

KIND WORDS & PLAY IN THE EARLY YEARS

3 month report, January - March 2021

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Introduction

Koala NW were commissioned to pilot a 6 month guided play and engagement programme for parents and their young children, to support communication development and positive engagement.

Aim:

To reduce aggressive behaviour by giving parents skills to better communicate and engage their children positively in play activity.

Target

- 60 children showing challenging or aggressive behaviour referred into the programme by the end of March
- 60 children and their parents supported by the end of June

Delivery Model

3 Koala NW co-ordinators with experience of early years and working with children with complex needs. 2 staff working 1 day a week on this project, and the third staff member working 2 days a week.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions during this period, January – March, all support has been virtual. We had planned to deliver this programme in face to face groups, running two groups a week at the hub, with 6 children and their parents in each group. They would attend weekly for five weeks. Due to Covid-19 restrictions we have had to adapt our mode of delivery to virtual. First contact is made following family contacting us/referral, upon the initial phone call we discuss what the programme will entail and confirm they can commit to the full five weeks, we also establish how they would like to receive the session. We suggest zoom, but also offer WhatsApp video call or phone call if the parent prefers- we then book in session one with the family. 3 of our co-ordinators have been working with a caseload of families, usually five at a time and guide them through the 5 week course via weekly sessions. We send out a parent pack prior to them starting their sessions, which consists of a parent information booklet with lots of information about the course, different strategies for dealing with challenging behaviour and ways of understanding why that behaviour may be happening, we also provide weekly diary sheets, and an outcome check list. We refer back to this paperwork throughout the course. When setting the activities for the week ahead – which would previously had been carried out during their session at the hub - we talk through the activity with the parent during their one to one and then follow it up with an email after each session highlighting their tasks for the week and with the attachment of the document that details the activity and the benefit etc. We actually feel this delivery model has worked better as we have been able to offer more tailored support and a personal service for the families due to working on a one to one basis.

What's going well

There are many elements of the project that we feel been really successful. Below we list and explain some of the key parts we feel have gone well.

We feel that the majority, if not all, of the families that we have worked with have achieved the following:

- Through talking, and keeping diaries parents now feel they have a better understanding of their child, their emotions, behaviours and triggers. Due to recognising triggers parents have been able to either stop emotional meltdowns and challenging behaviour, or decrease it by preparing the child for the trigger through visual aids, communicating and playful interactions.
- Through setting boundaries and increasing communication between parent and child, we have established what the parent's expectations were along with what behaviours are acceptable within their family. By following the strategies for dealing with meltdowns there has been a huge decrease in challenging behaviour such as swearing, shouting, aggression and violence/outbursts.
- Due to setting tasks and activities between sessions, families are having significantly more positive interactions, and both parent and child are looking forward to spending time together rather than feeling fearful about their daily interactions.
- We have noticed a substantial increase in parental confidence and ability. We found that many of our parents were struggling with very low self-confidence - and had very negative core self-beliefs, for example "I am not good enough" "I'm a rubbish mum". We managed to significantly improve this. Parents feel they are achieving their full parenting potential due to having the confidence, skills and strategies we have provided throughout the sessions. Parents feel they have been supported without judgement, and now feel capable of implementing change, dealing with challenges, setting boundaries. Parents have also commented that they now feel able to play and communicate with their child much more positively and effectively.
- Immense improvements in communication in general, both the parents and their children have a greater and progressing understanding of themselves, each other and their world. As a result, they now have more respect, compassion and empathy for each other. A multitude of parents reported feeling closer to their children, and expressed that their bond has been strengthened as a result of the course. In addition to this there has been a notable increase in the children's ability to both name and discuss their emotions. We have accomplished this through a variety of ways such as talking, playing, emotion flash cards and Makaton for when speech is a barrier.
- Many of our parents feel less socially isolated for having someone to talk to without judgement who offers practical strategies that are specific for their set of circumstances. Many parents have felt seen and heard for the first time and this has had a knock-on effect to their overall wellbeing, which in turn increases their ability to parent lovingly and

effectively. We've also managed to reduce social isolation and increase physical activity due to better behaviour and listening from the child - resulting in parents feeling able to go on outings again. Something which many of them had stopped doing due to too many bad experiences when out with their child.

