



Working together to support families

Sally Moffatt discusses collaborative relationships from an early childhood education perspective

Introduction

The Intervening Early Programme (IEP) is an early childhood education support programme for families with young children who are deemed to be in an at-risk situation. Families are referred to this programme by a Child, Youth and Family social worker.

The social worker evaluates the situation and may find that the parents lack specific skills or knowledge, but with support mechanisms in place, it would be more appropriate for the children to stay in the care of their parents.

Areas of concern may include supervisory, emotional or educational neglect. There may be a history of high needs, including lack of parental knowledge, isolation, lack of understanding of children's learning and development and the need for effective behaviour management skills.

The IEP is a strengths-based support and education programme that specifically caters for individual needs. It supports families in their home environments and works one-

on-one to meet the children's and families' holistic needs. The programme is based on the formation of reciprocal relationships with clear boundaries and outcomes in place. All of the organisations and agencies involved with any family collaborate on the goals and strategies that are put in place to support the family. All

opportunities and support services in the family's community are utilised to provide ongoing support when the programme finishes.

The emphasis of this programme is to support the parents so that they have a greater understanding of

their children's unique learning and development. The programme allows time to visit with the family once a week for the first month and then fortnightly until the end of the programme.

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Background

The family involved in the following case study resided in the greater Wellington area and was referred to our service by the local Child, Youth and Family office.

The names of the family have been changed to protect their identities and privacy. In this article, the mother is called Jane, the father Robert, and the children Kevin (aged three years, five months at time of enrolment) and Bella (aged one year, eight months at time of enrolment).

Goal setting

A meeting between the Linmark regional support manager (RSM), the education co-ordinator (EC) and the social worker from Child, Youth and Family identified specific areas where support was needed for this family. There were indications of domestic violence while the children were present, controlling behaviour from the father, and general lack of cohesion and co-operation between the parents. A family therapist was currently working with the parents. It was agreed that the support programme would run for a minimum of six months. Three goals were set.

1. The Linmark EC would gain the trust of the parents so that a reciprocal relationship could develop.
2. Both parents would gain skills and knowledge so that they have an understanding of their children's learning, development and emotional needs.
3. The parents would be supported to build ongoing connections to their local community.

The Child, Youth and Family social worker and the Linmark RSM and EC met with the parents and children in their home. Discussion with the parents revolved around the children's interests and routines, and the expectations and goals of the parents for their children. Kevin attended Kohanga Reo and Robert was actively involved in this. There were some routine and sleep issues with both children, with no clear strategies in place to overcome these. Bella was becoming

independent and showed a caring empathy with her dolls. The children's play appeared to be controlled and the television was a major part of both children's lives. Observation showed Robert overtaking the children's play, by directing how they should use a toy and verbalising his expectations of the outcome of their play. This appeared to cause the children to be anxious about their play and to be overly active, flitting from one activity to another. There was a television in each of the children's bedrooms, with unrestricted viewing permitted particularly at bedtime. The television was on continually in the main living area, drawing the children's attention away from their play and holding their attention when others present were trying to interact with them. There appeared to be mixed messages and a lack of consistency by the parents when dealing with the children's sometimes unacceptable behaviour. The parents admitted to having different points of view about parenting, which often caused conflict, and confusion for the children.

Jane cared for the children full-time, and did not work outside the home. Robert was currently unemployed and spent most of his time at home. This appeared to be part of the problem, with Jane's role as full-time carer undermined by Robert, who wanted to control the family's everyday activities. It appeared that Robert made all the decisions in regard to the children, including their food, play, outings, routines and behaviour management, often overriding any plans or decisions already put in place by Jane.

Beginning the IEP

Following the initial meeting, the Linmark EC made an appointment to meet again the following week. Between these meetings, there was an escalation of conflict and the parents separated. The programme was then put on

hold until some decisions were made about the family's future.

Two months after the initial meeting, the parents reconciled and the Linmark EC resumed visits. The home situation had begun to change, as Robert was now working and Jane appeared more relaxed in her role as mother and primary carer. Jane's confidence appeared to grow now that Robert was not continually present. She was making decisions for herself and the children and was able to implement these without having Robert override her decisions. The Linmark EC was able to support Jane by acknowledging that her parenting skills and decisions were effective and benefiting the children.

The parents indicated that reading and books were not a big part of the children's lives. They had also noticed that Kevin was not as independent as Bella, particularly with self-care skills such as dressing. During discussions with the EC, the negative impact that the television had on how the children reacted and interacted was highlighted. It was agreed that the family's television viewing needed to be restricted. This decision was made initially to benefit the children, but it became apparent that it was a positive influence for all of the family, particularly at meal times, where there was now more group interaction.

Subsequent visits fostered the relationship between the parents and the Linmark EC, allowing them to open up and share their concerns. This provided the opportunity for the EC to build on the strengths of the parents in such a way that they were able to talk about what they saw as their issues and share their

successes. Following the television restrictions, the children showed more of an interest in books and reading. Although some books had always been available for the children, there had been no support or encouragement from the parents to read or have quiet story times. The parents now interacted and played with the children more at their level, and began to allow the play to be controlled by the children.

