

The Incredible Years® Baby and Toddler Parent Programmes: Promoting attachment and infants' brain development

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The Incredible Years® (IY) parent series provides an interlocking, comprehensive and developmentally based set of programmes for parents of children from birth to 12 years of age. The newest addition to this evidence based programme series is the IY Babies programme (for 0-1 year) and the IY Toddler programme (for 1-3 years). These programmes aim to promote a positive attachment between parents and their babies and toddlers so children feel loved, safe and secure. Parents learn optimal ways to enhance their babies' emotional, social and language development; how to help their toddlers handle separations and emotional regulation issues by using predictable routines, clear limit setting, distractions and redirections and how to coach toddlers' school readiness skills. The parent group format fosters peer support networks and shared learning. Trained group facilitators use video clips of real life situational vignettes of multi-ethnic families to support the training and stimulate parenting group discussions, problem solving and practice exercises.

Keywords: infant, attachment, parent programme, brain development

The evidence for investing in early intervention is overwhelming. There is a wealth of research evidence showing that environmental influences from birth to three years of age impact significantly on a child's academic, language, social and emotional development. Poor early life experiences can permanently impair the healthy growth of very young children's brains; while positive experiences can have the opposite effect, promoting healthy brain development. The central tenet of early intervention is that by preventing problems arising in the first place and identifying and remedying problems as early as possible, families can be supported to help their children develop to their full potential. A child's development score at just 22 months can serve as an accurate predictor of educational outcomes at age 26 years (Allen, 2011a).

Alongside the scientific case to be made for early intervention and the significant potential to improve outcomes for children, economists and politicians are increasingly recognising the financial case for early intervention too. Allen (2011b) argues that early intervention has the potential to reap massive savings in public expenditure by preventing the necessary expensive provision that is required when families experience difficulties later on in life. The cost of not intervening has also been demonstrated, with one study demonstrating the cumulative costs to public services of conduct disorder to age 28 as much higher than providing services to someone without those difficulties (Scott, 2001).

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Babies are born with trillions of nerve cells but if the cells fail to make connections with each other they die and are never replaced. In order to establish these connections, babies need repeated, good quality and sensitive responses from caregivers. It is these interactions, when repeated many times, that form the brain connections required for optimal brain function. The first three years of life are therefore a critical period of growth and provide a window of opportunity for optimal intervention. By age three, a toddler's brain is 90% of its size as an adult, highlighting the rapid development which occurs during the first three years of life.

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Furthermore, if a baby is exposed to high levels of stress or anxiety, this can lead to an over developed stress response and higher levels of cortisol, which are toxic to brain development. The longer term implications of this include problems such as poor impulse control, difficulties learning, extremes of emotion, poor understanding of social cues, lack of emotional literacy and eventual school drop out

and delinquency (Webster-Stratton & Taylor, 2001).

ATTACHMENT

There is longstanding evidence that a baby's social and emotional development is affected by the quality of their attachment to their parents (Belsky & De Haan, 2011). Attachment is not just an interaction between individuals but a bond that exists between them. Early experiences are therefore key to the development of attachment and form a crucial foundation for all future relationships.

Evidence repeatedly demonstrates that infants under three years of age who do not form strong bonds with their mother or father are more likely to suffer from aggression, defiance and hyperactivity when they are older. Insecure attachment is associated with poorer language development and higher rates of misbehaviour in school. The effect also continues throughout the lifespan, with insecure children more likely to leave school without further education, training or employment. Furthermore, there is evidence that the quality of parent care and attachment in the first year of life is a strong predictor of school success, with one study finding a 77% accuracy rate in whether children graduated from high school (Moullin et al., 2014).

The significance of this early period is also dramatically highlighted by the fact that babies are disproportionately vulnerable to abuse and neglect, with babies in England being seven times more likely to be killed than older children (Leadsom et al., 2013). In the UK, around 26% of babies are estimated to be living within complex family situations, which can heighten the risks for the infant's wellbeing, including parental mental health problems and substance misuse. The case for intervening early is very strong, with good evidence to support interventions which target infants and promote attachment by helping parents to be responsive and sensitive. It is often assumed that parents automatically know how to do this, but this is simply not the case. The actions of holding a baby lovingly, responding to their needs appropriately, and talking to babies which are key to the development of attachment, often need to be learned, especially for parents who have not experienced this in their own childhood. The NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) Guidance for England and Wales on 'Social and Emotional Wellbeing: Early Years' (2012) highlights the need for services to identify early those under five year olds most at risk of developing problems later in life, and to provide evidence based interventions to promote parental sensitivity and positive parenting skills.