- All Parents are leaving the course with a more positive outlook, and are now armed with a 'toolkit' of strategies, coping skills, many different ideas for play/interactions, that they can use for years to come and with any other children in the future.
- We have managed to achieve an overall positive change and impact on family life and dynamics. Due to respect and boundaries being put in place alongside regular, positive, one to one interaction, resulting in an all-embracing improved atmosphere in the family home and on outings in the community.
- We all feel that although it was a challenge to adapt the project to delivering it remotely, this has actually helped us to be able to provide a more tailored service to the families we have been supporting. We feel that families have been more honest and detailed about the issues they have been facing than they maybe might have been in a group setting with other parents. As a result of this we have been able to more specific and in-depth support for them, resulting in increased success and outcomes.

Referrals

January – March 2021 Koala NW have received referrals for 82 children aged 0-8 years. 51 boys, 31 girls.

Of the 40 families supported January – March 2021:

24 - Self Referrals

9 – Children Centres

4 – Social Care

3 – Health Visitors

200 one to one x 1 hour sessions delivered

Parents reported feeling more confident managing their children's challenging behaviours

92 %of parents reported a better understanding of their children' behaviour

92% of parents reported improvements in their child's behaviour

92% of parents supported reported a better understanding of the importance of play and communication with their children

Challenges

- As previously touched on, our original plan was to run face to face groups with a maximum of 6 families per group. Due to Covid-19 restrictions this has not been possible so the programme had to be adapted. We now deliver the course through one to one zoom sessions or WhatsApp video calls. We were concerned that we might not be able to build trusting working relationships with the families due to the virtual delivery model. This is something that all co-ordinators have been mindful of and we have made a conscious effort to really dig deep and get to know the family as best we could through our screens. Some co-ordinators have faced challenges with getting their families to complete the work in between sessions, as we are asking them to do the activities between sessions rather than in the session in person, some have failed to complete tasks and therefore have not gotten the most out of sessions. We have tried to deal with this by offering additional support via phone calls, emails, and texts with mixed success.
- In addition to this we feel that for a few of the families we have worked with it has not been the right time for this intervention. Despite us being very clear about what was expected of them in our initial calls, they have struggled to implement the changes and suggestions we discussed due to having other more pressing family circumstances to contend with. To deal with this we have referred them onto different services that we feel would benefit them more at this time i.e. our family support service. We feel disappointed about this as we all wanted all of our families to get the very most out of the course, but have come to accept that for some families change has just not been possible at this particular time in their lives. Moving forward we think it's important to highlight even more than we previously have how important the work between sessions is when doing our initial phone calls. Making them even more aware of the commitment and work required, to ensure that all families starting the course are fully prepared for what the 5 weeks will entail
- We also feel that parents are missing out on the opportunity to meet other parents with shared experiences. We have found that many of our parents feel very isolated, and like that are the only ones facing the issues they are dealing with. When this is not true, and is in fact the opposite. Many of them are facing similar if not identical challenges, and had they been in a group together they would have been able to hear this first hand, which we think would have been really beneficial. To try and combat this issue we have been sharing with our parents that others doing the course are having the same struggles, of course anonymously to observe family's confidentiality... but we believe that this has nowhere near to the same effect as actually hearing and seeing fellow parents talking about these things first hand.
- Difficulty with some families getting to the root of behaviours – as we ran this course virtually, we were basing our suggestions and strategies on the parent's interpretation of events. Had we been in person/group setting, perhaps coordinators could have understood behaviours more clearly.
- Our child-centred approach to parenting was a challenge for some families. Some of the methods for dealing with challenging behaviour contradict those which the parents may have experienced through their own childhood.

- Due to the sensitive and personal nature of the Kind Words & Play programme some of the sessions, namely the initial and evaluation, took longer than we had anticipated. Moving forward we will allow more time for initial and end sessions.
- We feel the most obvious down fall to delivering the course in this way is that it is taking up five times longer to deliver the same content. Rather than delivering once to 6 families, we are delivering 5 times, to 6 families. This has of course had a knock-on effect on how many families we've been able to offer the course to. We would have been able to reach far greater numbers delivering the course in the original way. However, as previously mentioned this delivery model definitely has some major positives which balance this issue out in our opinion.

