most attended by mothers (Philliber, Brooks, Lehrer, Oakley and Waggoner, 2003). Yet one-third of Nurturing the Future's group members are fathers.

This was achieved partly because the programme is well-known and respected in the community. But mostly it was because while the mothers attend group sessions, facilitators were building relationships with them and gently encouraging them to invite their partners to join too. Often this is reinforced when facilitators meet the whole family out and about in the community - sometimes when they pick the mothers from their homes to drive them to group sessions. This gave them the opportunity to start forming relationships with the men and encourage them to attend. This encouragement from partners and sometimes facilitators is an example of the process described by McGrath (2007) whereby people who have already identified themselves as needing some support require the personal input of at least one other person before they enrol.

Having both partners enrolled in the programme means that Nurturing the Future is also able to address the unintended consequences of women attending courses without their partners (Mockford and Barlow, 2004) where, in changing one parent's approach to parenting but not the other, sometimes a parental conflict is created.

Another recruitment advantage for programmes such as Nurturing the Future and Te Aroha Noa being rooted in their local communities is that they are very accessible when families are facing a crisis - a time when parents are more likely to seek support (Zeedyk et al., 2008).

Some of the parents had identified institutional barriers (such as distance from venue and timing) yet regarded them as a minor inconvenience compared with the benefits they felt they derived from the programme.

This may fit the work of Wellington et al., 2006 who examined the behavioural beliefs of those who intended to participate (intenders) in a parenting education programme and those who did not (non-intenders). They discovered that intenders were more likely to focus on the benefits of attending a group whereas the non-intenders focused on the costs of participation, for example the cost of transport or difficulties organising childcare.

## **Role of supportive groups**

Parents confirmed findings that learning about being a parent in a group is the best and most effective way to learn.

*“We learned to be honest with ourselves and each other. It helps with a smaller group and knowing each other. It’s reinforcing to know you have people in the same situation as yourself” (Father in focus group).*

All three programmes provided the time and the opportunity to allow groups to grow, relationships to develop and discussion to happen. They recognised that effective parenting education is more than the provision of information in two hour parenting education sessions over a number of weeks. They went beyond just providing group sessions and actively tried to develop environments where parents supported parents. They recognised that social links reduce isolation experienced by many parents and also helps to normalise the experience of parenting. They provided ongoing and multiple support mechanisms to allow parents to continue to develop as parents confirming Wellington et al (2006) that group programmes are more successful in the long-term in changing parenting behaviour than one-to-one programmes. Writers such as Cranton (2006) stress the importance of providing on-going support when people are undergoing particularly challenging transformational change.

Group processes were also clearly revealed as an effective transformative learning mechanism particularly with the parents from Nurturing the Future when they considered how their own parenting related to their own upbringing. The groups provided an opportunity for this reflective process to take place. In a group, parents can provide support, understanding, respect and caring to each other while they discuss alternative views on positively influencing children’s behaviour and look at their own parenting assumptions and where these came from. This is in line with both neuroscience findings and transformative learning theory that the human brain learns best when reflecting and in dialogue with others.

This confirms findings in the professional literature that show parents like having other parents as a resource for problem solving (Miller and Sambell, 2003) and in preference to experts (Smith, 2000).

## **Importance of the facilitator’s role**

This study confirmed others that facilitators obviously play a key role in setting a group environment if participation by parents is to be encouraged. This is particularly important if parents are to reveal

their own backgrounds and parenting beliefs and it is essential they are able to do this if they are to question those beliefs as a precursor to being able to parent consciously. It is also important if relationships are to be built to encourage parents to begin supporting each other in the group and in the wider community.

Facilitators in these programmes expressed a strong belief in parents' potential to be good parents both in what they said and how they related to the parents. One facilitator told parents:

*"I'll believe in you until you start believing in yourself" (P.Hunt, recorded in researcher's journal, November, 2008).*

This strength-based approach and communication of their belief in parents appeared especially important in creating a sense of trust particularly for parents from 'hard-to-reach' families. This seemed to help them feel they were safe to participate more deeply in the groups. Facilitators from Nurturing the Future were members of the community themselves and as such interacted with parents in other contexts and this deepened the sense of trust between them.

