



# Seeds for Success He kakano ka puawai

## School Entry Behaviour Screening and Intervention

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### ABSTRACT

The Seeds for Success pilot project involved RTL, Ministry of Education - Special Education staff, and classroom teachers. It successfully developed and trialed a school entry screening and intervention programme for young children who were identified by teachers as having behaviour difficulties across three school clusters. Collaboration between professionals was a key part of the pilot. Seeds for Success was then introduced to a number of other clusters in different parts of New Zealand.

### ‘EARLY INTERVENTION IS WIDELY SEEN BY RESEARCHERS AS AN EFFECTIVE MODEL FOR LEARNERS WITH BEHAVIOURAL AND EMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES.’

There are many potential adverse outcomes for young children who have behavioural difficulties early in school. They may participate less in classroom activities, are less likely to be accepted by their peers and teachers, and may receive a reduced level of positive teacher attention and instruction. These children may lose opportunities to learn cooperatively from other children, and can develop a negative attitude to school and learning (Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Stage & Quiroz, 1997). Social skills such as cooperation, as well as social-emotional factors, can be predictive of academic success in the early school years (Agostin & Bain, 1997).

Early intervention is widely seen as an effective model when working with children with disability and learning difficulties. For example the Early Intervention Service in early childhood settings, and Reading Recovery in schools, are important features of New Zealand education. Sixty-eight percent of New Zealand schools operated Reading Recovery in 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2004). Early intervention is also widely seen by researchers as an effective model for learners with behavioural and emotional difficulties (Church, 2003, Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey 1995), but our experience is that much of the existing service provision regarding behaviour problems in schools in New Zealand is reactive rather than proactive.

Overseas research suggests that, although parents of many children recognize emotional and behavioural problems in the early childhood years, “there is a predictable multi-year lag between that recognition and getting the children and families linked to appropriate services, thus losing the potential efficacy of intensive early intervention for these young children” (Raver & Knitzer, 2002).

Early intervention with behaviour difficulties is informed by a significant body of research that describes developmental pathways that children may follow that lead to further behavioural difficulties and antisocial or criminal behaviour as adolescents and adults (Broidy et al, 2003; Church, 2003; Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Nagan & Tremblay, 1999; Shaw, Gilliom, Ingoldsby & Nagan, 2003; Walker et al., 1995). Fergusson & Horwood (2002), using data from the Christchurch longitudinal study, noted that the majority (58%) of chronic adult offenders had conduct problems at eight years. The Department of Corrections (2001) emphasised a “trajectory” model as a way of identifying and intervening early to prevent chronic adult offending. The Dunedin Multidisciplinary Study (White et al, cited in Stormont, 2001) showed that 70% of children classified in the antisocial group at age eleven years were accurately classified based on preschool variables. In boys, physical aggression in childhood is a distinct predictor of later violent delinquency, and early disruptive and oppositional behaviour increases the risk of later nonviolent delinquency (Broidy et al., 2003).

### ‘EARLY SIGNS SHOULD NOT BE IGNORED SIMPLY BECAUSE THE CHILD WAS STILL YOUNG AND HIS/HER BEHAVIOUR WAS REASONABLY EASY TO MANAGE.’

Prediction on an individual basis will, however, always be problematic. Predictive accuracy using behaviour rating scales, for example, can reach a positive predictive value of 60% over a year, although typically studies have reported lower values of around 50% (Van Lier, Verhulst & Crijnen, 2003). Efforts to improve the predictive ability of screening instruments by “multiple gating,” that is, by including a range of different child, environmental or familial factors, appear to increase prediction, but this increase may be only marginal and needs to be balanced against the costs of doing so (Van Lier et al., 2003). However, as the Scottish Inspectorate of Schools put it “early signs should not be ignored simply because the child was still young and his/her disruptive behaviour was relatively easy to manage” (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2002).

### CONTEXT

The essential importance of context in influencing children’s behaviour is described by many writers. For example, Barth et al., (2004) described the importance of the classroom environment, and in particular peers, on the development

of children's behaviour over time. High levels of aggression in first grade classrooms increase the risk of males being highly aggressive from first grade to middle school (Kellam et al., 1998).