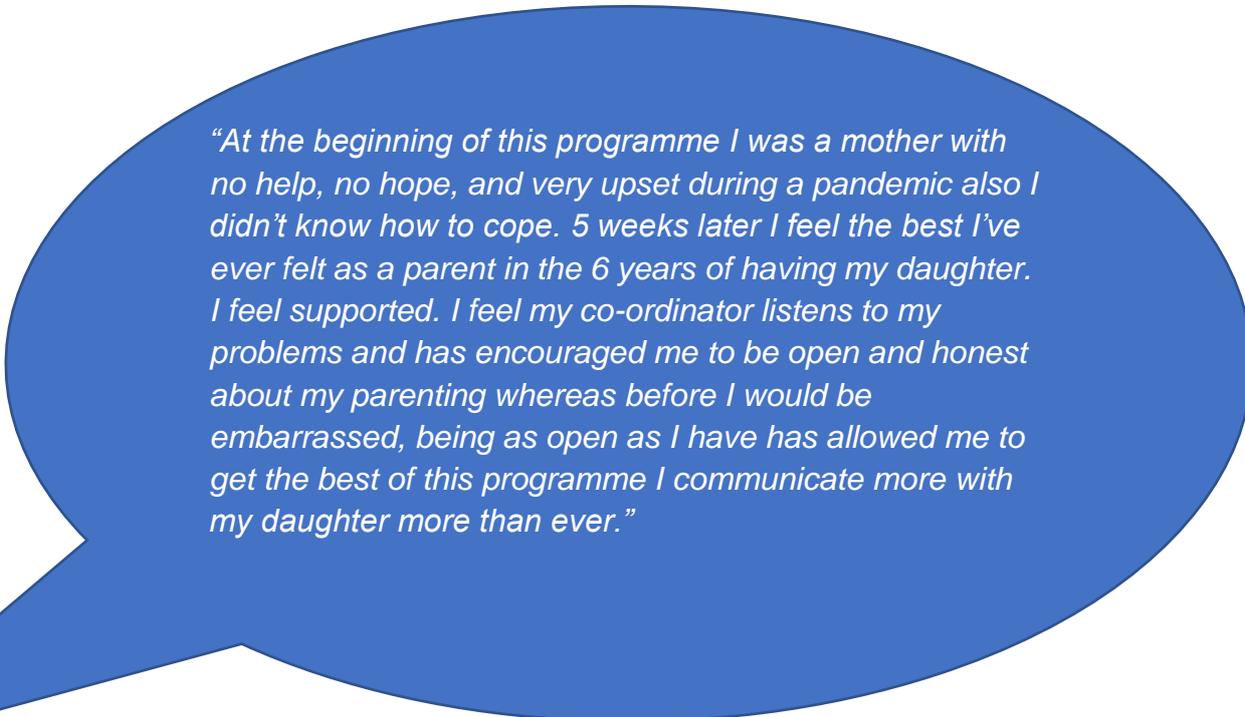
What Next?

Going forward we will continue delivering the course virtually, we currently have no plans to alter the course to face to face delivery. This is firstly due to needing to keep the numbers of people in the building to a minimum due to COVID-19 risk. Also, after considering both the positives and negatives of this mode of delivery we feel this is the best way to proceed. We believe the results in terms of the improvements to behaviour and increased parental confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour have been better than what they would have been had we delivered this course face to face. This is something that we will continue to assess moving forward. It is clear to see that this programme is achieving wonderful outcomes and actively changing family's day to day lives.

There is a clear demand by families asking for support to understand and manage their children's behaviour and improve parent child interactions, and with this we hope to secure funding to continue delivering the project beyond June 2021.

We supported 40 children January – March and have confirmed start dates with the 20 other children we are commissioned to support.

We have an additional 22 children and their families on our waiting list so we will need to stop taking referrals until we have confirmation if funding is available to continue beyond June 2021.