This confirmed neuroscience findings about the importance of facilitators in providing an emotionally empathetic environment for people to learn in.

## **Content that changed parents' view of the child**

Parents' increased understanding of their children's development and behaviour resulted in improved relationships with their children because it seemed to help them to 'disengage' from their children's behaviour and enable them view it more dispassionately from a developmental perspective rather than their being 'naughty'. This made it easier for them to respond in a positive and less harsh fashion. The beneficial outcome for the children was less harsh parenting and better relationships.

Part of parents' increased understanding came from the opportunity to compare their children's development with others in the groups. According to the literature being able to normalise their children's development by sharing experiences with other parents is a common benefit cited by parents from parenting groups (McGrath, 2007).

Another outcome from this better understanding of children was an increased awareness by parents that they can have a beneficial impact on their children's development (Invest in Kids Foundation in Canada, 1999). Research has shown that parents are not always aware of the strong impact they have on their children's development. The three programmes helped parents realise this – SPACE and Te Aroha Noa programmes by focusing on ways to help children's early learning and development; Nurturing the Future through its brain development workshop.

Parents from Nurturing the Future were particularly affected by this workshop, provided at the beginning of the programme. Besides emphasising the impact they have on their children's development, it explained for many parents who had experienced difficult childhoods themselves what had happened to them – how they had their 'potential stolen'. For many this seemed to provide motivation and a determination to not repeat the same patterns for their own children.

Studies have shown that there is a level of fatalism for families in low socio-economic situations with low expectations and erosion of hope (Department of Education and Employment (UK) cited in Hoghughi and Long, 2004, p. 14). Perhaps this new understanding of the powerful positive effect they *can* have on their children's development may help overcome these fatalistic feelings and motivate more positive interactions with their children. This may explain one of the processes at work in research that demonstrates parenting education can minimise poor outcomes for children living in families with risk factors such as poverty, low levels of parents' education and high birth rates (Guo and Harris, 2000).

## **Content that linked parenting practice with own childhood**

Many parents reported they had become more conscious about their parenting and realised they did not have to parent the way they were parented. The most powerful evidence of transformative change and beneficial outcomes came from the Nurturing the Future programme. A large component of the content of this programme was parents connecting their childhood experiences with the way they parent their own children. Siegel and Hartzell (2004) state that in the absence of this self-reflection, history often repeats itself, and parents will pass on to their children "unhealthy patterns from the past" (p. 4). Many of the parent stories demonstrated self-reflection had taken place. Indeed, wanting to break the unhealthy patterns from the past motivated many of the parents to reenrol time and again in the programme.

Benefits from this self-reflective approach were expressed by many of the parents in the focus groups – including those from the higher deprivation areas. Most encouraging was the transformative change expressed by those who came with family violence and drug and alcohol issues. Many of these stories came from the fathers many of whom came from physically abusive and chaotic backgrounds (often involving alcohol) and who had been repeating these patterns with their own children. This confirms research that people “who themselves did not have ‘good enough’ parents or who even have had traumatic childhoods can make sense of their lives and have healthy relationships” with their children (Siegel and Hartzell, 2004, p. 5).

### **III. Transformative change in parenting behaviour**

All three programmes showed that transformative learning and change can be gained through attending group parenting programmes. The triggers for starting the change process varied among parents, confirming the literature that triggers could range from traumatic events or crises to being confronted with new information that was out of alignment with their prior beliefs. The experiences of the parents in this study confirmed that dialogue in groups and allowing them to reflect together was essential in achieving transformative learning and for supporting long-term change.

All three programmes were able to trigger conscious parenting behaviours and the Nurturing the Future programme was remarkably successful in stimulating this reflective process by enabling parents to link their own traumatic childhoods with their parenting behaviours. Many of the parents demonstrated moving through the three levels of content, process and premise reflection and changed many of their values and beliefs.