**“THERE IS A REALITY THAT TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS EXPERIENCE: THAT SOME CHILDREN ARE ‘TROUBLED’ AND NOT MERELY ‘TROUBLESOME’ AND THAT THESE CHILDREN, THEIR TEACHERS AND PARENTS CAN BENEFIT FROM ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE.”**

The importance of the developmental and interactional nature of learners with behaviour difficulties needs to be emphasized (Van Lier et al., 2003). Considering context, and intervention that may change that context, is essential if we are to take an ecological approach to behavioural difficulties. At the same time, there is a reality that teachers and schools experience; that some children are “troubled” and not merely “troublesome” and that these children, their teachers and parents can benefit from additional targeted assistance (Jones, 2003).

### **INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS AND WHANAU**

Parenting practices, parent adjustment, and parenting satisfaction have been shown to play a key role in the early development of disruptive behaviour and adaptive functioning, including social behaviour (Barkley et al., 2002; Stormont, 2001). There is a growing body of evidence that early interventions with parents can prevent later antisocial behaviour by their children (Scott et al., 2001; Department of Corrections, 2001). Mothers' interactions with their children at school entry have some unique predictive value in terms of later social and academic outcomes (Morrison et al., 2002).

In education support programmes, research shows that ‘home support’ programmes are a critical factor at this stage if long term changes are to be effected (Project Early, 1999). Evaluation of the Severe Behaviour Initiative indicated that the family is an integral link to successful implementation of the programme (Bourke et al., 2001). Berryman (2000) challenges us to think about power relationships between parents, whanau, and professionals. Rutter and Maughan (2002) stated that “there is no doubt that parental support for children's learning can be instrumental in fostering progress but that there can be minuses if the involvement makes some parents feel deskilled”. Innovative approaches such as Hei Awhina Matua (Berryman & Glynn, 2004) have created real and significant benefits from genuine collaborative approaches between parents and teachers. The essential nature of the home school connection is discussed in detail by Ryan and Adams (1995).

We believe that these findings emphasise the importance of a holistic role for those working in special education such as RTLB and Ministry of Education – special education staff.

### **SCHOOL ENTRY SCREENING**

The first year at school provides a valuable period for early identification and intervention (Walker et al., 1995). Transition to school is a complex experience and presents

challenges for many children. Discontinuities between the child's previous environments and school may be significant. Adjustment to school depends to a large extent on the child possessing the necessary social, behavioural and academic skills to respond to the demands of the new environment. The nature of the support children receive and the connections between family, teachers and peers is of great importance (Margetts, 1999; Peters, 2000).

**“THE PERIOD SOON AFTER SCHOOL ENTRY PROVIDES A LOGICAL, COST EFFECTIVE WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR EFFECTIVE SCREENING AND INTERVENTION FOR THOSE WORKING IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM.”**

Schools in New Zealand are aware of the importance of this time, and class sizes are typically smaller at the year one to three level, assisting a focus on the individual needs of children. New entrant teachers in New Zealand schools take part in early academic assessment. School Entry Assessment was used in well over half (59%) of primary schools during 2001 (Dewar & Telford, 2003). The period soon after school entry provides a logical, cost effective window of opportunity for effective screening and intervention for those working in the school system. The Department of Corrections has suggested a cost benefit (cost of crime versus cost of intervention) of 51:1 for school entry screening and intervention, compared to 25:1 for 10-14 year olds (Department of Corrections, 2001).

The concept of screening developed in medical settings with populations at risk for highly specific conditions (Van Lier, Verhulst & Crijnen, 2003). Behaviour problems are not this specific. However, although there are potential risks associated with inappropriate use of screening programmes, such as the possible negative impacts of labeling children as “disordered”, and some writers have criticised the inappropriate use of screening instruments to delay school entry or make exclusionary placement decisions, there are appropriate programme goals for screening that include curriculum planning, child find activities and follow up procedures (Rafoth, 1997).

**“TEACHERS ARE VERY WELL PLACED TO MAKE COMPARISONS BETWEEN CHILDREN ON BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES AT SCHOOL BECAUSE OF THEIR EXTENSIVE EXPOSURE TO STUDENTS AS THEY TEACH,”**  
(WALKER, 1995) .

