

Helping a school community with Stepping Stones

Stepping Stones is a programme that has been developed to educate and support parents who have children with a developmental disability. It's based on the successful Triple P Positive Parenting Programme developed through decades of research and clinical trials by Professor Matt Sanders. Now the programme is also helping teachers deal with day-to-day behaviour related problems in the classroom at the same time as educating the whole school community.

Matt Sanders is an Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Education and the researcher behind this unique initiative addressing the behavioural needs of children in special schools. He visited Patricia Avenue School in Hamilton earlier this year to oversee the very first delivery of the Stepping Stones programme into this type of school in this country.

Children at special schools are often diagnosed with a range of special needs including autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, global developmental delay and a range of rare genetic conditions. These children can often be dealing with the challenge of multiple disabilities affecting their learning, mobility, vision and hearing.

Not surprisingly, adding classroom learning on top of these factors can make school a real challenge for both students and teachers.

"Every child has learning potential, but depending on their disability that potential is at risk," said the Principal of Patricia Avenue School, Jill Weidenbohm*. "The world turns very differently for these children. Unless we know what makes them tick and have strategies to help manage the potential difficulties that can pop up all day, teaching is constantly sabotaged."

"Our core business is learning," added Jill. "If you want to increase the learning outcomes for these children, you have to have consistency in relationships and to achieve that you have to understand the client group of children and how best to manage the relationships. If you haven't got good relationships, it doesn't matter how good your buildings or technology are."

All teachers at the school have received the Stepping Stones training and are currently using it in the classroom and sharing the information with parents. The idea is, says Matt Sanders, to have both school and parents working together so that they are dealing with children's behaviour in a consistent and positive way both at school and at home. Such an approach sets the students up to succeed in all areas of their lives to the best of their individual abilities.

"Through this programme we want to empower kids to develop the kinds of social, emotional and life skills that will enable them to get on with school, peer relationships, family, and life," says Matt.

Jill Weidenbohm believed the investment in the programme is having a marked impact on staff, children, and their families. It has aligned best practice across the school and brought deeper understanding to the work that they do. Staff report



Jill Weidenbohm and Professor Matt Sanders.

they are now better equipped to anticipate what might go wrong and have necessary strategies in place, and there is a calmer atmosphere school wide.

Matt Sanders is also directing a number of other projects through the Triple P Research Group at the Faculty of Education aimed at supporting families and communities cope with the pressures of parenting. These include discussion groups to support parents dealing with children's bedtime routines and aggression, and a project supporting parents of teenagers transitioning to high school.

Two hundred parents are currently involved in a research trial exploring the effectiveness of delivering the Triple P Positive Parenting Programme via the internet. The research group is also surveying attitudes towards parenting in New Zealand, the experiences of parents who are also teachers, and the opinions of fathers on parenting.

To become involved in Triple P Research contact Dr Cassy Dittman, c.dittman@auckland.ac.nz or phone +64 9 623 8899 ext 48778.

For more information on Stepping Stones contact Jackie Riach, www.triplep.net.nz or phone +64 9 579 1794.

Tips to deal with challenging behaviour

1. Provide a safe engaging environment - kids that are busy are less likely to be disruptive
2. Make sure the learning environment at home and school is a positive one
3. Give prompt, consistent, and assertive discipline - kids need boundaries
4. Have reasonable expectations - understand what your student or child is capable of accomplishing
5. Take care of yourself as a parent or teacher - applying the above suggestions means you need to be supported
6. Be a part of the community - normalising children helps develop life skills

**Jill Wiedenbohm, passed away during the preparation of this article. The Associate Minister of Education, Rodney Hide, paid tribute to her work in special education and her vision and leadership in contributing to the recognition of Patricia Avenue as a "leading specialist school in New Zealand".*