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PARENT TRAINING: INCREDIBLE YEARS® PARENT PROGRAMMES

Behaviour problems in young children are very common and there is strong evidence that parent training programmes are effective in managing these difficulties for children between the ages of two to twelve years. One of the most effective of these interventions is the Incredible Years® parent series (Kazdin, 2010), with multiple, independent, randomised controlled trials across diverse populations demonstrating its effectiveness in the treatment and prevention of conduct disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Brestan & Eyberg, 1998; Mentinga et al., 2013; Trillingsgaard et al., 2014). Over three decades of research have shown positive outcomes for families who participate in the IY toddler, preschool or school age programmes, including improvements in children's social and emotional competences, school readiness skills and reductions in their aggressive behaviour and internalising problems. These changes have been brought about by improvements in parental stress and depression, as well as by improvements in parenting interactions with their children (Beauchaine et al., 2005). Long term follow-up research has demonstrated that IY parent programmes have prevented and treated conduct disorders, promoted sustained positive parent relationships with children and positive academic outcomes (Webster-Stratton et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2014). There is also evidence that styles of parenting taught in the Incredible Years® Basic Parent Programme impact on parental responsiveness, a key component of the measurement of attachment (O'Connor et al., 2013).

IY parent programmes
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INCREDIBLE YEARS® BABY AND TODDLER PROGRAMMES

A more recent addition to the series of these evidence based programmes is the IY Baby and Toddler programmes (Webster-Stratton, 2008) which have been translated into Danish and Spanish. In line with the other programmes, the emphasis is on strengthening parent-child interactions, attachment and children's safety, reducing harsh discipline and fostering parents' ability to promote children's social, emotional and language development. In both programmes, trained facilitators use video vignettes to structure the content and trigger group activities related to parents' goals and build parent support networks. Both programmes have comprehensive group facilitator manuals with suggested facilitator questions for group discussions, session protocols, handouts for home activities and summaries of key points. For the IY Baby Programme it is

recommended that the parents be provided with 'Incredible Babies: A Guide and Journal for Your Baby's First Year' and for the Toddler Programme, with 'Incredible Toddlers: A Guide and Journal of Your Toddler's Discoveries'. Additionally for both the baby and toddler programmes, there are home coaching manuals with protocols that help clinicians know how to deliver the programme at home with families. While the group model is highly recommended because of the value of group support for parents, the home-based version can be used for parents who miss group sessions, or are unable to attend groups, or need coaching in addition to the group training. For child-welfare families, it is recommended to add several home coaching sessions to the group model.

Parents start the 2-hour weekly IY Baby Programme when their babies are 6 weeks to 2 months old. Ideally parents are recruited during their prenatal visits so they can begin as soon as possible. They bring their babies to the group sessions for 10-12 weeks or more for child welfare referred families. With the babies present, they are able to engage in baby practice time allowing group facilitators to support and encourage their responses and learning. Parents learn how to help their babies feel loved and secure, how to provide a safe environment and how to encourage their babies' physical and language development. The parent group format normalises their experiences, fosters peer support networks and promotes shared learning.

The sessions cover the following topics:

- Getting to know your baby (0-3 months)
- Babies as intelligent learners (3-6 months)
- Providing physical, tactile and visual stimulation
- Parents learning to read babies' minds
- Gaining support
- Babies emerging sense of self (6-12 months)

There are currently research trials of the IY Baby Programme taking place in Norway, Denmark and Ireland. A small pilot study recently conducted in Wales has shown positive feedback from families and would suggest potential as a cost effective intervention (Jones et al., 2012).

The IY Toddler Programme is designed for parents of children aged one to three years. Parents do not bring their toddlers to this 12 week, 2-hour weekly programme but day-care is provided for their children. In this programme, parents learn how to help their toddler feel loved and secure and how to ensure safety at a time when toddlers are driven to explore and resistant to limits set. They learn how to use child-directed play, and social and emotional coaching to encourage their toddler's language development and beginning self-regulation and friendship skills. They also learn how to establish clear and predictable routines, handle separations and reunions, and use positive discipline to manage misbehaviour.

