



The Helping Families Programme

An Intervention for High Risk Complex Families

Background

The Helping Families Programme has been developed to provide a clear and structured yet flexible method to work as effectively as possible with multi-stressed families who have children with severe conduct problems.

Routinely available parenting interventions are less likely to be effective for families with high and complex needs (see Lundahl et al, 2006, for a review). The multiple stresses that such families face can dominate their lives, making it incredibly difficult to implement changes that could improve the wellbeing of their children. In addition, they have typically had numerous and often negative experiences of services and as a result can find it difficult to trust practitioners and to commit to available support.

A research collaboration led by the National Academy for Parenting Research (NAPR), UK, and involving the University of Queensland and Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia aimed to improve outcomes for this group of families by developing, piloting and evaluating The Helping Families Programme. Guided by the Medical Research Council (MRC) framework for the development and evaluation of complex interventions (Campbell et al., 2000), the Programme has been developed carefully over time involving families who met the following criteria:

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary school age Severe conduct disorder (DSM-IV) School exclusion risk Lives with parent/carer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal presenting problem of sexual abuse Pervasive developmental disorder Severe mental disability
Parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subject to at least one of 5 risk factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpersonal conflict Emotion dysregulation Unsupportive parenting networks Harmful substance use Frequent hassles and crises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acute mental illness Insufficient spoken English Consent for school attendance records and liaison refused



Aims and outcomes for families

Overall, the Helping Families Programme aims to help multi-stressed parents address their children's immediate behavioural difficulties and in doing so help parents to bring up their children safely, lovingly and with confidence that they are doing the best by their children.

The Programme focuses on reducing conduct problems in children and to reduce family harm and increase parent and family resilience. It aims to reach these outcomes by facilitating improvements in 5 key risk domains that have been shown to lead to the onset, maintenance and exacerbation of severe child behavioural difficulties. Therefore, where relevant, the Programme aims to:

- (i) Improve interpersonal conflict management by increasing parents' ability to interact positively, build and maintain relationships and reduce conflict with their child/ren, partner, family and/or key professionals.
- (ii) Improve mood stability and regulation by increasing parents' abilities to be tolerant, feel calm, happy and satisfied.
- (iii) Improve supportive social and family networks by increasing the frequency and availability of constructive parenting support.
- (iv) Reducing the harmful effects of drugs and/or alcohol by working towards cessation or harm minimisation.
- (v) Strengthen instrumental and emotional coping by increasing adaptive problem management and improving emotional regulation and distress tolerance in relation to problems that cannot be immediately managed.

In summary, outcomes for families are as follows:

- Reduced frequency and severity of child conduct problems
- Improvement in parents' reports of their ability to monitor, regulate and control their emotions
- Reduction in parents' negative beliefs
- Improvement in parenting behaviours and access to universal parenting resources e.g. parenting programmes
- Child school attendance and attainment

Programme Development

The Helping Families Programme is based on a clear set of values and uses an explicit intervention model to help parents achieve their desired goals (see Figure 1). The model attends to both the 'process' of helping (Davis & Day, 2010) and to the 'content'. One of the most long-standing controversies with psychological treatment programmes is the delineation between therapist techniques and the quality of the therapeutic relationship (McCrary, Haaga & Lebow, 2006). The Helping Families Programme does not attempt to separate these aspects of treatment, but instead views them as mutually compatible, inter-related and inter-dependent. Equal attention is therefore paid to both 'what is done' (Implementation Modules) and 'how it is done' (Core Practice Tasks).

The Programme draws on a range of evidence-based strategies and techniques, derived from cognitive, behavioural, social learning, relational, attachment and systems theories, to develop individualised implementation plans that are structured yet non-sequential (Dawe & Harnett, 2007). This accommodates the complexity and individual variation in families' needs and allows for additional problems to be addressed as they emerge during the course of the intervention.