“At the beginning of this programme I was a mother with no help, no hope, and very upset during a pandemic also I didn't know how to cope. 5 weeks later I feel the best I've ever felt as a parent in the 6 years of having my daughter. I feel supported. I feel my co-ordinator listens to my problems and has encouraged me to be open and honest about my parenting whereas before I would be embarrassed, being as open as I have has allowed me to get the best of this programme I communicate more with my daughter more than ever.”

Case Studies

Case Study 1

Background - Family referred themselves into the programme to address the challenging behaviour displayed by their eldest child O. O is a six-year-old child with a younger sister A (18 months old) who was often the focus of O's frustrations – causing A to be bitten, hit, pushed almost daily. O was said to have daily violent outbursts, screaming, throwing/breaking items in the home, attention seeking (mainly through hitting/constant chatter/interrupting), expressing that she thought her family “hated” her and spending a lot of time alone in her bedroom. O is on the ADHD pathway and is awaiting support from CAMHS regarding anxiety. Mum was very emotional on our initial phone call, she felt overwhelmed and that she would be unable to cope for much longer. O seemed to direct a lot of her frustrations towards her younger sister A (18 months old). This again caused mum a great deal of upset as she had expected her two girls to be great friends and play together.

Input - Throughout the intervention mum realised she had not played with O since before A was born, she concluded (on week 3) that she believes O blamed A for her lack of attention from mum, hence her being the target of O's outbursts. We worked 1:1 with O on 3 occasions over the 5 week period – modelling to mum how to start a conversation – as this was a challenge for both mum and dad. We discussed visual aids – to support O's organisation skills such as timetables/reward charts which were very successful and made school mornings much smoother for this family. Mum also highlighted, with regards to O potentially having ADHD, that her interruptions/outbursts were a part of her condition – leading her to believe these issues could not improve. Following a discussion between our Co-ordinator and both parents they understood that although O may be predisposed to these impulsive behaviours – this is not an excuse for unkind/unacceptable behaviour. Mum felt unsure in how to parent O whilst still being respectful of her potential neurological diversity- she felt a lot of guilt when trying to implement boundaries and so wouldn't see them through. Throughout the programme we discussed both mum and dad's childhood's and unearthed some difficulties they had both faced when growing up.

This family completed every task and were determined to improve their family dynamics. Since the intervention – the family have introduced emotion flashcards, a thinking chair, O now has a reward watch and chores list which she completes each night, and enjoys! Perhaps most impressively, the relationship between sisters O and A has developed more than the parents could have imagined – On a number of occasions, O has invited A into her bedroom to play and will verbalise/use flash cards to signal to mum if she is becoming frustrated (instead of becoming violent).

Outcome - Following intervention mum said she felt “stronger than she ever had as a mum”, O is not demanding mum's attention through challenging behaviours anymore, instead they are both enjoying each other's company much more. Mum feels much more respected and appreciated in her parental role and says that the intervention has had a positive ripple effect on her bond with her daughters, boyfriend and her mental health in general. It was a pleasure to assist such a lovely family in their journey and I am very pleased with the progress both O and mum have made together!

Case Study 2

Background - Mum referred herself into the program, as they were facing lots of challenging behaviour with their five year old only child "T". At the time of the referral T tended not to listen and pushed boundaries to see how far he could push mum and dad. T was displaying many attention seeking behaviours such as climbing and moving furniture when left unattended even for short periods, throwing items at Dad whilst he was driving, uncovering and pointing to his genitals in the direction of parents when frustrated.

Despite being very academically capable, Mum had been really struggling with home schooling T, he would often argue over doing school work and had point blank stopped doing his work. Mum was facing daily battles to get him on board with his school work and was concerned about him falling behind as a result. T was described as 'very clingy' to mum, he is very reliant on mum and required constant reassurance from her. He would not play independently and would insist mum is in the bed with him at bedtime - which is another main area of concern. His neediness for mum was particularly problematic when she needed to work. The family often had to pretend mum had gone out and had to lock the office door in order for her to work. Mum was also feeling fairly isolated because T would not allow her to have laptop/phone calls with family and friends. He would sit on top of mum, and show attention seeking behaviours until mum would hang up. T was showing aggressive behaviour such as pushing, pinching, kicking, motion stab with pencils, gun gestures, and use his head and fists to push against mum when he did not get his own way or was frustrated. T was able to communicate his physical needs, but unable to name his emotions and discuss them.

