

Aotearoa New Zealand

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Incredible Years: New autism programmes

By Education Gazette editors

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A greater focus on imaginative play can help young children with autism, says Dr Carolyn Webster-Stratton, clinical psychologist and founder of Incredible Years.

The Ministry of Education is introducing two new programmes specifically designed for parents and teachers of children aged 2–5 with autism this month – Incredible Years® Autism, a 14–16 session programme for parents, and Incredible Years Helping Children with Autism, a separate six-session programme for teachers of children with autism.



Dr Carolyn Webster-Stratton.

Dr Webster-Stratton was in New Zealand in February to train local facilitators to deliver these programmes. While she was here, she spoke about the inspiration behind these programmes and how parents and teachers can work together to make a real difference in the lives of children with autism.

“We know that children with autism are more likely than their peers to have behaviour issues and their parents are more likely to experience high levels of stress.

“We also know that teachers of children with autism can sometimes doubt their own ability to manage the behaviour. They feel they need more support, they feel frustrated and they can lack confidence.

“But teachers are often in a unique position to be able to make a real difference in children’s lives. This means it’s vital that we support them to work effectively with children with autism, while still meeting the needs of other children.

“I originally developed the Incredible Years programmes because I saw a very real need for cost-effective support for parents and teachers, helping them to find more positive ways to interact and respond to children in challenging situations. Learning in groups, and using video vignettes to model positive interactions and trigger group discussions is not only cost effective, but also helps reduce parents’ and teachers’ feelings of isolation and frustration.

“Over the years of evaluating the Incredible Years parent and teacher programmes with families of children with behaviour challenges, there were always some parents in the group who had children with language and developmental delays, emotional regulation and attachment problems, in addition to behaviour problems. Some of these children were likely on the autism spectrum, although at that time they might not have been recognised as such. I also became aware of the tremendous need for more support for parents and teachers working with children with developmental delays and on the autism spectrum.

“A transformative moment for me was working with a little boy in one of our Incredible Years child groups in our Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder study. This boy was overwhelmed and withdrew when playing with the other boys. I took him out of the group to play with him using a large, child-sized puppet. I was amazed by how caring and empathetic he was with this puppet and how he demonstrated some social, emotion and language skills that I had not seen him demonstrate in the child group.

“I was convinced that other children with similar challenges would benefit from more work strengthening their pretend and imaginary play, as a way to teach them social skills and emotion language, and as a way to get into what I call their ‘attention spotlight’.

“This was the lightbulb moment that led to my wanting to develop and test a programme for parents and one for teachers that focused on children with autism and language delays, and I’m very excited that the Ministry of Education is bringing these programmes to teachers and families in New Zealand.”

Incredible Years is a series of interlocking, evidence-based programmes for parents, children and teachers supported by over 30 years of research. The two new programmes are highly interactive, collaborative, self-directed, and driven by the child’s developmental abilities and goals. Together, they aim to promote children’s emotional regulation, positive social interactions and language development. They are part of a range of supports that the Ministry provides for children and young people with autism.

The new programmes will initially be offered in Auckland, Tauranga, Hawke’s Bay, Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch and Invercargill, with further programmes being announced later this year.

[For more information about Incredible Years Autism and Incredible Years Helping Children with Autism\(external link\) \(http://www.pb4l.tki.org.nz/Incredible-Years-Autism%20\)](http://www.pb4l.tki.org.nz/Incredible-Years-Autism%20)
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**BY Education Gazette editors**

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