The curriculum covers the following topics:

- Child directed play to enhance relationships
- Promoting toddler language and child directed coaching
- Social and emotion coaching
- Praise and encouragement
- Spontaneous incentives for toddlers
- Handling separations and reunions
- Positive discipline – effective limit setting
- Positive discipline – handling misbehaviour

There currently exist several randomised control group trials evaluating the IY Toddler Programme. The first study (Gross et al, 2003) was conducted with parents and teachers of 2-3 year olds in day care centres serving low-income, ethnically diverse families. Results showed parents who participated in the programme to have higher self-efficacy, and use less coercive discipline and more positive parenting, while their children showed reductions in behaviour problems. Most effects were maintained 1-year later. The most recent study tested the efficacy of the programme in eleven diverse, primary care rural and urban paediatric practices. Parents in this study were selected based on their toddlers being at high risk or showing clinical levels of behaviour problems. They were randomly assigned to the parent programme or a waiting-list control condition. Results showed reductions in negative parenting and child misbehaviours that were sustained at 1-year follow up (Perrin et al, 2014).

IMPLEMENTATION FIDELITY

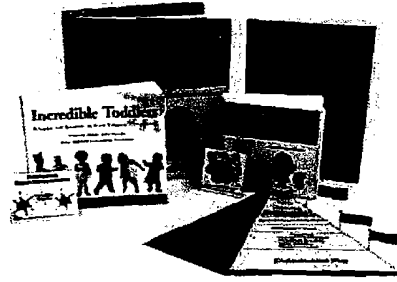
There has been a huge shift in recent years for public services to commission and deliver evidence based interventions that have demonstrable outcomes for families. However, all too often these outcomes are not replicated once delivered within services and programmes are abandoned as 'not working' for that population. There are many factors which can affect outcomes but one extremely common problem is that of intervention programme fidelity. This means delivering the intervention exactly as in the original research, with all of the content and group process components that make it effective. For example, video modelling, role play practices, group discussion, a collaborative approach and session protocol adherence including number of vignettes shown: all of these are core clinical delivery components along with the minimum recommended number of sessions and are vital to ensure positive outcomes for families.

One factor affecting
outcomes is programme
fidelity.

To ensure the IY programmes are implemented with high fidelity, there are proven accreditation and supervision processes in place to ensure

KNOWLEDGE BASE

group facilitators are delivering the intervention to the same standards as conducted in the original research, ensuring the same outcomes are obtained in practice. Research has shown that when IY group facilitators are trained by accredited trainers and mentors and provided with on going coaching and support as they start up new programmes, the quality of their programme delivery is much higher and their participant drop-out is lower (Webster-Stratton et al., 2014).



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CHILDREN'S AND PARENTS' SERVICE

Manchester, UK

Manchester has a population of approximately half a million people and has the highest ranking for child poverty in the UK. The Children And Parents' (CAPS) Service is a city-wide, multi-agency early intervention service in Manchester, providing evidence based interventions to pre-school children and their families. The service is jointly funded by health and local government, is led by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and employs clinical psychologists and family support workers. CAPS has been established for over 15 years and has an excellent track record of delivering the Incredible Years parent programmes in community settings across the city to diverse and multi-cultural populations, demonstrating effective parent and child outcomes using standardised, valid and reliable measures.

Manchester has recently implemented a new Early Years pathway with a recommended blueprint for all 0-5 year olds to give them the best start in life. The model provides eight points for assessment throughout the pre-schooler's life with assessment tools and care pathways to ensure families get the right intervention at the right time and at the earliest appropriate point for intervention. Baby and Toddler Incredible Years parent programmes are evidence based interventions commissioned as part of the model and CAPS has been successful in establishing them in Manchester.

Working with a diverse, and in many cases, hard to reach populations, CAPS has established a number of key principles to ensure successful recruitment and retention of parents throughout delivery of the Incredible Years parent courses. Many parents of babies and toddlers can be chaotic, feel depressed and overwhelmed or not want to receive help for fear of negative appraisal. The following factors are seen as crucial in the engagement of parents to Incredible Years Baby and Toddler parent courses:

STAFF

- Highly trained and skilled, collaborative group leaders (all are accredited Incredible Years group leaders and receive weekly clinical psychology supervision)
- Specific requirement to attend accredited Incredible Years video supervision
- Job descriptions re-written to include requirement to collect standardised measures in relation to IY programmes
- Regular audit cycle to maintain and improve standards

REACHING OUT

- Close working with midwives and health visitors
- Assertive outreach approach to engage families, including home visits
- Provision at Incredible Years sessions of high quality crèche and translators when needed

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