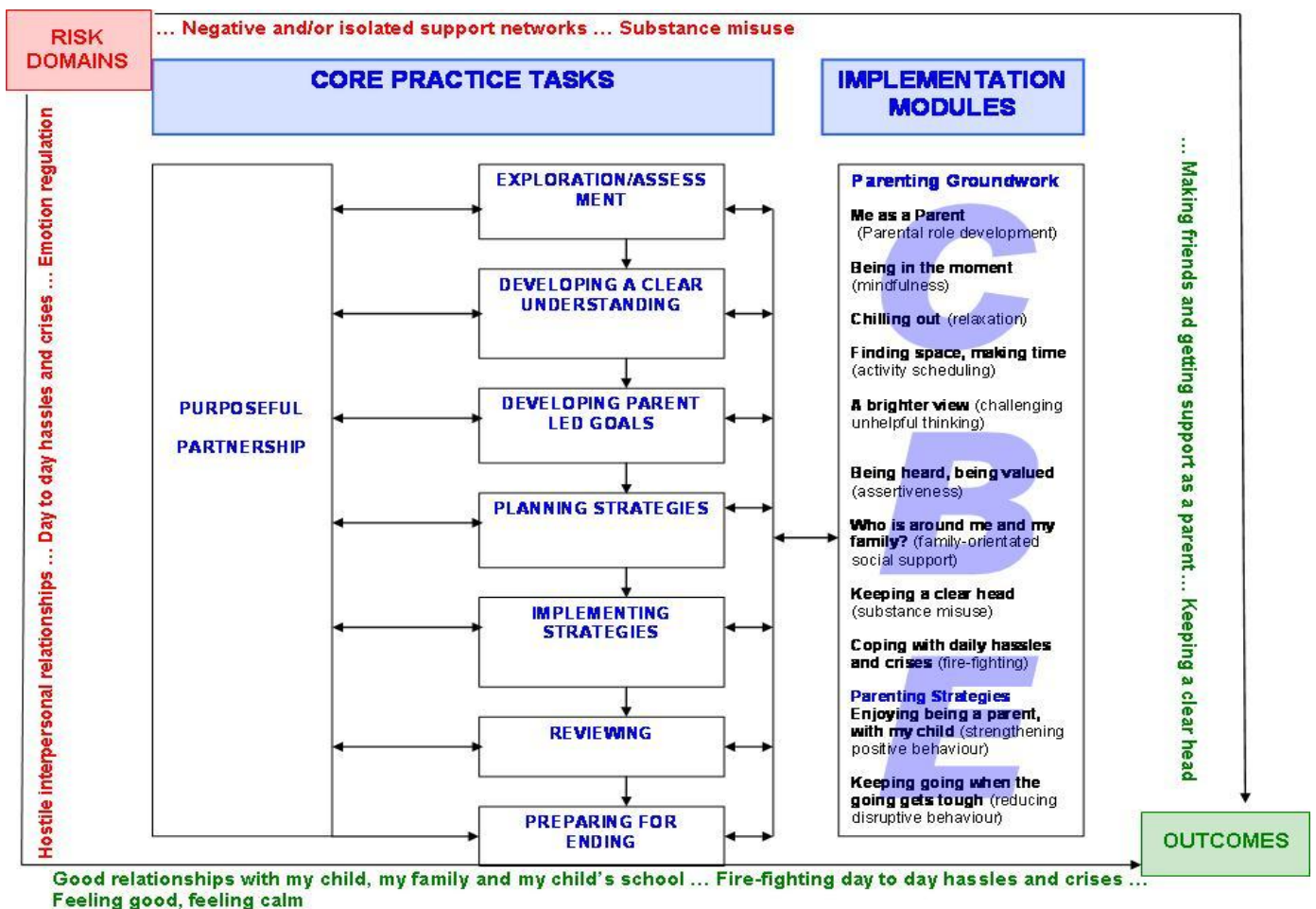


Figure 1: Helping Families Core Practice Tasks and Intervention Modules



The Helping Families Programme Core Practice Tasks make explicit the nature of the partnership relationship and the process of help required in order to achieve successful outcomes:

- ***Building a Purposeful Partnership:*** a way of working with families on their genuine participation in the Helping Families Programme, to ensure a shared and common purpose, from the very first contact (which is usually by telephone).
- ***Exploring and Assessing:*** a way of getting a very clear idea about the nature and extent of the strengths and difficulties that families face as well as understanding parents' perspectives.
- ***Developing a Clear Understanding with Parents:*** a way of developing a formulation with the parent and making sure that both the parent and practitioner are very clear about what they want to get from the Helping Families Programme and why.
- ***Developing Parent-Led Goals:*** a way of agreeing on specific objectives relating to the 5 Helping Families Programme risk factors.
- ***Planning and Implementing Strategies:*** a way of agreeing on, developing planning and implementing clear and specific strategies to help parents reach their goals.
- ***Reviewing:*** a way of actively reviewing with the parents both the extent to which their goals have been achieved and the purposeful partnership.