Teachers are very well placed to make comparisons between children on behavioural issues at school because of their extensive exposure to students as they teach (Walker, 1995). From an ecological perspective, “teachers are uniquely positioned to obtain a coherent picture of children's functioning and adjustment” (Stanley, Rodeka, & Laurence, 1999). Teacher ratings are a widely used and valid method for assessing behavioural adjustment at school (Margetts, 2000; O'Neil & Liljequest, 2002).

However, a systematic model of identification and intervention early in the school life of children who have behavioural difficulties that utilizes teacher assessment does not exist in New Zealand at this time. Some successful models for intervention that show we can make a difference with young children do exist in New Zealand, such as Project Early in Christchurch (Church 1997; Project Early, 1999; Department for Corrections, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2003). The Special Education, MOE Early Intervention Service intervenes with some children with behaviour difficulties during early childhood and may assist at school entry. A limited number of referrals for assistance at the school entry level may come to the Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTL) or the Ministry of Education (MOE) - Special Education.

Proactive approaches are needed in the school setting because research shows that teachers can be highly selective in these referrals and this can lead to less desirable outcomes (Algozzine et al 1991; Walker et al 1994) and also because teachers are less inclined to refer children for antisocial behaviour in their first year of school (Walker, 1995). Recent research by Abidin and Robinson (2002) suggests that while teachers may generally act professionally in their referral decisions, a substantial degree of variance still exists in those decisions.

We also believe that proactive early identification and intervention may have an important preventative role to play for girls, who are less likely to follow chronic offending pathways (Fergusson & Horwood, 2002) but have a higher rate of some mental health problems as adults (National Advisory Committee on Health and Disability, 1996). Girls exhibit a higher rate of internalizing behaviours than boys (Merrell, Crowley, & Walters, 1997) and low socio-economic status girls may enter school displaying greater apprehensive behaviour (Child & McKay 2001). Although research indicates that girls with early conduct problems are not at the same risk for exhibiting the same types of later delinquency as boys, research needs to examine the connection with other deviant outcomes girls may experience, such as drug or alcohol dependence, disordered eating, depression or early pregnancy (Broidy et al, 2003). A proactive focus that goes beyond externalising behaviour to include a wider social emotional domain may assist girls (Merrell, 2002). There may be some substantial issues of equity in the way special education behaviour services respond reactively to the needs of boys and are largely uninvolved with the needs of girls.

Research by Hill Walker and his associates has indicated the efficacy of an approach to screening called "Systematic Screening for Behaviour Disorders" (Walker et al, 1994), and of early intervention at this school entry stage (Golly, Stiller, & Walker, (1996); Walker, Stiller, Severson, Feil, & Golly, (1998); Walker 1998; Leff, et al., (2001). This intervention programme is called "First Steps to Success". Hill Walker visited New Zealand in 2000 to speak at the Special Education Conference in Canterbury.

However, these procedures derive from the United States school system and use American instruments and methods, appear to have a prescriptive format and a focus on individual remediation rather than ecological interventions, and may not reflect the culture(s) of New Zealand schools. Consequently, the Seeds for Success pilot project sought to develop and trial a model of screening and intervention with children soon after school entry that would be valid and useful for New Zealand school clusters, using existing special education services.

Reflective practice and collaborative enquiry can integrate research and practice (Buysse, 2003; Campbell, 2003). Communities of Practice networks can involve numbers of educators who agree to collaborate to collect and report data, gathered in the real world over periods of time, to inform their practice. In developing the Seeds for Success pilot, and in work since that time, we have wanted to build collaborative relationships between MOE staff, RTL and teachers. We have been assisted by the concept of Communities of Practice. Ryba et al., (2000) identified moderating factors that can assist the development of a "Community of Practice" between RTL and MOE. These included collaborative development of systems, shared experience, and compatibility of models of practice.

#### PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

The three key elements of the pilot project were

1. The development and trial of a screening and intervention model for children at risk for behaviour difficulties in their first year at school.
2. Collaboration between schools, RTL, and MOE – Special Education. Collaboration across geographical areas, including urban and rural schools.
3. The implementation of this pilot using the existing service framework.

The Pilot Programme contained three stages.

Stage 1: Initial consultation with RTL, principals, junior class teachers, SES and MOE, leading to the development of draft screening materials and draft intervention protocols.

Stage 2: Trial and development of screening procedures leading to evidence of efficacy and satisfaction and selection of children for intervention.

