



Confident Carers – Cooperative Kids: The First 10 Years

Background

The Confident Carers – Cooperative Kids (CCCK) group program emerged from the frustration experienced by two local clinical psychologists -- Greg Konza (CAMHS) and Mark Donovan (CAMHS & Northfields Clinic, UOW) – at the perceived lack of an appropriate intervention for families being referred to CAMHS with children displaying severe behavioural and emotional problems.

Both Greg and Mark had been trained in and had facilitated a number of existing Behavioural Family Intervention programs. The Incredible Years Program developed by Carolyn Webster-Stratton was generally regarded as the best of these, however the videotapes were badly out-dated, some of the concepts were laboured, and to include all the necessary components would require attendance at up to 24 sessions. Triple P offered a strong intervention for families who could manage the worksheets and where behavioural problems were less severe, however did not seem to suit those families being referred to CAMHS.

Common feedback from parents who attended such groups was feeling evaluated about their parenting. They often experienced skills-teaching as further communication of their deficits as a parent, inviting negativity and defensiveness. Under stress, parents reverted back to unhelpful inter-generational parenting behaviours. Underlying cognitions such as ‘there’s no point’, ‘I can’t cope’, ‘I’m a bad parent’, ‘s/he’s a bad child’ guided parents’ actions.

In order to stem the flow of such difficulties, parents needed unifying concepts that could guide them during stormy interactions and at times of family stress. They needed strategies that would help them to remain calm, to sensitively attune to their child’s needs, to remain in the adult role.

Confident Carers – Cooperative Kids (CCCK)

CCCK attempts to meet these needs by incorporating neurobiological, attachment, and social learning theory within a 9 week Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)-based parenting program^{1,2}. CCCK uses a number of key images to help parents to remain attuned to their children while striking the balance between being loving/caring and having firm and consistent limits.

During the program, parents are invited to identify and then move in the direction of their deeply held wishes for their child, family and for themselves as parents (‘Parenting Compass’, ‘Doing What Matters’). They are helped to acknowledge all of the factors that contribute towards problem

behaviours and to liken these behaviours to a fire that can rage through family life and destroy relationships ('Bushfire Metaphor'). They are helped to step-back from 'Power and Mind Struggles', and to reduce the 'heat' in the family through a combination of mindful play, praise, limit-setting, planned ignoring, consequences, and emotion coaching. Parents are also helped to gain some distance from the thoughts and feelings that invite unhelpful parenting practices ('Virus X'/Mind Struggle). Importantly, parents are encouraged to 'attune' to their child and to be present with their child while using these well-researched parenting strategies. Images, video-clips, guided mindfulness exercises and attuned therapist-client interactions are utilised throughout to communicate with parents on a right-hemisphere to right-hemisphere intuitive level.

The program has now run for over 10 years at the University Clinic as well as local CAMHS and Non-Government family organisations. Early research has shown that attendance at CCCK leads to a decrease in child behaviour problems and an increase in parental mental health and parental self-confidence³, greater benefits for those families with more severe problems⁴, and support that these benefits can be observed⁵.

The Future?

With a range of empirically-supported and government-backed parenting programs available, the continual challenge is to recognise what CCCK can offer beyond such programs. Our belief remains that CCCK offers images and processes to parents that simplify the task, build the parent-child relationship, and get to the heart of parenting. In short, CCCK helps carers to feel more confident, and kids to be more cooperative.

Mark Donovan & Greg Konza

June 2019

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References:

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3. Horsfield,S., Caputi,P. & Donovan,M. (2009). Parents as Confident Carers: the Role of Parental Self-Efficacy in Parenting Interventions. Unpublished Masters thesis.
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