

Evaluation of the Strategies for Kids – Information for Parents (SKIP) programme.

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Abstract

The Strategies with Kids – Information for Parents (SKIP) programme is a New Zealand government initiative to improve outcomes for children and families. The SKIP programme is a community-based approach to promoting the benefits of positive parenting, and raising awareness and acceptance of alternatives to physical punishment. Research was commissioned to inform the development of SKIP and the programme itself was launched on 5 May 2004. SKIP is comprised of the following three strands:

1. National resources.
2. Strengthening and improving the consistency of parent support and education.
3. A contestable fund to support local initiatives.

The evaluation of the SKIP programme is currently underway.

This presentation will report on the background to the development of SKIP and the evaluation of Strand 3 in particular. The range of local initiatives and the approach developed to promote a culture of self-evaluation among providers will be discussed.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The New Zealand government is committed to improving outcomes for children and their families. In February 2004, it approved the establishment of a community-based programme to provide practical parenting knowledge and skills on safe, effective, non-

physical ways of disciplining children. SKIP is led by Ministry of Social Development (MSD) and has as an overall goal, ‘that all children growing up in New Zealand are raised free from physical punishment’.

Physical punishment is inconsistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), ratified by New Zealand in 1993, as it conflicts with a child’s right to live free from violence. Furthermore, Article 19 (1) states that member states “shall take all appropriate ... social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence ... while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s), or any other person who has care of the child”.

For the purpose of this paper ‘discipline’ is defined as “guidance of children’s moral, emotional and physical development, enabling children to take responsibility for themselves when they are older. Positive discipline normally involves helping children to understand why certain behaviour is unacceptable and other behaviour is acceptable. Negative discipline focuses on doing what you are told in order to avoid being hurt or punished. Physical or corporal punishment is the use of force to cause pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control” (Children’s Issues Centre, 2004, p.10).

Programme Development

The overall aim of the SKIP programme is to promote the benefits of positive parenting and to raise awareness and acceptance of alternatives to physical punishment. The target audience is parents/caregivers of children from birth to five years. The focus of SKIP is parents/caregivers attitudes to positive parenting and the use of physical punishment. The programme recognises that changing social attitudes and addressing perceived barriers to using alternatives to physical punishment are necessary precursors to behaviour change. The overall goal is to raise all children in New Zealand in a positive way, with parents feeling confident about managing their children’s behaviour in a loving, nurturing relationship.

Research was undertaken to inform the development of the SKIP programme, to determine the current awareness/attitudes/behaviours towards discipline and physical punishment, to understand barriers to change, to establish the most effective mediums for target audiences together with the most appropriate language, and to test preliminary ideas.

The research undertaken to develop SKIP included a national telephone survey of parents and care-givers, in-depth qualitative interviews with parents who currently use physical discipline, key informant interviews with stakeholders, and a review of the relevant literature. Each component of the research programme contributed to ensuring that the development of the strategy was based on research evidence and importantly, understanding of priority audiences.

National telephone survey

A total of 1151 telephone surveys were completed by 612 parents and 539 caregivers, of children five years and under, between April and May 2004. The survey was conducted using computer-assisted telephone interviewing.

The national telephone survey was not strictly population based. However, it included samples of Maori, Pacific Island, and Asian groups that were stratified by gender, location, and care-giver type (parent or care-giver). The parent sample was weighted to approximate the gender, ethnicity, and location distribution of the national population of parents with children five years and under, while the care-giver sample was weighted to the gender, ethnicity, and local distribution of the national population 15 years and over.

Parents were defined to include: parent/guardian; step-parent; foster-parent; and whangai parent. Care-givers were grouped and reported under the categories: grandparents; brother/sister; other relative (including aunt/uncle); other care-giver (including de-facto partner of child's parent, friend/neighbour, childcare worker, baby sitter, and all other care-givers).

In-depth qualitative interviews

A total of 32 in-depth qualitative interviews were completed with parents, of children five years and under, who identified as currently using physical discipline. 11 interviews were conducted with New Zealand European/Pakeha, 8 with Maori, 9 with Pacific Island, and 4 with Asian parents. Face to face, individual or paired in-depth interviews were conducted with parents using a semi-structured interview schedule.

Parents were selected to provide a range of parenting experience including male and female, living situation, age of youngest child, household income, and location. Parents were selected using both personal networks and through a specialist market and social research recruitment company.

Key informant interviews

A total of 14 key informant interviews were held with stakeholders throughout New Zealand. Stakeholders were purposely selected on the basis that they could provide knowledge and experience relevant to the development of SKIP. Informants provided "expert" level input from a range of sectors and interest groups including well child and early childhood services, paediatrics, parenting programmes, crisis intervention, training, education, and advocacy. Maori and Pacific Island experts were also included in the interviews.