*“You’re still changing your belief system all the time. It’s like an onion, you just peel away the first layer and there is all these other layers – most of the shit you deal with is belief systems”  
(Father at focus group).*

### **IV. Areas for further research**

There is a growing evidence supporting ‘what works’ in parenting education, although some of this is contradictory and much of it set in other countries such as the United States of America or the

United Kingdom. However there are a number of areas which need to be investigated in the context of New Zealand. In particular:

- how can transformative change in parents knowledge and attitudes be maximised so it can be translated into long-term changes in behaviour;
- what other community approaches are there nationally which are successfully reducing the numbers of people parenting in isolation and recruiting those most on the margins; and
- how can 'hard-to-reach' fathers in particular be encouraged to take part in programmes which ensure better outcomes for them and their children.

## **V. Conclusion**

This study discovered that parenting education can have a role in reducing this country's rate of child abuse and neglect; it can help improve outcomes for children; it can reduce the number of parents parenting in isolation and it can help parents develop as warm, loving nurturers of their children.

However, it also discovered that to achieve these high expectations, parenting education should be set in a community development context. Planners, developers and implementers of programmes would do well to look to the past when iconic parent support movements such as Plunket, Playcentre and Parent's Centre were so much a part of their communities they were able to be very responsive to parents' needs.

Despite differences in their structure and focus, the three parenting programmes in this research overcame many problems commonly reported by other parenting education programmes particularly in the recruitment and retention of parents. One was able to successfully recruit both fathers and crisis ridden families to its groups - both rare achievements in other parenting education programmes. Parents' stories from the programmes - often powerful - revealed that transformative learning and positive change had occurred for many of them by attending these programmes. There were short-term benefits and because of the transformative learning, long-term benefits were also likely.

This study showed that one size of parenting education programme does not fit all and that simple approaches do not solve complex problems. It suggests that programmes, developed outside of communities and delivered by strangers, may have some limited benefit for parents, especially for

those with lower needs. However they will not be as beneficial as those developed with and embedded in the communities, delivered in groups with a range of ongoing and multiple means of support woven through them. Nor will short-term universal programmes be as successful as those which include and consult with the people from the communities they want to reach.

Results from this study suggest that group parenting education programmes should contain the following elements. They should:

- Be developed and embedded within communities to meet the needs of local parents and be flexible enough to respond to changing and emerging needs – consultation should take place and be ongoing.
- Be designed and delivered by people who understand and are committed to their communities and who genuinely believe in people's potential, no matter their past histories.
- Be delivered by facilitators from the community they are offered in or who have similar background and experiences as the parents the programmes are targeted at.
- Be offered in groups – preferably of only six to eight people – with a focus on maximising social group learning processes.
- Ensure group sessions have the time and space for discussion and the sharing of stories to take place.
- Include content that helps adults understand and deal with children's development and behaviour – children's brain development content is highly recommended. All content should be evidence based.
- Provide parents with the opportunity to self-reflect on their own childhood and how this links with their own parenting practice to enable them to 'consciously parent'.
- Enable parents who require more intense support to continue to be engaged with their programme in multiple ways for as long as they need.

- Help develop parents' potential within the groups by expanding their social networks and building communities where parents support parents to become self-sufficient.
- Remove as many institutional and logistical barriers to recruitment and retention (for example, provide childcare and transport) as is practical.

Findings also revealed what elements are *not* necessary for programmes to be successful. None of the programmes had proscribed, inflexible curriculum with accompanying set manuals. The focus of all three remained firmly on good outcomes for their parents and they were prepared to change their content and delivery to keep that focus.

They did not use didactic models led by 'experts' focusing on 'teaching' parents skills in response to their children's behaviour. Rather they helped parents understand their children (through providing learning on child development) and themselves (by providing an opportunity for parents to reflect on their own parenting practices in relation to their own upbringing).

The three programmes demonstrated that it is essential for parenting education programmes to focus on relationship building to help communities rebuild declining traditional support structures for families and enable people to parent together – moving from the 'I' to the 'we'. They were achieving this by actively encouraging parent development and confidence and enabling parents-to-support-parents. Their success offers hope for those parents who did not have a nurturing childhood themselves, that they too can learn to positively parent their children in warm and loving relationships.