The Core Practice Tasks require practitioners to continually demonstrate an explicit set of characteristics (Day, Ellis et al 2010) and procedures to engage and maintain goal-orientated partnerships with parents (Davis & Day 2010) (see Appendix 1).

The Helping Families Programme Implementation Modules help parents and practitioners to work together to achieve the parent's goals and the outcomes of the Programme. The modules incorporate a number of evidence-based strategies to address the 5 key risk factors affecting multi-stressed families, through three important facets of parenting (behavioural, cognitive and emotional regulation). The strategies are organised into Parenting Groundwork and Parenting Strategies. A menu is developed with parents to address their goals, reduce their risk factors and increase family resilience.

Helping Families Programme strategy menu:

A Parenting Groundwork (Cognitive, emotional & behavioural strategies to address parent risk factors)

1. Constructs of self as a parent & child (The parent I want to be)
2. Mindfulness (Being in the Moment)
3. Relaxation (Chilling Out)
4. Activity Scheduling (Finding space, Making time)
5. Challenging Unhelpful thinking (A Brighter view...)
6. Assertiveness (Being heard, Being valued)
7. Family Orientated Social Support (Who's around me and my family)
8. Substance Misuse (Keeping a Clear Head)
9. Instrumental & Emotional Coping (Fire Fighting – Managing daily crises and hassles)



B Parenting Strategies (Evidence-based, grounded in social learning theory)

1. Strengthening Positive Behaviour (Enjoying being a parent with my child)
(e.g. child centred play, connecting with your child, modelling, praise)
2. Reducing Disruptive Behaviour (Keeping going when the going gets tough)
(e.g. punishment vs. discipline, giving clear instructions, setting limits)

Practitioners and parents agree on goals for the intervention and then formulate a strategy plan based on the equation: **OUTCOME** = *Goal* x $(A1+A2-9)$ + $(B1+B2)$, which is implemented over the course of the Programme.

The intervention materials consist of a practitioner manual, and a parent toolkit. Consistent with other treatment approaches for multi-stressed families (e.g. Dawe & Harnett, 2006; Schoenwald et al., 2008), contact occurs over 20 sessions over a maximum of 6 months, with the possibility of multiple contacts during each week. The Programme is delivered in the community, most frequently in the family's home and sometimes in venues such as Children's Centres or even a local café. Engagement is facilitated by proactive and assertive outreach. Appendix 2 provides an example overview of a parent's engagement in the Programme.

The Helping Families Programme has been evaluated through a pilot study, with positive results. 14 families were recruited, with 10 families completing. See the 'HFP Evaluation 2010-11' document for a summary of the results.

Appendix 1: Helping Families Programme (HFP) Practitioner Characteristics

<p>Genuine respect for multi-stressed families living in complex circumstances</p>	<p>There is significant potential that parents for whom the Programme has been developed can feel criticised and judged by practitioners and seen as possessing, at most, limited strengths and abilities to change. Parents may be sensitive to a perceived lack of practitioner genuineness and authenticity. It is therefore important that HFP practitioners make a positive effort to identify and find value in the families' capabilities, resourcefulness and capacity for change</p>
<p>Humility about what HFP can achieve</p>	<p>Parents in multi-stressed families need HFP practitioners to be honest and realistic about what taking part in the Programme may achieve. Change will come about through the efforts of the parents supported by the practitioner. HFP practitioners guide and support change, it is the parents who achieve it.</p>
<p>Practitioner strength and integrity</p>	<p>Practitioners need the internal strength to listen to and explore, as well as accept and contain parents' feelings, behaviour and ideas. They need to be able to effectively manage the inevitable uncertainty involved in working with families in complex situations. This requires perseverance, hope, maintenance of purpose as well as the open and transparent management of risks, such as safeguarding, when they occur.</p>
<p>Intellectual and emotional attunement with parents</p>	<p>It is crucial that parents experience HFP practitioners as making a sincere and honest effort to understand the complexity of their lives, the difficulties they and their children face and the personal and emotional meaning it has for them. The capacity to do so helps disaffected and disenfranchised parents to develop a more connected and effective partnership with practitioners.</p>
<p>Resolute and quiet enthusiasm</p>	<p>Practitioners need to be able to communicate their hope and desire that the HFP will result in realistic success and achievements. This helps to galvanise and enthuse parents so that they become genuinely committed and involved in the Programme and able to persevere in the face of competing demands, crisis and chaos. Practitioners also need to communicate their enjoyment and interest in working with each and every parent and family.</p>
<p>Technical expertise and communication skills</p>	<p>The HFP demands that practitioners have very clear knowledge and abilities to help parents use the variety of techniques and approaches available within the Programme, such as social learning theory based methods, mindfulness, coping, cognitive, behavioural and relational strategies. To do so requires high level listening skills, the ability to communicate in an open, respectful and straightforward manner that is understood by parents, the ability to assist parents living in complex circumstances to focus on and work systematically towards specific, realistic goals and in doing so facilitate purposeful change.</p>

