



Parents Voices

Mangere East Families share their experience of seeking parenting support.

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Background to capturing their voices

Based at the Mangere East Community Learning Centre, Ohomairangi Trust and Mangere ACCESS Trust worked in partnership to provide high quality parenting education and support to families in need. In the past twelve months 200 parents have enrolled and 180 parents successfully completed one or more of the parenting support programmes provided at the Mangere East Community Learning Centre. Those that did not complete were experiencing extremely difficult circumstances including homelessness or illness though others had found new employment. Most of the parents seek help because a friend, neighbour or work mates has recommended them. Others come because their midwife, social worker (CYFS), family court judge, probation officer, paediatrician or schoolteacher has encouraged them. The programmes are free for all families and transport, childcare and healthy food provided including for evening sessions.

These Impact stories are the first part of a joint project with Ohomairangi Trust and Mangere ACCESS Trust with the support of SKIP and Point Research. Our goal is to enable parents to share their experience of seeking help and exploring the impact of this support on them and their children. SKIP research shows parents are more likely to change their approach to parenting when they have opportunities to learn alongside their other parents and when they have strong trusted relationships. The five impact stories explore each parent's unique reason for seeking support and what difference it made for them and their children. All eight parents live in the Mangere East community and we have changed their names. Thirteen parents were interviewed and other impact stories are in the process of been written and will be shared over the coming months.

Current Parenting Initiatives

Providing a Parent Friendly Community Space – everyday Mangere East Community Learning Centre staff receive phone calls and drop in enquiries from parents seeking help. Under stress these parents are given time to talk and help to find the right support for their family situation. The aim is to keep children safe and help vulnerable parents to receive high quality community support. The staff and volunteers as parents understand the huge step it takes to seek help and have an extensive knowledge of local community groups and services.

Hoki ki te Rito – Oranga Whanau – an intense parenting programme for parents and their children aged 0-5 years old. Based on the world renowned Mellow Parenting Programme. Separate groups for mothers and fathers ensure parents can openly explore the underlying issues affecting their parenting attitudes and beliefs. They then join together in the afternoon sessions to explore parenting specific topics relevant to babies or toddlers together. Mother and Fathers programmes run each term, the commitment is one day a week for 14 weeks.

Mellow Bumps – a parenting programme designed as a family friendly antenatal programme. It recognises parents and whanau can make changes in pregnancy and in the early days that can have a significant long-term impact on their child's wellbeing. Engaging young parents is a focus with the support of community partners. Programme runs two-hour sessions over six weeks and then follow up parent and baby sessions.

Positive Parenting Skills – the SKIP workshops aim is to help parents connect with other parents who want to share ideas, keep motivated and support each other. The two-hour workshops run regularly and parents attend for a series of five sessions. The group formed is another support system for these parents that continues after the workshops finish. Workshops run in the daytime and evenings to fit around family and work commitments.

Incredible Years Parenting Programme - for parents of children aged 3-8 years old. The aim is to increase parenting skills and knowledge to turn around behaviour and build healthy family relationships. The 14-week programme runs in the evenings so working parents and couples can attend together.

Let's Play – these free play sessions are designed to encourage parents and children to learn through play. These sessions are provided in the children friendly environment and is open to all local parents including those attending other parenting workshops and programmes. Weekly two-hour sessions that are facilitated throughout the school term.

Early Bird – this programme for parents and whanau of children 0 - 5 years who have a child

on the autism spectrum. The programme is run over eight weeks and includes home visits for videoing activities between group sessions.

Keith & Maraea

AT A GLANCE

- Keith and Maraea have a blended family with three children and attended a parenting programme together.
- They were having ongoing family stress due to their different parenting approaches and were struggling with the impact of this on their children.
- Keith learnt how to manage better boundaries with his children, which has created more consistency in family life.
- Maraea developed a new confidence as a parent. She no longer needs to smack as a method of discipline.
- Keith and Maraea feel like they are working together more effectively and their daughter Hana is more confident and is showing less challenging behaviour.
- They are sharing the knowledge they gained with others in their family; some are attending the course based on their recommendation.