Stage 3: Trial and development of intervention procedures leading to:

- Evidence of efficacy and satisfaction
- Good behaviour interventions provided for children

Two screening instruments were produced, following consultation and item analysis.

The Brief Behaviour Screening Checklist is a five-item checklist for use by teachers after a child has been at school for six to eight weeks. It provides five positively framed areas of behaviour on which to briefly consider children's

adaptation to school. For example, one item is “plays appropriately in the playground.” It provides a three point scale on which to rank each item.

The Behaviour Screening Checklist is a 28-item checklist arranged around the same five key areas. It provides a range of positively framed skill items that can be used as a basis for teaching plans. For example one item is “accepts playground boundaries and bell times.” It provides a three point scale on which to rank each item. It has space and categories for additional information.

### **Outcomes of consultation meetings**

Consultation meetings with principals, teachers, MOE staff, and RTLB provided a great deal of support and guidance to the project. In particular, these meetings suggested:

- Strong support for a proactive model that recognises the skills of teachers
- Professional decision making on a need-based model
- The importance of parent involvement and partnership
- The importance of a positive skills based focus and the avoidance of labelling, which can suggest that deficits lie within individual children and may lead to reduced expectations, social isolation, or exclusionary practices
- The acceptability of a time limited intervention but also the ability to refer on to ensure children access other appropriate services quickly.

### **THE PROGRAMME PROCESS**

#### **Overview of the programme**

Seeds for Success is a programme for screening and intervening at the new entrant level (five to six years) with children who may be at risk for behavioural difficulties.

Seeds for Success uses:

1. A systematic screening process near the start of year one which ensures all children are considered for intervention.
2. A time limited intervention aimed at skill development dependant on need which may involve in-class support and playground support and will involve a home support component with parents.

The screening process ensures that every child in the new entrant classroom is considered by using:

1. A collaborative interview (Proactive Screening Meeting - PSM) between the teacher(s) and the keyworker.
2. A brief screening instrument that assists teachers to consider skill areas for development for every child at the six week check or during the PSM.
3. A longer screening instrument for use with children who may be of concern during the PSM.

The intervention process:

1. Involves initial and final observations.

2. Utilises professional skills and knowledge collaboratively with teachers to design an appropriate plan for teaching and encouraging adaptive skills, and assists teachers to implement the plan over a ten week period.
3. Involves the parents in the intervention process as appropriate and maintains regular contact with parents over the ten weeks .
4. Evaluates the programme collaboratively at the end of the ten week period and makes appropriate decisions for further action at that time.

Keyworkers (RTLB, MOE special education staff) were provided with a practice manual.

The manual contained :

- An overview of the programme
- Two flow diagrams of the programme process
- A description of the screening checklists
- A description of the proactive screening meeting and a list of tasks for this meeting
- Practice notes suggesting good practice for various stages of the programme
- Criteria for selection for intervention
- Notes regarding parent permission and participation
- A set of programme principles derived from the previous consultation rounds
- Screening checklists
- Evaluation forms.

### **RESULTS**

The Seeds for Success pilot project was conducted in three school clusters - Rangiora in North Canterbury, Dunedin West, and Invercargill South. This involved a mix of rural and urban schools, with an average decile rating of six. Seven RTLB were involved from these three clusters, with three Special Education, MOE staff. Fifteen children were included in the pilot.

#### **Screening**

The proactive screening meeting was seen as being very useful and easy to set up, with an average of six children (range 1- 30) discussed at each meeting. There was a range of presenting issues ranging from isolation to aggression. Both checklists were rated as useful and no major changes were suggested. Of interest was that although all children selected were of some concern to teachers, only one child had involvement with another agency at this time.

#### **Intervention**

Interventions lasted an average of eight weeks. A wide variety of skills were chosen for development, and interventions at school involved a range of individual, group, class and schoolwide strategies, dependent on the needs of the children and the context.

Keyworkers and New Entrant teachers valued the opportunity to work co-operatively together. Issues of concern included “finding the time,” home problems affecting the school programme, changing teachers, and high caseloads.

