

Confidence keeps new parents strong

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Support for the family can have a profound effect on a child's future. Credit: Karitane

Just months after her daughter Jayne was born, Amelia was a sleep-deprived zombie. Breastfeeding was a nightmare, the baby kept her awake most of the night – and Amelia spiralled into postnatal depression.

It's a familiar story for many new parents. Without support, however, these experiences can have long-term effects on parent-child relationships and child development.

A five-day residential visit to a Karitane family support and education centre turned things around for Amelia and Jayne, a transformation Amelia later described as life changing for her family.

"I was feeling supremely confident I could now cope," she wrote in a thank-you letter to Karitane.

Education and support for parents such as that delivered by Karitane, Tresillian family care centres and through local health districts can have a profound effect on children's futures.

Education expert Dr Nick Hopwood is heading a three-year research project to identify the most effective ways parenting services help families to build confidence and resilience through learning new skills.

"We know that in the early years, particularly between the ages of birth and four, parents and parenting behaviours exert an extremely strong influence on child development and wellbeing," says Dr Hopwood, a senior lecturer at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

"We also know that those early years have a long and lasting legacy throughout life. The later you leave it, the harder it is to change."

Researchers at the Telethon Kids Institute analysed longitudinal data from the Australian Early Development Census for children from the ages of five to 14.

Their research supports the importance of early child development strategies to close the learning gap and improve equity.

They found that children starting school with good scores on the Early Development Index remained on better educational trajectories throughout their school years than those beginning school with poor early development scores, irrespective of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

However, the gap widens for those starting with low scores. Children from a high socioeconomic background improved their educational trajectories at a greater rate.

Dr Hopwood and co-researcher Dr Teena Clerke will initially follow the work of child and family health professionals working with families in need in NSW, tracking their relationships with parents and documenting their impact. This new project will focus on more common and lower cost services.

In the first phase, they will concentrate on home-visiting and day-stay services, collaborating with Karitane, Tresillian and Northern Sydney Local Health District. Subsequently, the research will be extended to other parts of Australia.

Dr Hopwood says the value of his project is to "look at these kinds of services through different eyes, through educational eyes, and find different ways of bottling the magic of what works well".

He says many Australian professionals adopt the Family Partnership Model developed in Britain by the Centre for Parent and Child Support, a project partner.

"Educating parents is not about experts giving a diverse group of parents a universal recipe for good parenting," Dr Hopwood says.

Sally Lee, a clinical nurse consultant in child and family health at

Karitane, says families can struggle with all sorts of challenges that affect [child development](#).

"Some parents have very high expectations of what parenting will be like, and the reality can be very different," Lee says.

Anxiety and depression in new parents is common but can be eased when parents gain skills and confidence in developing their relationship with their baby, she says. "Part of the role is broaching subjects that are not always talked about and doing it in a respectful way."

Dr Hopwood's previous research shadowed nurses in Karitane's residential unit at Carramar, where the often stressed-out parents of young children received intensive, live-in support and education in a five-day program. That work led to a model now used in all casework reviews.

"It's a way to think differently about how we work with families and lets us break down the most effective practice into what we did and how we did it," Lee says.

Working in partnership with families intensifies the learning aspect of the professional's work, Dr Hopwood says.

"When their role is not to solve a problem but to help parents solve problems themselves and anticipate future ones and to build resilience, then both the professional and the parent are learning together," he says.

Dr Hopwood says this project will provide tangible, practical evidence to support and make best use of existing services.

"What's nifty about it is it takes skills and expertise that are already there, and identifies examples where that is mobilised effectively to help

a family enjoy lasting, positive change."

More information: "The impact of socio-economics and school readiness for life course educational trajectories":

www.aedc.gov.au/Web silk/Handle ... 2b-9fad-ff0000a141dd

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