“I told them I love them, I am here for them and this is what I need to enjoy our time together. Kids don’t need a friend they need a parent, that’s been part of my problem.”

Keith and Maraea have three children; two teenage boys from Keith’s first marriage and four year old Hana. They attended a 14 week parenting programme in 2013.

Keith has always wanted to be a hand-on dad, motivated by wanting a close relationship with his kids. Having his boys on the weekends was an important part of this and for Keith, being a successful dad meant keeping everyone happy so that his boys would want to come and stay. As a result, boundaries and structure were missed, and the boys would return to their mother after the weekend tired and grouchy. No one was happy with this situation, least of all Keith, who realised he was struggling to find a balance between being a parent and knowing what children need to be happy.

Maraea could see the effort Keith was making but she could also see the kids needed more from their dad. “They needed him to hold off giving them everything they wanted and to have expectations of them. Just basic things like doing what they were asked... going to bed... or eating healthy food.”

Keith and Maraea realised these patterns were well established and hard to change. They loved being parents but were struggling to parent. Hana was increasingly unhappy, constantly

asking for things and would play her parents off against each other. Keith and Maraea needed some help with their parenting, and enrolled in the Incredible Years parenting programme.

The programme helped Keith and Maraea understand and change their parenting approach. Keith can now see how boundaries help his children build self-confidence and respect. The strategies he learnt have helped him deal with his children's requests by creating expectations and rewarding good behaviour. Keith understands that the boys may choose to stay less often because there are new boundaries but hopes in the long term it can benefit the whole family, including the boys. "I told them I love them, I am here for them and this is what I need to enjoy our time together. Kids don't need a friend they need a parent, that's been part of my problem."

Maraea learned how past events and developmental stages can affect how a child behaves and also the importance of the quality of the child/adult relationship. As a result she now gets down to Hana's level, gives specific requests and/or positive responses which suit the situation and encourage her. Since learning these skills Maraea stopped smacking Hana and has not smacked her since. "I don't need to [smack] now. I feel confident I can read the situation and do something to make it better."

Both parents feel they are now on the same page and are backing each other up with parenting decisions. Keith has noticed Hana comes to him less often when she wants something Maraea has already said no to. "I ask her 'what did mum say?'". Both have noticed Hana has stopped throwing tantrums and constantly asking for things and as a result there is less parental conflict. They feel Hana is a lot happier and is becoming more and more confident. Maraea now feels she can rely on Keith to take on more parenting responsibilities and manage Hana's routine, which has allowed Keith more space to be the hands-on dad he wants to be.

Keith and Maraea have taken away a lot from the programme and have recommended it to close friends and family. Some are now doing the programme. They have both recommended the things they have learnt on the course to others and are now advocating for all the children in their extended whānau. "I have told other members of my family about speaking nicely to their children, giving children specific instructions of what you want them to do and praising them. At first I thought, what, thank kids for doing everyday normal stuff? It seemed strange to me but now I know it works. I talk to mums about understanding what might be behind a children's way of doing things especially the way adults relate and treat them."

Solomon & Ngaire

AT A GLANCE

- Solomon & Ngaire are married and have four children aged 3-13 years old.
- Due to family violence issues their four children are currently being cared for by a family member.
- Both parents work full-time and their employers have supported them to take time off work to attend separate 14-week parenting programmes designed for mums and dads.
- Solomon has begun to make changes starting with reflecting on what informs his parenting attitudes and beliefs.

“I don’t know how I can show others how much the fathers programme has meant to me. It gave me hope”.

Solomon was at work when his wife called to say CYF were at their home responding to concerns for their children’s safety. Their eldest daughter had disclosed issues going on at home to a friend who then sought help from school staff. Solomon describes the events that followed as highly stressful, confusing and humiliating. For him losing the care of their children has been heart-breaking.

Encouraged by their social worker, Solomon and Ngaire joined the Hoki ki te Rito – Oranga Whanau – (Mellow Parentng) parenting programme feeling vulnerable but determined to do whatever it took to get their children back. Both parents work fulltime and were supported by their employers to take time off work.

Solomon arrived at the fathers Programme feeling anxious and struggling to cope. He was committed to attending, however, and over the next fourteen weeks attended every session.