Some of the key findings from the development research are discussed below:

Parents and care-givers

- Parents are generally united in their desire to achieve the best possible outcomes for their children through their parenting. Many parents seek to become 'good' and 'effective' parents.
- Parents/care-givers identified the most influential factors on their parenting/care-giving style as their own upbringing, personal experience of what works best, and

family members. Printed material was also reported as a major influence on parenting style.

- Parenting can be a largely assumed or natural role for parents.

Cultural issues

- Western models of parenting are not the norm for all, and parenting can also be about cultural retention.
- While Maori parents consider themselves to be the main care-givers, the whanau is considered influential and involved in the upbringing of the tamariki (children).
- Maori parents interviewed tend to have an informal, relaxed, or ‘naturalistic’ approach to parenting. Tamariki are required to be flexible and adaptable to the events of whanau life.
- Parenting of Pacific Island children occurs not only between parents and other family members, but also between island countries and New Zealand.
- It is quite common for Pacific Island houses to have many generations living within one house, and it is common practise for the older female children to be given responsibility for childcare of younger siblings at an early age.

Understanding discipline

- Parents consider discipline as something that occurs in response to child misbehaviour. Positive, proactive parenting practices are less likely to be recognised as a form of discipline.
- Parents use discipline to achieve these outcomes; child remains safe, asserting adult knowledge and judgement, maintaining control, teaching rules and boundaries, foster child’s ability to control behaviour and emotions, respect for others, teaching of values and morals, being good, instilling cultural values, control and teach.
- Maori, Pacific groups, and parents who grew up in a country other than New Zealand, in particular, noted that discipline was also used to instil important cultural values, such as respect for elders.
- Respect and authority were still considered important by parents, but there was a common desire to move away from highly authoritarian and controlling parenting styles.

Use of physical punishment

- High proportions of parents (49%) and caregivers (79%) report never having used physical punishment or not having used physical punishment in the last three months.
- Physical punishment is less likely to be used on younger children (under two years).
- Parents often experience conflicting thoughts and emotions when using physical punishment – tension between doing what they believe is required or justified and suspecting that the practice may be wrong and/or ultimately ineffective.
- Physical punishment is typically considered and used as a ‘last resort’ discipline strategy. A ‘pathway’ to the use of physical punishment is commonly described by parents, in which physical punishment is eventually used after trying other discipline methods and/or because of the continuation or escalation of inappropriate behaviour.
- Parents resort to physical punishment because their coping resources are stretched and they do not have the strategies and capability for alternative methods.

Reasons for using physical punishment

- Physical discipline is commonly used because parents/caregivers consider it to be a required and/or justified response to the child's behaviour.
- Other reasons for use include to teach about safety and danger, to achieve short-term outcomes (e.g., stopping the behaviour immediately), to regain control of the child's behaviour, and because other methods of discipline are considered ineffective.

Reasons for not using physical punishment

- A number of reasons identified for not using physical punishment stem from the experience of physical punishment being ineffective and/or through the experience of trying alternative discipline methods.
- Personally experiencing physical punishment to be ineffective is an important change influence.
- There was some awareness that physical punishment does not succeed as long-term discipline strategy and that it becomes less effective as the child grows older.

Use of alternatives

- Parents and caregivers (to a lesser extent) already see themselves as using a variety of alternatives to physical punishment.
- Most parents/caregivers report trying other methods in situation where they might normally use physical discipline, particularly time-out, loss of privileges.

Readiness to engage in SKIP

- The majority of the parents/caregivers supported an initiative that would provide information on alternative methods of discipline.
- Almost two-thirds of parents/caregivers conveyed an interest in receiving information and programmes on parenting.

The research findings indicate that the SKIP programme should be based upon a number of fundamental elements. These include:

A Positive Empowering Approach

The need for a positive empowering approach which:

- affirms the role of parents/care-givers as well as the place and value of children within the family and wider society;
- builds from where parents/care-givers are at;
- acknowledges that parents/care-givers generally seek to do their best for the children in their care;
- normalises the provision and seeking of parenting support;
- builds parents/care-givers confidence and self belief that they can successfully undertake desired actions and behaviours;
- acknowledges and reinforces the existing use of appropriate alternative discipline strategies.

Work within Cultural Context

The need to acknowledge and work within a cultural context, particularly in recognising that parenting can also be about cultural retention. The programme needs to ensure that positive parenting messages are not read to undermine the validity of parenting practices that may not follow western models of parenting.

A Whole of Life Approach

The need to take a 'whole of life' and ecological approach which addresses the causal factors leading to physical punishment and which works at multiple levels of analysis (child, family/parents, community, society). Simply presenting strategies as isolated or one-off alternatives to the use of physical punishment are unlikely to achieve long term change.

