

Good morning. My name is Melissa (name changed) and I am the mother of Jessie eleven, Michael eight and Annie who is nearly four (names changed). I am a nurse, a teacher and a carer of a child with a disability. My daughter Annie who is nearly four has been diagnosed with Global Developmental Delay. She is the most adorable, charming little girl who is always eager to please. Annie is small in stature though never stops eating. This wasn't always the case. Right from birth Annie had feeding difficulties which was heightened with the discomfort of colic and severe reflux that lasted over two years. Annie was failing to thrive and meet her developmental milestones. With test after test proving no notable cause, Annie was referred to our local Community Development centre for physio, occupational therapy and speech therapy. After twelve months of therapy Annie was referred to Disability Services Commission.

I met with the team of therapists who would be providing services to Annie. I was a mess emotionally as was my husband at this point in our lives. We were grieving for the loss of expectation we had for our daughter. We were finding it difficult in adapting to having a child with a disability. I was feeling guilty because all my time was being consumed with Annie. My expectations of my other children rose. I would escalate issues with them to the point where I would be on edge of losing control, then I would feel guilty and go through all the emotions of considering myself to be a bad parent. We were feeling extremely overwhelmed with all the information we were being given about Annie but not having any answers.

I started withdrawing from playgroup, the gym where Annie attended the crèche and other social contacts as Annie's behaviour in my eyes was diabolical. She would pinch, scratch and pull at anybody and everybody. She had this high pitch scream that irritated everyone due to her sensory issues. Annie found it extremely difficult to cope with a large group of children due to the constant rise of noise level. I was tense, stressed and always on edge ready to pounce. I always found it difficult to explain to others why Annie was so vicious to them or their children. My older children were always on the receiving end of Annie. While my husband dozed on the couch, he always had one eye open, waiting to receive the next scratch or pinch.

I felt awkward leaving Annie with anyone. She had no language, had difficulty eating foods, poor balance and a desire to scratch you. I was scared. This was my child, my responsibility.

After raising my concerns about Annie's behaviour to her therapists and my inability of not feeling in control or managing her behaviours, we were given some information on the Stepping Stones program.

Both my husband and I along with five other couples attended one workshop a week for five weeks during August of 2003. All of our children had different behaviours that we were finding difficult to manage. It was comforting to be able to speak honestly and openly to people who could understand what you were going through. It was good to know that what we were feeling was normal. In the first week alone I found out that I was being too hard on myself and that it was o.k. to take time out for me. We discussed family environment issues and in particular escalation traps and giving instructions effectively. I really took this on board. I was having difficulty with my other children about these issues, not Annie. It reinforced in me to deal with situations immediately with all my children to prevent my escalation. Guess what? It worked! We set goals for change in our children's behaviour as well as our own. We worked on one goal a week, keeping track of our child's behaviour in diary form. This was so useful. It taught me to look at the whole situation, not just the undesirable behaviour.

In the second session, we were given useful strategies on how to encourage desirable behaviour. We talked about reward options and building positive relationships with our children. Surprise! This worked with my other children again.

In session three we looked at teaching our child new skills and behaviours. Annie was a difficult feeder who also refused to attempt to feed herself. This caused me a lot of anguish. We discussed backward teaching. This involves teaching a task starting with the last step and working back to the first. By day four, Annie was able to feed herself a bowl of yoghurt. I am now able to use this method of teaching with Annie to encourage all sorts of new skills like threading beads on a string or getting her to help with dressing and undressing.

In session four we discussed the brief interruption routine. This worked extremely well with Annie at home as well when we were out. If she hurt someone we would ask her to stop immediately. If Annie didn't respond well we would use a brief blocking response, telling her "hands down", and then praise, praise, praise when she co-operated.

In our last group session, we looked at planning ahead for high risk situations at home and in the community. I remember thinking this is going to be tough! Well guess what, it wasn't. With thoughtful planning about how we were going to deal with the inappropriate behaviour outside the home, I started to enjoy leaving the house again even though it took me a while to get organised what with all the rewards I was going to use at every opportunity I could.

It was sad to say goodnight at the end of our last session, as we all enjoyed how each week everyone was starting to succeed at their goals they had set with their parenting. I had learnt a lot from these other families, little tips for this and that that they had shared from their experiences. I felt as if I knew these children personally. I admired these parents.

We were now on our own with a weekly follow up phone call for four weeks from one of the Psychologist from the disability team. After my second week of follow up phone calls, I was back at playgroup and enjoying it. I had learnt that I needed to expose Annie to situations that she found difficult, to be able over come them. Annie was now able to play alongside other children and was always remorseful of any hurt she had caused someone else. I was no longer using any blocking techniques and her language was coming along in leaps and bounds.

By the end of my fourth week of follow up phone calls, things were still not perfect but I felt a lot more confident in dealing with any inappropriate behaviour from any of my children.

Fourteen months on and life is wonderful. Annie attends day care twice a week and has lots of friends that she interacts with beautifully. Annie enjoys all the sensory activities and her language has increased unbelievable, knowing well over two hundred words and joining three to four together at times. Annie has now progressed from eating with a spoon to eating with a fork, eating everything. I now have no concerns about leaving Annie with anyone and I have even left her overnight. This certainly has achieved our goal of being able to go out and enjoy each others company once again without being concerned about how Annie is doing. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the Psychologists from Disability Services Commission in the Peel team for all the support that my family and I have received in the past eighteen months. The Stepping Stones: Positive Parenting Program was a fantastic course to be involved in and I certainly would recommend it to anyone.

Thank you