The fathers programme helped Solomon to explore what informs his beliefs and attitudes about being a father. He is thankful to have been in a group with other fathers who want the best for their children. Whilst it took him a while to open up about his family situation, with the support of the group he began to open up and share with the other fathers and the male facilitators. Solomon believes that feeling his contribution was valued by the other group members was key to his continued participation in the sessions.

Because Solomon’s children were living with relatives in another city, contact was limited to a one-hour weekly Skype conversation. Solomon was better able to deal with the feelings that arose from missing his children and trying to maintain a relationship thanks to the

programme discussions on child development and attachment. For Solomon, encouragement from the other father's and pointing out the value of speaking regularly to his kids helped him persist and look forward to this valuable time with his children.

Solomon believes the biggest impact from doing the fathers programme has been on his relationship with his eldest daughter. He has been able to find the words to reassure her that it was ok to ask for help, that she deserves to feel safe, and to let her know they were working hard to make changes. Solomon had never talked to his daughter about these kinds of issues before and he is unsure he could have done this without the support and mentoring from the two facilitators.

Other dads on the programme mentioned Solomon as an important part of their experience of the fathers programme. They expressed deep admiration for his courage and his commitment to make changes for his children. One commented, "I wish I had had a dad like him, my old man never changed, but he [Solomon] is doing work on himself, there is nothing more important you can offer your kids".

Solomon and Ngaire are on a process of change and as they graduate from the Fathers and Mothers programmes the facilitators recognise they are still vulnerable and in need of ongoing support. This kind of ongoing parenting learning is provided to help families make the transition to being violence free.

Solomon wants people to know he wants the best for his children. "I want them to know I love them every day. I don't know how I can show others how much the fathers programme has meant to me. It gave me hope when I thought there was none."

Matiu

AT A GLANCE

- Matiu has six children aged 1-15 years old, five boys and one daughter.
- Matiu's wife Joanna passed away in early 2014 after a 15 month battle with cancer, shortly after their youngest turned one.
- Matiu and the children are adjusting to life without Joanna and this is made even more challenging by juggling the needs of two children, his 5 year old son and 9 year old daughter who both have autism.
- They have attended EarlyBird – a programme for families with young children with autism, at the centre, three years ago
- As a couple they attended a parenting programme in the evenings. Matiu has recently returned to attend the Fathers programme five months after Joanna passed away.

“Taking the time to celebrate the small stuff like my wife did - enjoy our time together.”

Matiu's life is often hectic to say the least, caring for his six children and dealing with their grief has been his full-time job for the past nine months. He gets up every morning and takes care of his boys but he also still starts everyday with tears. Missing Joanna is a part of living and is something he is learning to live with.

Before Joanna's illness Matiu and Joanna, who was expecting the couple's sixth child, began attending a parenting programme at the Mangere East Community Learning Centre. It was while doing the course that Joanna was diagnosed with cancer and started treatment. Dealing with Joanna's illness while pregnant with their sixth child was difficult and through this period staff provided additional support for the couple. This support became essential with the realisation that Matiu was going to have to raise the kids on his own.

Matiu has had to transform his whole way of thinking about being a dad. “I was the provider, I went to work all day and my wife knew what our children needed and wanted,” he says. “She was there for them, it is my job now. I had to let go and focus on the kids”.

Transitioning from working outside the home to becoming the full-time caregiver for his children has been both rewarding and challenging for Matiu. “I have learnt so much about them, from them.” Matiu has had to be careful not to rely too much on his eldest son who

naturally wants to help. Having the support of specialists for his two children who have autism has helped Matiu monitor their developmental needs and get used to caring for them.

A few months after Joanna passed away Matiu began to realise he needed to be around other parents. Reconnecting with the Mangere East Community Learning Centre was easier because of the support they had received over the past few years. They had regularly dropped-in to see the staff – who were always willing to listen, make a coffee and let the kids play on the fully-fenced playground. “It was easy to come back because we belonged. This is a place where people love me and my kids, they know our journey.”