Understanding Readiness to Change

The need to recognise that individuals, families and even communities will be at different points of readiness to change, in respect to behavioural parenting/care-giving practices. These differences will in turn require different types of intervention. The 'Stages of Change' model is seen as providing a useful tool for ensuring that the interventions provided by SKIP are matched to the needs of different target groups.

Supporting Adoption of Positive Parenting

The need for the SKIP programme to consider five key areas to support adoption of positive parenting. These are: consciousness raising; preparation for implementation; supporting implementation; acknowledgement and reinforcement; and, demonstrating outcomes and benefits.

Building a Supportive Environment

The importance of building a social and cultural environment which is supportive of the behaviour change being requested from parents/care-givers. This will include efforts to build a societal culture which normalizes and supports parents in their decision to use positive parenting. It also requires the need to target beyond just parents/care-givers. For example, influencing the views and attitudes of influential others will also be important in assisting parent/care-givers to make change.

The SKIP programme launched on 5 May 2004 was comprised of three strands:

1. National resources for training providers, local level promotional activities, and parents and caregivers. The resources provided include information on practical ways to manage children's behaviour, understanding behaviour, child development, managing anger, managing parental stress and where to go for practical support. The resources have been distributed to community groups with accompanying training programmes and also through channels such as Plunket rooms, Play centres, and libraries.
2. Strengthening and improving the consistency of parent support and education. Partnerships have been developed with national non-government organisations to strengthen existing parent education and support. A SKIP parent education training framework is being developed with the desired outcome being a sustainable and

diverse network of SKIP-based facilitators who are delivering consistent messages to parents/caregivers.

3. A contestable fund to support local level initiatives – The Local Initiatives Fund (LIF). The purpose of the LIF is to support community organisations to promote the benefits of positive parenting and to provide practical knowledge and skills to parents/caregivers of children aged from birth to five years. The LIF is designed to nurture new ideas, innovation, and collaboration of activities at a regional or local level. The fund supports new initiatives including meetings with parents/caregivers, promotional events, and educational activities.

The implementation of SKIP is underway, and will finish in 2006.

For more information about the programme, please see the SKIP website.

www.familyservices.govt.nz/our-work/skip/

Method

The evaluation of the SKIP programme currently being implemented will involve:

- A campaign monitor, to assess the impact of the SKIP programme over three years.
- A LIF self-evaluation process to promote continuous improvement among providers for two years.

Campaign Monitor

A continuous survey methodology was selected for this aspect of the evaluation to permit robust measurement of change in self-reported attitudes and behaviour across points in time. The main advantage of the design being that it provides ongoing feedback that could, potentially, be used to revise the SKIP programme.

The campaign monitor will have two objectives:

1. To assess parents/caregivers awareness of SKIP and its associated activities.
2. To assess the net impact of the investment in SKIP activities on parents/caregivers attitudes and behaviours regarding positive parenting and methods of discipline.

A questionnaire will be designed for a national telephone survey to assess awareness of the SKIP programme, attitudes and behaviours regarding discipline methods, and knowledge of positive parenting. The sample for the campaign monitor will be population based and include participants from indigenous Maori, Pacific Peoples, and Asian groups. The sample will be stratified by gender, location, and care-giver type.

A baseline survey will be undertaken in November 2004. This will be the initial point of reference for the ongoing campaign monitor that will continue until 2007.

LIF Evaluation

There will be four Rounds of applications for the LIF. The first Round of applications for the LIF has closed and decisions on the applications have been made by a decision panel. There were 33 successful recipients from the first Round of applications. Each recipient

signs a one-year contract. Successful initiatives include parenting courses and ongoing support, community events, seminars, in-home support programmes, and community networking.

Attempting to capture the specific processes and outcomes associated with each LIF funded initiative would likely have cost as much, if not more, than the total funds dispersed to providers to provide actual services.

Given the diversity of projects funded through LIF over four rounds, significant benefits are likely to accrue from promoting self-evaluation and sharing of best practice ideas and lessons among the provider group. Such an approach is also cost-effective.

The LIF evaluation will therefore have two main objectives:

1. To promote an evaluation culture among provider organisations.
2. To develop and implement a self-evaluation process with individual community provider organisations who are recipients of the LIF.

LIF recipients will receive guidance from an evaluation consultant in developing and implementing a self-evaluation process. This will involve identifying the outcomes they are seeking to achieve and a means of collecting data that they can use to monitor their progress toward the outcomes. On completion of their contracts, LIF recipients will prepare a presentation on their ‘outcome evaluation’ and share this with their peer providers at a regional review forum. This will enable recipients of the LIF to share best-practice lessons and ideas with one another, and develop relationships with providers responsible for other initiatives within their region.

References

Children’s Issues Centre, 1994, *The discipline and guidance of children: A summary of research*. University of Otago, New Zealand.