Home interventions included both one and two parent families and averaged six visits. Evaluations showed :

- Building rapport was seen as a critical factor.
- Collaborative problem solving was the most common approach, covering a range of different topics.
- Both keyworkers and parents believed the home programme was useful, but some thought the time frame to be a little too short.
- Parents rated keyworkers as knowledgeable and understanding of children’s issues, and both believed they were able to work well together.
- Parents mentioned improved relationships with their children.
- Issues mentioned by keyworkers included parent difficulties such as mental health problems, and a difficulty getting to the “real” issues.
- Keyworkers appreciated getting a holistic view of the child.

Positive outcomes were experienced by most of the children who participated in the project. One child commented that now he “is as good as gold”. The collaborative approach of the project allowed relationships between teachers, pupils, and parents to be enhanced.

#### **Focus Group Meeting**

A number of the keyworkers involved in the Pilot Project were able to meet following the completion of the project to discuss their experiences. Positive features of the Seeds for Success model that were mentioned during this meeting included:

- The proactive screening process which was seen as effective and helpful.
- The value of visiting homes, building rapport, providing helpful information and building links between home and school, and the importance of building trust and rapport in a short time frame.
- The value of working with New Entrant teachers, their skills, the positive environment, and using co-operative learning strategies.
- The usefulness of relatively simple, unobtrusive and flexible interventions at this level.
- Building links to other agencies, at this early stage.

Issues identified included:

- Time constraints.
- The pressure observed on some teachers to achieve academic gains early in a child’s school career.
- The relationship between RTLB and Early Intervention (Ministry of Education) services.

#### **DISCUSSION**

This paper describes how we successfully developed and trialed a programme for school entry screening and intervention for behaviour difficulties, and produced positive results for children and schools in three school clusters. This was a successful collaboration between RTLB, MOE staff, and schools.

**“OUR EXPERIENCE WAS THAT USING POSITIVELY FRAMED SKILLS CHECKLISTS ALSO CREATED A POSITIVE TEACHING MODEL.”**

The idea of screening children for behavioural difficulties was very well received. Keyworkers were involved with a number of children who would probably not have received additional services at this level. Therefore, they were able to intervene earlier, with positive results.

The screening meeting and two screening checklists formed the basis of a simple method of screening and also described positive social and classroom skills that could form the basis of intervention plans. The pilot project highlighted the variety of children’s presenting issues, the variation in school and teacher expectations, as well as parental needs. This emphasized the importance of an individualized needs based approach.

This experience of success within a prescribed time frame is consistent with Walker’s (1998) “First Steps to Success” programme, which shows that within this time significant and enduring changes can be made. Other research such as Rohrbeck et al., (2002) suggests that in several different educational areas, shorter, intensive interventions may show greater effects than less intensive long term interventions.

Some additional follow up referrals were made, meaning that these children were not subject to large time delays before additional services are brought into play. The methods of involvement with children varied significantly from individual work to large group interventions and teacher support. Our experience was that using positively framed skills checklists also created a positive teaching model. This suggests that this educational and ecological way of working fits well with our clusters and that labeling at this level may be less of a concern because this model avoids excessive focus on individual child deficits.

Parent involvement was in general a very positive feature of this pilot programme. The experience was that at this age level, presumably before there is a history of negative communication about behaviour difficulties between home and school, parents were happy to participate. The degree of home school liaison was variable during these cases and is an issue to address in future work.

**“THE EXPERIENCE WAS THAT AT THIS AGE LEVEL, PRESUMABLY BEFORE THERE IS A HISTORY OF NEGATIVE COMMUNICATION ABOUT BEHAVIOUR DIFFICULTIES BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL, PARENTS ARE HAPPY TO PARTICIPATE.”**

The children worked with during this pilot programme all displayed some behaviour that meant that they stood out from their peers in order to be prioritised for intervention. Clearly it is not possible to make accurate predictions on an individual basis about which children would have gone on to develop more serious problems. However these were legitimate referrals at this level and keyworkers were able to contribute positively to their situations and to their teachers and parents at this stage.

Although enthusiasm among keyworkers and teachers was high for this model of working, workload commitments among keyworkers, to children with higher, more urgent needs provided difficulties in prioritising time. This showed especially in delays in beginning the work, as other work took top priority. This work was carried out with the agreement of management committees and Ministry of Education management. A systemic commitment to proactive work is essential if competing demands are to be managed.

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