Input

-Firstly we acknowledged that there were inconsistencies in mum and dad's approach to parenting, which mum recognised was confusing for T and increased his challenging behaviour. So, this was the first thing we addressed and Mum and Dad made a conscious effort to be consistent. Although dad was not taking part in the sessions mum was feeding back to dad and they became more of a united front.

-We looked at why mum felt these challenging behaviours were happening, and with some guidance mum quickly recognised that most of the behaviours were T's way of asking for more interaction and reassurance. Also there was a need there for consistent boundaries to be put in place.

-We worked a lot on mums confidence and this really helped her to feel able to address the issues the family were facing head on.

-I provided many different strategies for the family to try in response to the challenging behaviour they were facing, as well as offering solutions that I hoped would prevent and reduce these behaviours. Such as increased 1-1 interaction, lots of verbal and physical reassurance from mum.

-The family immediately started using the 4 step system for big emotional meltdowns, which involves getting down to the child's level, offering active listening and compassion, followed by offering a teachable moment once the child's level of emotion comes down.

-We referred the family into our sleep service, and discussed managing the parent's expectations on days when T was tired due to lack of sleep. We discussed how we could be more flexible when attempting school work on those days: e.g. allowing T some play/fun/outside time before attempting school work.

-We used weekly diaries/daily reflections to identify triggers and patterns in T's behaviour and then

applied strategies such as child mindfulness exercises (I.E. blowing the clouds away) when mum was noticing early warning signs that T was becoming distressed.

-I provided various weekly tasks, that reignited parent and child's ability to spend quality time together. Mum commented that at the beginning when doing these activities, she was feeling 'silly' but quickly she began to enjoy these interactions and was seeing the benefits.

-We used parts of the sessions to reassess T's hobbies and interests and then used this knowledge to help get through more difficult tasks such as home schooling. By taking part in hobbies with T before HS and promising more play after work had been completed.

-Providing T with focused activities and using provocations to help reduce the dangerous behaviours.

-I suggested working on T's listening skills by doing team work tasks such as Simon Says and simple scavenger hunts.

-Introduced emotion flash cards, and suggested to mum to make these and discussions of feeling and how to cope with them part of their daily routine. Also discussed that the best time to discuss these things was not when T was in a heightened emotional state.

-lastly, I offered mum a safe space throughout the course, to be open and honest without the fear of judgement.

Outcomes

As a result of this intervention the family have noticed

T has responded very well to the changes that mum and dad have put in place - Far less aggression, violence and defiance and by the end of the course this was a rare occurrence and he showed parents more respect. They feel this is due to recognising triggers, spending more one to one time together, improved communication and using the strategies' suggested with much success.

Mum felt much more confident in her parenting role, and felt able to cope with challenges. Mum, T and Dad are all enjoying spending quality time together again, feel their bond and understanding of each other had significantly improved. The family are participating in daily one to one interaction, using the activities provided over the course of the 5 weeks as part of their daily routines such as regular child led and adult led play. This has had a clear effect to T's general mood, and the attention seeking behaviour has reduced immensely. As mum has commented that T is a far more "content and happy boy" and had said she had "witnessed him playing independently and signing to himself for the first time" which is now a regular occurrence.

It was a pleasure to assist and work with this family and I am delighted that they feel that our input has had positive outcomes for their daily lives as a family.

Case Study 3

Background - Mum referred herself to Kind Words and Play because she has been struggling to manage her child's behaviour over the past few months. It was a fairly recent change but mum wanted to manage it quickly before his behaviour escalated. She suffered from domestic violence for many years so she was concerned that the behaviour was a result of it being in her child's DNA. The child got very angry to the point where he would scream, turn red and lash out violently at mum. Mum struggled to calm him down and the outbursts were getting worse and more frequent. Mum acknowledged that when her child got angry and upset she got really frustrated

because he would not articulate his needs or emotions, even though he has very good language skills. Recently he hurt another child in nursery which has resulted in mum seeking support.

