Stepping Stones Triple P: Evaluation of a State-Wide Roll Out

Background to the research

The current program of research investigates the roll out of ‘Stepping Stones Triple P’ across New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. The five year research program has been funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council under the title ‘Mental Health of Young People with Developmental Disabilities’.

This program of research will address the significant, unmet mental health needs of young people with developmental disabilities and their families. Young people with developmental disabilities demonstrate mental health problems approximately 3-4 times higher as a group than comparable groups of typically developing children. This includes both serious psychopathology and challenging behaviours. These mental health problems are frequently not well managed and persist if left untreated. Relatively few families access evidence-based programs designed to reduce mental health problems for these children.

The impact of a child’s disability on a family is compounded by these additional emotional and behavioural difficulties. Parents can experience high levels of parental stress, which can impair their capacity to maintain positive relationships with their child and other family members. The impact of family stress and poor management of a child’s challenging behaviours often extends to other environments, such as school. This reduces the likelihood that the child will achieve their potential, engage effectively with peers, and be able to make use of available opportunities in the community. Therefore, the impact of raising a child with a disability and mental health difficulties is not felt solely by the family, but also by those working with the family and by the wider community.

Previous research with families of children with a disability has found parenting program interventions to be effective at improving child and parent outcomes. However, parenting program interventions are not currently routinely available to parents. This program of research aims to change this, by making the evidence-based parenting program ‘Stepping Stones Triple P’ widely available to parents and other caregivers of children with developmental disabilities.

Who is conducting the research?

The research is being led by Professor Stewart Einfeld, from the University of Sydney, in conjunction with Professor Matthew Sanders from The University of Queensland and Emeritus Professor Bruce Tonge from Monash University. Co-investigators on this project are Associate Professor Jo Arciuli from the University of Sydney, Associate Professor Kate Sofronoff from The University of Queensland, and Associate Professor Kylie Gray from Monash University.

This research collaboration brings together Professor Einfeld and Emeritus Professor Tonge, world leaders in the assessment and clinical care of young people with developmental disabilities and mental health concerns, with Professor Sanders, world leader in the development and public dissemination of intervention strategies for mental health concerns in children.

How will the research be conducted?

The research program will investigate outcomes of the roll out of Stepping Stones Triple P (SSTP) programs across New South Wales. There will be similar investigations into the roll out of SSTP across Queensland and Victoria. The overarching aims are to increase access to evidence-based parenting programs and to reduce the prevalence rates of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in children with developmental disabilities.
There are three main stages to the research program in each state. First, all parents of children aged 2-10 years with an intellectual, developmental, motor or sensory disability will be asked to complete the My Say survey about their parenting experiences. It will ask about their child’s emotions and behaviour, parenting strategies used to manage challenging behaviour, the family environment, and parent’s awareness of available parenting programs. Professionals and service providers who work with children with a disability or developmental delay will also be asked to complete a survey about their professional experiences with such children and their use of parenting interventions. The aim is to establish baseline prevalence rates of difficulties experienced by children with a disability and their parents. The surveys additionally act as a way for parents and professionals to tell us how they would like a parenting program to be run. This information will be used to inform the roll out of SSTP, through feedback on aspects such as the preferred methods of professional training and preferred styles of program for parents.

The second stage of the research program will be the gradual roll out of the SSTP programs across the state of New South Wales over a 2 year period. Professionals can nominate to receive training in selected SSTP parenting programs. There are different programs with different time requirements for training and program delivery, as well as a focus on different amounts of family need. Professionals will be able to receive training in SSTP programs free of charge. They will also have access to support and supervision when delivering SSTP programs to families. A limited number of training places are available and professionals will be selected based on their capacity to deliver a mutually agreed number of programs to families free of charge during the project. Professionals will be asked to complete some questionnaires so we can learn about their experiences with delivering SSTP. All parents of children aged 2-12 years with a disability will be able to access the SSTP programs throughout the 2 year supported roll out period. A sub-sample of parents of children aged 2-10 years with an intellectual disability or global developmental delay will be invited to participate in a targeted research study. Parents can choose a SSTP program that best suits their needs. All parents receiving SSTP programs will be asked to complete questionnaires before and after participating in a SSTP program. Participation in this research study is voluntary.

After the roll out of SSTP, all parents and other caregivers of children with a disability will be asked to complete the My Say survey again as part of the third research stage. Professionals will also be asked to complete the survey again. By doing this after the roll out, we aim to evaluate whether use of parenting programs has increased and child emotional and behavioural difficulties have decreased at a population level. The repetition of all three research phases in Queensland and Victoria will allow us to look at the effectiveness of the SSTP programs for a large proportion of the Australian disability community.

What are the expected benefits of the research?

The research will increase our understanding of the experiences of families of a child with a developmental disability. It aims to provide professionals with access to evidence-based parenting interventions and to increase professional skills in delivering such interventions. It is expected that parents will benefit from their participation in SSTP, via changes such as improved parenting confidence, refined parenting skills, decreased family stress and a reduction in their child’s challenging behaviours. We aim to raise the population’s awareness of the mental health concerns that can affect young people with developmental disabilities. We would further like to provide access to prevention and early intervention strategies to reduce the impact of mental health difficulties. We anticipate that the community will benefit from our aim to ensure the sustainability of evidence-based parenting programs. This will be achieved through collaborative work with our key stakeholders, including key parent associations, non-government organisations, and government departments.

Questions and further information

For further information, please contact the NSW Stepping Stones Triple P research team at fhs.steppingstones@sydney.edu.au or on (02) 9114 4060.