Some discussion revolved around the setting of reasonable limits and boundaries for the children. The parents acknowledged that they were often in disagreement over how to manage the children's behaviour, what is acceptable and how to deal with situations. Strategies and written information were given

to the parents on setting limits, planned ignoring and inclusive time out. Discussion revolved around recognising the triggers, managing behaviour in relation to the children's age and development, acknowledging each of the children's differences or uniqueness,

the importance of consistency, and the parents working together and compromising to avoid an escalation of any disruptive behaviour and confusion for the children. The children, particularly Kevin, appeared at times to be "overly active". He found it difficult to stay on task and focus on any one activity, and was continually on the move. When the EC visited him at his Kohanga Reo, the Kaiako mentioned that Kevin was often "not in control" and would not take responsibility for his actions. Kevin found it difficult to stay still and to concentrate even for small periods of time.

Television was still an issue, particularly for Kevin, but Robert had now recognised that the

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television was one of the reasons that Kevin would not listen, carry out instructions or interact when others were present. Strategies implemented to replace the television viewing included playing games and music, going for walks, reading and more adult interaction.

The parents began to share what they noticed in relation to the children's interests. Resources and ideas were provided to support their interests and strengths, which in turn led to greater sharing and interest from the parents. Building from this, the EC was able to write about the children's learning journey: the learning behind their play and the importance of the processes to future learning and development. This provided a foundation for the parents' knowledge about the children's holistic development. Both children now attended Kohanga Reo and Jane was taking Bella to 'kindy gym' and utilising the library.

The parents began sharing with the EC opportunities and future possibilities for each of the children. They became receptive to new ideas and strategies, and began asking further questions and offering their own ideas. Jane started using the community resources and had recognised the importance of learning within their own environment. She was excited to share their adventures during the holidays, including bus rides, trips to the library and exploring their neighbourhood. Robert was now supporting Kevin and acknowledging his interests and strengths. He provided Kevin with some old phones and electronic equipment to pull apart and explore. Robert allowed Kevin to do this in his own way with no set outcome or expectations.

Robert and Jane were now co-operating with relation to routines and boundaries, and were able to discuss and accept each other's point

of view and use compromise when conflicts arose. They recognised areas that required further support. Jane had become more assertive and confident in her role as mother and primary carer. Robert had let go of some of the control and had begun to recognise and value the uniqueness of each of the children and the importance of allowing them to discover for themselves. Previously Robert had set ideas about parenting, with no allowance for the children's individual temperaments, personalities, strengths and interests. This level of control did not allow for the children to discover for themselves and made them anxious when exploring and playing as they may not have "got it right". The EC often guided and modelled positive play with the children so that Robert became aware of another way of parenting, one which assisted the children's learning and development, capabilities and confidence.

Conclusion

Written reports or 'Learning Journeys' were provided after each visit detailing the learning and development of each child – providing a history and record of their journey. Photo stories presented a visual record of learning and documented the children's voices. These were placed into a Learning Journal for each child and became a source of pride, interest and discussion for the parents, and a record for the social worker. A visit note detailed the parent's progress and provided a written basis to empower them from a strengths-based model.

The final visit note concluded that Jane and Robert were able to confidently share information, ideas and the positive aspects of their lives and discuss areas where they required further support. Along with the shared knowledge, Jane and Robert developed an

understanding of Kevin and Bella's individual learning. They could set objectives and goals for the children, and the EC was able to discuss the learning from these. The EC supported the learning by role modelling appropriate practice, which the parents acknowledged as being important to their understanding of the individual needs of the children. They recognised the effect that this had on the children's behaviour and learning. The most important aspect was the co-operation – Jane and Robert now worked together. They had some rules, routines and ideas that they both agreed on, and looked at everything with an open mind, focusing on their children's needs.

The changes in the family unit have been significant, particularly the calmness within each family member, which had been commented on also by the Kaiako at the Kohanga Reo. During the EC's visit to the Kohanga Reo, the Kaiako mentioned changes in Kevin's ability to now sit quietly, to co-operate and to be more in control of his actions. The EC always visits children in settings other than their homes, if possible, to observe them in another environment and from another perspective. It is valuable to have further input from other professionals, which allows an objective observation of the children's progress.

At the conclusion of the programme the goals were revisited with the parents and separately with the social worker. The social worker was kept informed of progress throughout the six-month programme, with a meeting at the half-way point. This meeting revisited the goals, provided feedback from the EC and RSM, and enabled the social worker to have an input into forward planning. This was also an opportunity to assess whether the programme was meeting Child, Youth and Family's expectations. The reports were sent to the social worker after

each visit and the EC followed this up with a telephone call. The social worker was able to be part of the process and to follow the children's progress, as well as that of the parents'. At the final meeting with the social worker, the goals were revisited and all parties involved discussed highlights and spoke about what had been effective. It was agreed that Child, Youth and Family had no further concerns about the family and would no longer be involved.

The issues and problems for this family were managed before a high level of outside involvement was needed. The parents needed support at a difficult time and, once they were past this stage, could use the long-term skills and knowledge they had acquired to continue to develop as parents.



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