Input

- Examined mum's expectations of behaviour; I helped mum to look at whether her expectations of behaviour were realistic. We discussed child's age/stage of development, emotional development and schemas.
- Discussed child development and brain development; explaining that the part of the brain that controls impulses and emotions develops slowly, which means children do not understand their emotions. I provided mum with plenty of activities and strategies that would help them understand and manage emotions.
- I helped mum implement strategies at home to reduced behaviour:
 1. Ignore negative behaviour unless dangerous or causing physical harm
 2. Set boundaries and routines; discuss with child, make routine charts and visual aids together, explaining that involving the child will give them a better understanding of what is expected.
 3. Create emotional puppets to use in conversations, play and communication tools
 4. Find ways to express emotions and release anger; deep breathing and counting backwards; silly shakes, blowing a windmill, mindfulness and yoga.
- I encouraged mum to build on her relationship with her child by connecting together in a warm and positive way, I did this by providing a variety of play activities. This helped mum see her child's strengths, allowed them to connect with each other and developed their communication skills. Mum discovered that they were both very controlling so she learnt to step back and let her child lead the play.

Outcomes

- Mum completed all the activity tasks with great determination. Additionally, she made a visual routine chart for her child to follow and they formulated a behaviour code of conduct together. She also made emotion puppets using paper plates to help her discuss emotions with her child. Her child will use the visual props during outbursts to help convey his feelings.
- Mum can identify behavioural triggers and eliminate triggers when possible; this has resulted in the reduction of negative behaviour.
- Mum can confidently use behavioural strategies to manage difficult behaviour; therefore, mum does not feel isolated and anxious about spending time with her child.
- Found a better way to play together; mum has learnt how to play with her child in a positive way which promotes bonding, communication and most importantly fun and excitement. She recognised that she has never played with her child like this before and she discovered that she is quite controlling. This realisation taught her to relinquish control to her child during play activities. As a result, Mum and child are engaging well together; they have strengthened their relationship and reduced tensions between them.
- Mum has a better understanding of her child's development so her expectations of her child's behaviour have altered. Altering her expectations has transformed mum's mindset and her approach to dealing with behaviour. E.G. mum does not get frustrated if her child gets lots of toys out to play with., she has realised that her child is happy playing, she can complete her own tasks and they play a tidy up game afterwards. As a result, everyone is calmer and no altercations take place.
- The intervention has improved their communication consequently stopping his behaviour from escalating because she is meeting his needs and understanding his emotions.

Family Feedback

"Its made me see my strengths as a parent and feel like it shows my hidden qualities I never knew I had. I am now better able to understand the kids better and read their body language"

"Its only been a week since we started and already this week we have had more good days than bad"

"I have managed to recognise some of the triggers for the challenging behaviour before it escalated. I feel more confident in using the right strategies for the situation and there has been a power shift in the home. I speak a lot better to my daughter and manage to walk away rather than getting into a battle."

'By the end week one we have noticed far less shouting and aggression. It's not been half as bad as before.'

"My child, who previously struggled to talk about his emotions was able to not only tell me how he was feeling, but why he was feeling that way. And because of this we were able to talk it through and deal with these feelings."

"I was really surprised because I thought I understood her quite well and the reasons behind the behaviour, but this intervention really opened up a whole other side to her that I wasn't seeing."

"By the end week one we have noticed far less shouting and aggression. It's not been half as bad as before."

"He is so much more content, today I even heard him singing as he was playing, happily and independently with his toys."

"The benefits of the activities my coordinator suggested stretch far beyond the time we are doing the activity itself, my child is now really happy and content between activities too."

"It has been so nice to felt seen and heard by someone who genuinely cares. I am so grateful to have had someone listen to me without judging, and then offer me practical solutions that have really worked."

"Our family dynamic has drastically changed for the better, For the first time I felt comfortable and confident to put in boundaries and my child has responded really well to these changes. It has improved our relationship massively and she respects me far more than she did weeks ago."

"I usual struggle to have a phone call due to my child interrupting me, taking the phone from my hand, sitting on top on me etc. My co-ordinator suggested explaining that mummy would still be here after the call and that I wouldn't be gone for long, along with giving him some 1-1 interaction prior to calls I know I am expecting, due to this I have been able to talk to my mum on the phone uninterrupted while my child played independently- as a result I feel far less isolated!"