*"Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see" (Whitehead, 1983, p. 3).*



## Appendix I

# Researcher's Biography

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**Claire Rumble** is currently the Royal New Zealand Plunket Society's National Parenting Education Advisor, responsible for overseeing programmes which enable parents to meet under the Plunket umbrella in support groups, play groups and parenting education groups. These reach over 15,000 parents a year.

Plunket's core parenting education programme – PEPE – is delivered throughout the countryside by a team of facilitators drawn from Plunket's volunteer base and also its Karitane and Kaiawhina. Claire is responsible for their training and the programmes development, curriculum development, resources and quality assurance.

Currently Claire is part of a Plunket team exploring the possibilities of e-Parenting which is looking at using new technology both for e-learning and as a method of supporting parents.

She is a life member of the Wellington Playcentre Association and Karori Playcentre. She has been a Playcentre adult educator and tutor for 16 years and also served as President of the Wellington Playcentre Association and on the Association's Education Team for many years. She has a NZ Playcentre Federation Diploma. As a Playcentre tutor she helps parents acquire Playcentre qualifications and has taken a particular interest in children's early learning, storytelling and play – particularly superhero and rough and tumble play.

In 2006, with Marie Ellis, she wrote *Child Development and Behaviour: A Resource for Supporters of Parents* a module for the Ministry of Social Development SKIP Positive Parenting framework.

Claire's work experience includes a short stint as a lecturer at the Wellington Technical Institute and as a part-time professional development facilitator in early childhood education centres for Wellington College of Education.

She has also served as member and chair person of the Otari School Board. This is a unique primary school in Wellington which has three strands – a Montessori, total Māori immersion and mainstream – all operating beside one another.

Recently Claire completed a B-Ed (Adult Education) and a PGDip. (Adult Education) with distinction at Massey University.

Brought up on a Wairarapa hill country farm, Claire was fortunate enough to attend a small country school before completing her education at a private secondary school for girls. She was a journalist for many years both in New Zealand and overseas before she had her children (Siân and Caitlin, now both grown up) which led her to Playcentre and her journey into adult and parenting education.

## Appendix II

### Details of questions for programme organisers

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- What is the history of your programme?  
*Information to draw out*
- how it came about
- how long operating
- why implemented, what was the need being responded to
- how has it changed since its inception
  
- How would you describe the philosophy of the programme?  
*Information to draw out*
- is there a clear philosophy
- what are the underlying values of the programme
- has the philosophy changed over time
  
- Who is the programme's target group?  
*Information to draw out*
- who is the programme aimed at
- is this the group that does access and participate, are there exceptions
- any overall demographic statistics of those who have participated in programme
- how is the group encouraged to participate
  
- How is the programme delivered?  
*Information to draw out*
- structure of programme
- timing, venues
- how are facilitators chosen?
- training of those delivering programme
- methods used to deliver programme
- content of the programme
  
- How successful is the programme?  
*Information to draw out*
- results of any evaluations done on programme outcomes
- anecdotal examples of programme outcomes
- attendance and retention statistics – do they match target groups
- opinion on why programme is effective
- are there any barriers you are aware of which stop the programme being even more effective than it is?
- reflection on quality of programme
- reflection on how well parents' needs are met
- retention information
  
- From your perspective, how might the programme be improved in the future?  
What is your vision for the programme in the future?  
*Information to draw out*
- reflection on possible improvements to programme
- responsiveness to needs of the future

## Appendix III

# Ethics documents

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Included in this Appendix are:

- **Māori Health Services Team consultation Letter**
- **Documents for programme organisers**
- II. Explanatory letter
- III. Participant Information Sheet
- IV. Consent form for programme organisers
- **Documents for parent participants**
- Participant Information Sheet
- Participant Consent Form

# Royal New Zealand Plunket Society (Inc.)



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Dr Karl Pajo  
Chair  
Massey University Human Ethics Committee  
Massey University/Te Kunenga ki Purehuroa  
Private Bag 11222,  
Palmerston North

1 October 2008

Tēnā koe Dr Pajo

This is to inform you that I am pleased to act as cultural advisor on Claire Rumble's Masters thesis "Group parenting education – enabling successful participation".