Appendix 2: Example of a parent's journey through the Helping Families Programme

Week	1	2	3	4	5
Intervention pathway:	Engagement- Exploration	Exploration/ Assessment	Exploration/ Assessment → Initial Clear Understanding- shared formulation → Fire Fighting	Fire Fighting Review → Increased Clear Understanding →Agree initial Goal	Clarify Goal→Strategy Planning
Facilitator/ Psycho education:	Process & model		Parenting Tasks and Child Development Fire-fighting diagram and info	Information and discussion topics related to Fire Fighting incident e.g. Conflict & Violence, Assertive Communication	Strategy Menu: See below
Home task:	Both parent & practitioner consider possible areas of focus	Family task- e.g. strengths identification, exploratory games	Parent task: e.g. mood diary Implementation of plan or further reflective exercises in relation to inter-relatedness of fire-fighting issue and formulation and goal		
Example of parent A NB: This is an example of the trajectory of the intervention, what is not included is the school and social services liaison. Cancellations are also not counted as these were re- arranged promptly and were not due to engagement issues. There were 5 cancellations, no DNA's.	Engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parent very withdrawn Open and tentative- trust an issue Parent's pace Exploration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parent- historically focused-traumatic history, current issues: own mental health family risk Home task: Parent: read through HFP model again and start to think about possible areas of focus	Exploration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many services involved – service mapping exercise with parent Initial understanding inc.focus re areas for change Home task: Parent: Using service map from session- identify gaps in service provision	Fire-fighting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concerns re threat to family from children's father Used F-F to develop a management plan- emotional coping in session/instrumental coping to take forward (Parent management plan) Exploration→Clear Understanding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family under constant threat Parent mood impacting on parenting (afraid, stressed, low) Home task: Parent: Carry out F-F management plan Practitioner: Arrange to call parent-emotional support	F-F→CU→Goal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed fire-fighting → increased clear understanding → goal re improving mood 	Goal → Strategy planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parent had received several interventions – explored what had been more and less useful Discussed strategy menu Home task: Parent: Peruse strategy menu to inform and discuss in next session

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Week	6	7	8	9	10
Intervention pathway:	Strategy Planning → Fire Fighting	Fire Fighting → Review → Increased Shared Understanding → Establish overarching goal for intervention → Strategy planning	Strategy planning → Implementation Ground work modules (decision regarding what to start first and use review to establish commencement of other module(s))	Review → implementation Ground work modules	Review → implementation Ground work modules
Facilitator/ Psycho education:	Strategy menu and crib cards Fire-fighting diagram and info	Personalized fire-fighting diagram	Module relevant information, guidance and tools	Module relevant information, guidance and tools	Module relevant information, guidance and tools
Home task:	Implementation of plan or further reflective exercises in relation to inter-relatedness of fire-fighting issue and formulation and goal	Consider strategy menu	Consider strategy menu	Practice exercises from modules included in plan	Practice exercises from modules included in plan
Example of parent A	<p>Fire-fighting (F-F)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parent very afraid of being on her own Unsure how she will be able to implement strategies due to this Emotional support provided, using F-F process <p>Home task: Parent: Carry out F-F management plan Practitioner: Available for supportive p/c</p>	<p>F-F → CU → Goal → SP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed F-F Discussed clearer understanding re 'blocks' to making improvements in parenting Extended goal to include being on her own without the worries/fears Revisited strategy planning menu in light of this 	<p>Groundwork: relaxation module</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussed relaxation exercise options Provided parent with written information <p>Home task: Parent to decide which exercise she wanted to start with</p>	<p>Groundwork: relaxation module</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreed on breathing & muscular relaxation exercises Practiced both in session <p>Home task: parent to use guidelines and practice with children</p>	<p>Groundwork: relaxation module</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed home task Adapted exercises in light of feedback <p>Home tasks: Parent: continue practicing the newly edited exercises Practitioner :daily text Groundwork: mindfulness module</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussed principles of mindfulness Information sheet given <p>Home tasks: Parent: consider mindfulness in the context of own religious beliefs and discuss with pastor</p>