Matiu joined the Fathers programme. Having a free crèche meant he could bring his children with him. He believes having a fathers group has made a huge difference and he could talk about life without fear of offending anyone. “We are all dads and could connect on that level”, he says. Having time to reflect on what it means to be a father and what he wants for his kids has helped him feel more confident to deal with the day-to-day task of being a parent and to find meaning in caring for them fulltime.

Matiu says that each day is about “taking the time to celebrate the small stuff like my wife did - enjoy our time together.” The family spends time building happy a memory together, which helps them manage the times when they are struggling with their loss.

Matiu recognised his eldest son, who is 15 years old, has struggled to cope with his mum’s death and the impact of caring for her while she was unwell. The fathers programme has helped Matiu learn about brain development and how his son may find it difficult to process his thoughts and feelings. As a result, Matiu is now more aware of his son’s needs and has begun talking to him more often. He is also taking steps to advocate for him when others cannot see how much he is hurting. This includes dealing with his school to ensure that members of staff do not give up on his son because they misunderstand his behaviour and needs when he misses school, misses deadlines and feels disconnected. Matiu describes dealing with others expectations of his son as extremely challenging. He feels it adds considerable stress on the family and seems so unnecessary. Matiu knows his son needs their compassion. He hopes to help his son through this difficult time and has gained confidence from the new knowledge and skills he has learnt on the fathers programme.

Matiu knows being a dad is the most important job in the world and would like to become a facilitator of the fathers group in the future. He recognises one of his strengths is helping others join in the conversation, which comes from wanting other fathers to have the opportunity to feel supported and to learn more about helping their children. He wants to offer support to others in the same way that he and his family have been supported.

“You could easily become depressed and go to a dark place but my children and those around us help me get through”, Matiu says.

Lawrence and Alona

AT A GLANCE

- Lawrence and Alona have a 3 week old baby girl called Emerson.
- Alona is 16 years old and Lawrence 17 years old.
- Lawrence and Alona attended the 6 week antenatal parenting programme 'Mellow Bumps' with Alona's older sister Jade who is also a young mum with two children.
- Alona valued learning how their baby's development could be affected by their environment both before and after birth. This motivated Alona to look after herself and avoid stressful family situations as much as possible.
- Lawrence learnt the value of talking to his daughter and noticing how she follows his voice and copies some of his facial expressions. Learning about her development has had a significant impact on how he is approaching being a dad.
- Lawrence and Alona hope to create a safe and loving home environment that is violence free.

"She is so tiny and totally reliant on us for everything. She likes to be rocked, she only likes going to sleep when it quiet, she settles well when she is close to us and when she cries we stay nice and clam".

For Alona and Lawrence, becoming Emerson's parents has been both amazing and challenging. The couple live in a volatile environment, dominated by Lawrence's mother. "Mum was brought up the island way," Lawrence says, "no mistakes are ok." Lawrence worried constantly about having Alona exposed to the often volatile environment at home. "[His mother] says lots of hurtful things," says Alona. When there were arguments going on in the house Lawrence and Alona would want to leave but had nowhere to go.

Dealing with home, school and the pregnancy was really tough. Both Alona and Lawrence were in need of support, which they mainly received from Alona's sister, Jade. Being a young mother herself Jade reached out to Alona and Lawrence by keeping in regular contact with Alona and helping with tasks such as finding a midwife.

Jade encouraged the young couple to enrol in the 'Mellow Bumps' programme, which she attended each week as she was able to bring her two toddlers along to the free crèche. Lawrence and Alona felt having Jade with them helped them take the learning back into everyday life. Jade noted she also learnt a lot from doing the programme "I learnt how to

communicate with my babies at an early stage and how to give them my undivided attention. It's helped me a lot, now they listen to me more" she says.

Alona and Lawrence learnt that an unborn baby's environment can have a long-term impact on development. As a result, they put strategies in place at home to relieve the stress on Alona and their unborn child, such as making sure Alona could remove herself when there were family arguments and avoiding conflict by keeping to family rules and routines. Jade's support was critical during this time. She would offer extra support by listening, reminding them how well they were doing and encourage them to persevere. Jade's goal was to make sure Alona and Lawrence always had someone to talk too and someone who believed in them.