We meet regularly to discuss various aspects of our work and I am happy to continue to work with her to provide a Māori perspective to her research.

nāku noa

nā Ripeka Ellison  
Manager, Maori Health Relationships



## Massey Letterhead

Date

Dear [name of organizer]

As previously discussed [on the telephone][by email], I am writing to invite your organization to take part in my research project which will lead to a Masters Thesis with Massey University. The project I am undertaking is examining the elements in parenting programmes which contribute to parents choosing to participate and how these programmes benefit people's parenting. I am particularly interested in successful strategies that encourage participation from parents from areas and social groups who don't normally choose to participate in formal parenting education.

I am hoping that in uncovering these successful elements and strategies that I then might use this knowledge in the design and implementation of Plunket's parenting education programmes.

Your input will aid this research in two ways:

- IX. Participating in a face-to-face interview with me about your programme
- X. Inviting past and current parents from your programme to take part in a group discussion about their experiences of your programme and how their families have benefited from these experiences.

I have included information sheets giving details about both of these aspects of my research and the consent forms for participants.

If you agree to your organization being part of this study, I will contact you to discuss the time and place that we might meet and the setting up of the group discussion of parents. I am able to travel to you for both the interview and the group discussion and will meet any agreed expenses incurred by your organization in taking part in this research.

I will distribute to you the final research report which will collate and analyse a variety of effective strategies used by parenting educators.

Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Yours sincerely

Claire Rumble  
National Parenting Education Advisor  
Royal New Zealand Plunket Society  
D/D (04) 474 1515

cell phone number 0212595970

Email: [claire.rumble@plunket.org.nz](mailto:claire.rumble@plunket.org.nz)

## Massey Letterhead

### Participant Information Sheet for a Study of Parenting Education Programmes

#### Researcher:

Claire Rumble, National Parenting Education Advisor, Royal New Zealand Plunket Society

#### Introduction

I am a Masters student in Adult Education at Massey University. As part of this degree I am undertaking a research project leading to a thesis. The project I am undertaking is examining the elements in parenting programmes which contribute to parents choosing to participate and what it is about them that benefit people's parenting.

#### Project description

I am inviting you as an organizer of a recognised parenting education programme to participate in this study entitled: *Group Parenting Education – Enabling Successful Participation*. The project will identify the strategies used in three programmes which result in the attendance, retention and positive learning outcomes for those parents involved in each programme. I am particularly interested in successful strategies that encourage participation from parents from areas and social groups who don't normally choose to participate in parenting education.

#### Project procedures

As a participating organiser I am inviting you to take part in a face-to-face interview with me describing your programme. During the interview I will ask you about the following:

- VII. History of your programme
- VIII. Philosophy
- IX. Target group including overall demographics of those participating
- X. Delivery and content of the programme (including methods and organizational information such as venues, timing, curriculum)
- XI. Information on evaluation of programme outcomes
- XII. Planned improvements and vision for the future

Interviews will take approximately one hour to complete and, with your permission, I will record the interview on audio tape. The interview will occur at a time and place of your choosing and I will meet any costs involved to you in participating including any travel or mileage costs.

I am also inviting interested parents who have been or currently are part of your programme to take part in a focus conversation group meeting to describe their experiences in the programme and outcomes on their lives as parents. I have included with this sheet a copy of the information sheet describing these groups. It is important that parents be invited to participate in these groups on a voluntary basis only and will discuss with you the best way that I can approach parents from your programme to invite them to participate in such a group

Responses collected from both the interviews and the focus conversation groups will form the basis of my research project and will be put into a written report on an anonymous basis. It will not be possible for participants to be identified personally in the report.

The thesis will be submitted for marking to Massey University's Graduate School of Education and deposited in the University Library. The findings from the thesis will be used to inform my work in implementing and improving parenting education programmes nationally from the Royal NZ Plunket Society. It is intended that one or more articles will be submitted for publication in scholarly journals.