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Week	11	12	13	14	15
Session mapping:	Review → implementation Ground work modules	Review → implementation Ground work modules	Review → implementation Ground work modules	Review → implementation Strategy modules	Review → implementation Strategy modules
Facilitator:	Module relevant information, guidance and tools	Module relevant information, guidance and tools	Module relevant information, guidance and tools	Module relevant information, guidance and tools	Module relevant information, guidance and tools
Home task:	Practice exercises from modules included in plan	Practice exercises from modules included in plan	Consolidation of groundwork exercises	Practice exercises from modules included in plan	Practice exercises from modules included in plan
Example of parent A	<p>Groundwork: relaxation module</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed home task Agreed next step to do on her own Planned the above including level of practitioner support <p>Groundwork: mindfulness module</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed information sheet Did exercise together in session (using CD) <p>Home tasks: Parent: continue practicing relaxation exercises on her own Practitioner :daily text, requiring response-emotional support and coaching</p>	<p>Groundwork: relaxation module</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed & relocated strategies within purpose of programme (Parent wary of spending more time on her own) <p>Groundwork: mindfulness module</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practiced in session Set home task for parent to practice using CD <p>Home tasks: Parent: cont. practicing relaxation & mindfulness, incr. spending longer alone Practitioner :daily text, requiring response-emotional support and coaching</p>	<p>Groundwork: relaxation and mindfulness modules running concurrently</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed homework Agreed to keep home tasks the same and practitioner to reduce support Back-up plan for support negotiated <p>Strategy modules</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Began discussions about parenting behaviour Agreed to work in parallel on 1) increasing positive interactions with child and 2) managing with more difficult behaviours <p>Home task: Parent: to record in parent folder areas to work on, using reflections during the week Practitioner: Reduce txt- every 2-3 days, sustaining connection (non interactive)</p>	<p>Strategy modules</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed home task, parent provided feedback re focus of work <p>1) To play mindfully and in a connected way with her children 2) Sibling rivalry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreed to focus on (1) whilst parent monitored (2) Discussed mindful play/connecting with your child information <p>Home task: to play a mindful game with the children Practitioner: 1x txt to remind</p>	<p>Strategy module: Connecting with child</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed successful home task Parent made suggestions for how to extend mindfulness to other interactions with children Agreed a plan for how she would do this with her son <p>Home task: Parent: mindful time with son, continue mindful games</p>

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Week	16	17	18	19	20
Session mapping:	Review → implementation Strategy modules	Review → implementation Strategy modules Review	Review → ending	Review → Ending	Ending
Facilitator:	Module relevant information, guidance and tools	Module relevant information, guidance and tools	Module relevant information, guidance and tools		
Home task:	Practice exercises from modules included in plan	Consolidation of strategy exercises	Ending toolkit – what is needed for the future?		
Example of parent A	<p>Strategy module: Connecting with child</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed home task Children noticing the difference Parent generated ideas about generalizing mindfulness principles <p>Strategy module: Sibling rivalry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed parent’s monitoring Encouraged parent to lead plan She requested written information <p>Home tasks: Parent: continue practicing in a variety of situations Practitioner :provide psycho-education</p>	<p>Strategy module: Sibling rivalry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided written information Parent took the lead in reviewing this Decided she was doing enough already in this area/had enough info <p>Review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Above led into more formal review of the work completed throughout Used parent folder Began to discuss & plan ending <p>Home tasks: Parent: continue practicing in a variety of situations. Observing & noticing when managing sibling rivalry</p>	<p>Strategy modules: Connecting with child and sibling rivalry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review of progress <p>Plan for ending</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared poems from manual <p>Home task: Parent: gave parent ending toolkit to look through Practitioner Prepared Summary of intervention for network of Professionals</p>	<p>Ending</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed home task Completed parent toolkit together Asked for parent feedback on Professionals Summary document 	<p>Ending</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided final copy of toolkit and professionals summary Went for a coffee to say goodbye