

STEPPING STONES TO SUCCESS

A new parenting course designed for families with a child who has a disability was run recently by RehabCare in Tullamore, Co. Offaly.



STEPPING STONES TRIPLE P is an adaptation of Triple P – Positive Parenting Programme, which is tailored to the needs of parents of children with a disability. Children who are experiencing delays in their development have the same needs as other children. However, they need extra assistance and opportunities to develop their abilities. Stepping Stones Triple P refers to children who have developmental delay and also to children who have physical or sensory disabilities. This is the first time that the course, which originated in Australia, has been run within Rehab’s services.

Sarah Boyd, who works with the RehabCare service in Tullamore, facilitated the course along with two other staff members. She explains what was involved in the course.

“The course was available to parents of children availing of respite and facilitated within the respite service, which provided the opportunity to promote the service as a community facility. One of the most important things for us was the location of the course. We brought the families into the service that their children attend,

so that they could see that aspect of their lives.

“Our main aim was to help parents develop their own approach to dealing with their children’s behaviours, by giving them the tools to adapt to their individual needs. We covered a variety of topics, including positive parenting, promoting children’s development, teaching new skills and behaviours, managing misbehaviour, parenting routines and planning ahead. The programme focuses on the positive aspects of parenting, which in turn would increase positive behaviours in the child.

“The group sessions offered participants the chance to meet with other parents in similar situations, who encounter similar challenges, and have a real understanding of what each disability is about. One of the main things for parents was to look at the causes of their child’s behavioural problems, other than their disability, such as the family environment and influences outside the home.”

The course offered parents the opportunity to develop skills to encourage their children, such as how

to communicate and get on with others, manage their feelings and solve problems. Following the group session, parents had to implement the programme at home and were instructed to keep track of their child’s behaviour such as patterns, consistency, level of risk, problem triggers, etc. They kept a behaviour diary, and a tally sheet for specific problem behaviours such as hitting or kicking. This allowed parents to later reflect objectively on behaviour patterns and how to improve them.

The feedback from parents has been very positive, due in part to the safe learning environment that facilitators provided. Sarah says, “It was really important for us, on the first night, to make a confidentiality pact. We wanted everyone to be able to talk about their issues without prejudice, safe in the knowledge that their experiences wouldn’t be shared outside the group. Parents expressed concerns around parenting issues and their approach to managing problem behaviours and their own reactions to situations. The course provided them with a network of people to talk to and there was a lot of ‘my child does that too!’”

Joe Moran and his wife Anne Doheny from Tullamore took part in the pilot programme to help them deal with the challenging behaviour of their autistic son, Cormac. Both Joe and Anne found the course very beneficial, not only for themselves but for the whole family. Joe said, "It was very useful for us as it made us look at things differently. Through analysing Cormac's behaviour, we realised that some of his triggers were sensory, reacting to sounds, and some basic needs such as feeling hungry, or toileting needs. As we learned how to recognise and try to prevent these triggers, the number of incidents we had with Cormac reduced.

"It can be very hard to discipline a child with autism and a learning disability. Often children are looking for attention and to them it doesn't matter whether it is positive or negative, just once they get a reaction. Cormac is no different in this. This made us look at how we reacted to Cormac in different situations. We did find the discipline and consequence tools hard with Cormac, but they worked great with our younger daughter, who had begun to copy her big brother's actions. We learned that the best tool was prevention and some of the small hints really made a massive difference, for instance, planning for trips out. One suggestion around trips to restaurants was very helpful: check the menu in advance; ensure there is something on the menu the child will eat. Bring a toy/activity the child can have in the restaurant and order the child's food to be served first to reduce the time waiting. This may help to keep the child happy and less stressed in the restaurant.

"We implemented this recently on a trip to Clare when we went for lunch in a pub. We brought activities for the children, which meant we sat for an hour without any problems. This had rarely happened before, as one of us would have to keep Cormac 'entertained' as the others ate."



Joe Moran and his wife Anne Doheny with their children.



Standing (left to right): RehabCare staff Carmel Ennis, Team Leader; Sarah Boyd, Community Support Worker; and Mary Conroy-Thoms, Residential Services Manager. **Seated (left to right):** Course participants Joe Moran, Anne Doheny and Niall Raymond.

The programme brought together people from different backgrounds who had shared experiences. Joe said, "We now have a new circle of people with whom we can share our experiences. As well as what the programme taught us, we learned from each other too. We definitely feel more empowered as parents now. Cormac also got an assistance dog from Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind around the same time as we did the course and both factors combined have had a really positive effect on our family."

The pilot programme was run by three RehabCare staff, with training for each provided by the HSE Disability Services. Following the success of the course, it is hoped

that it will be run twice a year by RehabCare in Tullamore, with the next course taking place early in the new year. ■

WHO TO CONTACT



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