### **Data Management**

All material collected will be kept confidential. No other person besides me and my supervisors, Dr Marg Gilling and Linda Polaschek (contact details below) will see material from the interviews. The audio tapes made during the study, the computer records of any transcriptions along with all other written data will be kept on restricted access for five years (stored on electronic file accessed by a password in the control of the researcher), after which all material will be destroyed. No material that could identify participants will be used, published results will not use names and no opinions will be attributed in any way that will identify participants.

### **Participant's Rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- III. decline to answer any particular question;
- IV. withdraw from the study without question at any time before the data is analysed;
- V. ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- VI. provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- VII. receive a summary of the project findings when it is concluded. This will be posted to the address you include on the consent form.

### **Project Contacts**

If you have any questions or would like to receive further information about the project, please contact me or my supervisors.

Claire Rumble  
RNZ Plunket Society  
Ph (04) 474 1515  
Email: [claire.rumble@plunket.org.nz](mailto:claire.rumble@plunket.org.nz)

### **Supervisors:**

Dr Marg Gilling  
Massey University College of Education  
Ph: (06) 356 9099, ext 8851  
Email: [m.gilling@massey.ac.nz](mailto:m.gilling@massey.ac.nz)

Linda Polaschek  
RNZ Plunket Society  
Ph (04) 474 1528  
Email: [linda.polaschek@plunket.org.nz](mailto:linda.polaschek@plunket.org.nz)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 08/44. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Karl Pajo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 04 801 5799 x 6929, email [humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz)

## Massey Letterhead

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

**Title of project:**

**Group Parenting Education – Enabling Successful Participation**

I, .....have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction. I understand what the study will involve for me. I have had sufficient time to decide whether I wish to take part. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I may withdraw myself (or any information I have provided) from this project before data collection and analysis is complete without having to give reasons or without penalty of any sort.

I agree that the information I give, including my own words, may be used in the study report. I agree that the tapes of the interview and computer records of any transcriptions (which will be stored on electronic file accessed by a password) will be kept on restricted access for one year after the completion of the research. I understand that no material that could identify me will be used and any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and the supervisors. The published results will not use my name and no opinions will be attributed to me in any way that will identify me.

I agree to the information I supply being used for educational purposes in presentations or publications. I understand that the data I provide will not be used for any other purpose than that stated or released to others without my written consent.

I know that if I have any concerns about any aspect of the study before, during or after my participation, I can discuss these with either of my supervisors (contact details below).

I agree to take part in this research.

Signed: .....

Please print name clearly: .....

Date: .....



I would like to receive a summary of the results of this research when it is completed.

(If yes, please include postal address and this will be posted to you)

.....

.....

**Supervisors:**

Dr Marg Gilling

Massey University College of Education

Ph: (06) 356 9099, ext 8851

Email: [m.gilling@massey.ac.nz](mailto:m.gilling@massey.ac.nz)

Linda Polaschek

RNZ Plunket Society

Ph (04) 474 1528

Email: [linda.polaschek@plunket.org.nz](mailto:linda.polaschek@plunket.org.nz)

## Massey Letterhead

### Participant Information Sheet for a Study of Parenting Education Programmes

#### Researcher:

Claire Rumble, National Parenting Education Advisor, Royal New Zealand Plunket Society

#### Introduction

I am a Masters student in Adult Education at Massey University. As part of this degree I am undertaking a research project leading to a thesis. The project I am undertaking is examining the elements in parenting programmes which contribute to parents choosing to participate and what it is about them that benefit people's parenting.

#### Project description

I am inviting organizers and parents from three recognised parenting education programmes to participate in this study entitled: *Group Parenting Education – Enabling Successful Participation*. The project will identify the strategies used in these three programmes which result in the attendance, retention and positive learning outcomes for those parents involved in each one.

#### Project procedures

You are invited as a member participant in *Nurturing the Future* to take part in a group meeting to discuss your experiences in the programme and the outcome on your life as a parent.

It is proposed that these group meetings be held at a time and venue to suit you. The meeting will be held as a relaxed and informal discussion group and take about two hours to complete. Refreshments will be provided and any travel costs such as parking and mileage expenses (at 0.62c/km) will be met.

I will be present at the meeting and will ask you and the other parents to discuss and comment on the following:

- Why you chose to join the programme
- What difference being part of the programme has made to your family and your parenting
- What do you like about the programme
- What would be your ideal if you were designing a programme for parents

I will record the group discussion on audio tape which I will transcribe segments of myself. All group participants will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement to protect the privacy of those taking part in the group discussions. A copy of the consent agreeing to participate and confidentiality form is included.

I will also be interviewing organizers of your parenting programme to gain information about other aspects of the programme.

Responses collected from your group will form the basis of my research project and will be put into a written report on an anonymous basis. It will not be possible for participants to be identified personally in the report.

The thesis will be submitted for marking to Massey University's Graduate School of Education and deposited in the University Library. The findings from the thesis will be used to inform my work in implementing and improving parenting education programmes nationally for the Royal NZ Plunket Society. It is intended that one or more articles will be submitted for publication in scholarly journals.

### **Data Management**

All material collected will be kept confidential. No other person besides me and my supervisors, Dr Marg Gilling and Linda Polaschek (contact details below) will see material from the interviews. The audio tapes made during the study, the computer records of any transcriptions along with all other written data will be kept on restricted access for five years (stored on electronic file accessed by a password in the control of the researcher), after which all material will be destroyed. No material that could identify participants will be used, published results will not use names and no opinions will be attributed in any way that will identify participants.

### **Participant's Rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- VIII. decline to answer any particular question;
- IX. withdraw from the study without question at any time before the data is analysed;
- X. ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- XI. provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- XII. receive a summary of the project findings when it is concluded. This will be posted to the address you include on the consent form.

### **Project Contacts**

If you have any questions or would like to receive further information about the project, please contact me or my supervisors.

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## Massey Letterhead

**Title of project:**

**Group Parenting Education – Enabling Successful Participation**

**Researcher Information:** Claire Rumble, National Parenting Education Advisor, RNZ  
Plunket, Ph (04) 474 1515, Email: [claire.rumble@plunket.org.nz](mailto:claire.rumble@plunket.org.nz)

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to not disclose anything discussed in the Focus Discussion Group

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

I would like to receive a summary of the results of this research when it is completed.  
(If yes, please include postal address and it will be posted to you)

.....  
.....

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Full Name - printed**

## Appendix IV

# Programme information

### • Supporting Parents Alongside (their) Children's Education (SPACE)



#### SPACE Supporting Parents Alongside Children's Education



**WHAT IS SPACE?** SPACE is a programme for mainly first time parents and babies. A SPACE programme meets weekly for 30 to 40 weeks in a relaxed and baby friendly environment and provides:

- Opportunities for parents to meet and get to know one another
- Play sessions with age-appropriate equipment that supports infants learning and development
- Discussions and information on relevant child development and parenting topics
- An introduction to rhymes, music and books for infants
- 

**HOW OLD ARE THE BABIES WHEN JOINING SPACE?** Babies joining a new SPACE session are usually between two weeks to three months of age. There are sometimes opportunities for older babies to join in with an existing SPACE or Playcentre session depending on the availability of places.

**WHO RUNS THE SPACE SESSIONS?** Experienced and trained Facilitators run the weekly sessions, along with a Support Person. Facilitators have Playcentre diploma qualifications and have completed an extensive SPACE Facilitators Training programme.

**WHAT DOES A TYPICAL SPACE SESSION INCLUDE?** A typical session runs for up to 2 ½ hours, and usually includes:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| VII. A welcoming and settling in time     | 1. A thought for the session               |
| VIII. An ice-breaker or sharing time      | 2. Music, rhymes and introduction to books |
| IX. A discussion topic (or Guest Speaker) | 3. Morning or afternoon tea                |

**WHAT ARE SOME OF THE DISCUSSION TOPICS COVERED IN SPACE?** The SPACE programme is divided into three units and covers a range of topics. Some of the discussion topics covered in Unit 1 and 2 include:-

- |   |                            |
|---|----------------------------|
| X. Getting to know you and your baby          | 4. Establishing attachment |
| XI. Sleeping                                  | 5. Heuristic play          |
| XII. Natural Movement                         | 6. How much is enough?     |
| XIII. Uniquely you: Understanding temperament | 7. The beauty of the brain |
| XIV. Music                                    | 8. Meaningful men          |

Unit 3 is an Introduction to Early Childhood areas of play and a short Course covering an orientation to Playcentre and Early Childhood Education and Care. Some of the areas of play explored and discussed in Unit 3 include:

- |                   |               |                |   |
|-------------------|---------------|----------------|---|
| XV. Blocks        | 9. Puzzles    | 10. Water play | 11. Encouraging Playfulness                         |
| XVI. Paintin<br>g | 12. Sand play | 13. Playdough  | 14. Outdoor play & challenge courses<br>for infants |

**Handouts on the discussion topics and areas of play are available each session for parents.**

**WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIVES OF SPACE?** The SPACE programme has four objectives:-

- **Children's Education:** to increase participation of children in early childhood education at an early age, provide a quality curriculum and maximise children's learning from birth
- **Parenting:** to ease the transition to parenthood; support parents in their role as the best and most important educators of their children; and help parents to recognise, support and extend their child's learning and development
- **Support:** provide parents with support and encouragement from one another and experienced facilitators as they share the journey through their child's early months
- **Links:** give parents an opportunity to hear from, and develop links with a range of community organisations and service providers

The objectives and practices of SPACE are in line with the three goals of the Early Childhood Strategic Plan Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki, to:-

- Increase participation in quality ECE services
- Improve quality of ECE services
- Promote collaborative relationships

The SPACE programme was chosen as a Ministry of Education 'Centres of Innovation' research project. This research project looked at 'How the SPACE programme implemented at Te Marua/Mangaroa Playcentre supports and fosters parents and infants learning, and supports collaborative relationships across the community and agencies'. The three year research project was completed in December 2007.

**WHERE IS SPACE?** The SPACE programme was initially developed and piloted by the Hutt Playcentre Association in 2003. Other Playcentre Associations throughout the country are underway with starting or planning to start SPACE in their area. For more information on where SPACE is running, visit the SPACE website [www.space.org.nz](http://www.space.org.nz) and refer to 'Sessions' for contact details.

**HOW FAMILIES CAN ENROL** - Families can contact a Playcentre Association that is running SPACE programme in their region (see contact details on [www.space.org.nz](http://www.space.org.nz)).

**HUTT SPACE NATIONAL TEAM** (from the Hutt Playcentre Association) supports the growth and sustainability of the programme nationally. The team can be contacted at [space.nz@paradise.net.nz](mailto:space.nz@paradise.net.nz).

# Nurturing the Future

## Handout for parents

### Strategies taught during NTF Core Programme

- We are the architects and builders of our children's brains.
- The first 3 years to lay the foundation, 11 years to influence the design and 18 years to emotionally support. Remember children under 3 years have no cortex, so we cannot discipline them for what they are unable to do.
- We cannot discipline brain development.
- Speak to the parietal lobe and we will have a 75% chance of compliance.
- I have the power to bring joy or pain to my child.
- Work in the 'we' – 'we are going to put things away' rather than 'you clean that up'.
- Avoid 'don't'; 'stop' and 'no; use the positive. 'Please stand on the floor' rather than 'don't jump on the chair'.
- Children live in Planet Childhood – use your cortex when we visit
- Children naturally do childish things – they are children.
- Parents (*who have their own 'shit' together*) are allowed to be the boss.
- There's always room for negotiation.
- Have a plan.
- Our children need us to be their parents not their best friend.
- Check my belief system.
- Check before I speak – is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?
- The spoken word has enormous power to build or break down.
- None of us are 'good' all the time.
- Don't sweat the small stuff – choose your moments.
- Discipline = 'to bring forth the best'.
- One crime – one punishment.
- Ask before we do – is it respectful? Related? Reasonable?
- Saying 'sorry' should always be accompanied with an action.
- Each night (10 mins) – take stock together – 'How was your day?' What was the best thing about it? What was the worst thing?
- Don't let the sun set on anger.
- Parenting should be a joy!
- Talk to me, with me not at me.
- Sing, laugh, move.

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