The Mellow Bumps antenatal parenting programme focused on both the psychological and practical elements of being a parent. This helped Lawrence and Alona make sense of their own situation, set goals for how they wanted to raise their daughter and allowed them to talk and be open about how they were feeling.

Dealing with their situation felt easier with the support of the group and the facilitators. "It's not just a course" says Alona "They showed us good stuff about babies." For Lawrence, having food made him feel welcome and eating together helped him get to know the other couples. "It was fun, it was so cool. The facilitators were sisterly and motherly it was easy to get along because we trusted them. The people in the group got on really well. We just looked forward to each time we came to Mellow Bumps"

Both Lawrence and Alona love being parents and take pleasure in meeting Emerson's every need. "I love her so much....she is so tiny and totally reliant on us for everything" says Alona. They understand what Emerson likes and needs. Lawrence says: "She likes to be rocked, she only likes going to sleep when its quiet, she settles well when she is close to us and when she cries we stay nice and calm". They believe knowing how to be a parent and knowing why it matters are two different things. Alona and Lawrence believe being a confident parent is knowing what kind of parent you want to be. Both would have liked the programme to be longer or to have activities after the programme finished, particularly around learning about what other things are happening in their community.

Now that Emerson is nearly a month old Lawrence has started the Hoki ki te Rito – Oranga Whanau Fathers group, giving him an opportunity to be with other dads. He has 20 credits to complete his NECA level 3 and he hopes to do IT at University, Alona attends the mothers group and is also studying by correspondence. "We just want to finish our study and get really good jobs".

As a result of doing the programme Lawrence and Alona are committed to raising their daughter in a violence free home. They hope to soon rent a house with Jade so they can achieve this together as a family.

Ripeka

AT A GLANCE

- Ripeka comes from a large whānau, she has six siblings, many of whom are whangai children.
- Ripeka became a mum late in life after being told she could not have children. Her partner of many years had passed away and she had only recently been seeing her new partner when she became pregnant.
- She experienced a lot of emotions due to her unexpected pregnancy and these feelings were compounded by ongoing health issues.
- Ripeka thought she would never experience becoming a parent and her bright and energetic three-year old son Tui is very precious to her and their whole whānau.
- Both Ripeka and her partner had been sexually abused as children and both were determined for this not to happen to their son. Her childhood trauma impacted on how she viewed herself as a mum and her instinct to protect Tui made it difficult for her to accept support.

“I share with others what has changed for my son because I did the course. They might be less threatened if we share the impact on our children.”

Ripeka had always wanted to be a mum and tried for many years to start a family with her long-term partner. When he passed away Ripeka had accepted that she would not have children. Within a few months of meeting her new partner, however, Ripeka discovered she was pregnant. After a complicated pregnancy Ripeka gave birth to a beautiful healthy baby boy they named Tui.

Although Ripeka and her partner had only known each other a short time they often spoke of their own upbringing and what they wanted for their son. It was very painful for this new couple to share with each other that they had both been molested by family members when they were children. This abuse had had an ongoing impact on them both and they wanted to prevent this happening to their son. When Ripeka and her partner brought Tui home from hospital they were living at Ripeka’s family home with her parents and other whānau members.

Ripeka found the first six months of being a parent difficult, and often felt inadequate as a mum. Unlike her mother who believed parenting just came naturally, Ripeka second guessed

her parenting decisions and often felt fretful for Tui. She became increasingly worried about keeping him safe and was paralysed by thoughts of what could happen if she failed to protect him. She began having frequent frightening thoughts of her son being abused by her partner or a family member. Every day was an ongoing battle with her low self-confidence and the impact of her past trauma. Ripeka began to refuse help from her mum, close family and her partner. "I wanted to do things myself, I was aware what happened to me might affect my parenting but I second-guessed everyone and every decision I made".

Ripeka reached out for help, booking herself on the mother's Hoki ki te Rito -Mellow Parenting programme. Before she attended she had to explain to her mum that parenting may come naturally to some people but for her she was struggling to cope and need some help. She joined her first programme (Hoki) when Tui was six months old and over the past three years she has attended the Incredible Years and many SKIP parenting workshops at the Mangere East Community Learning Centre.

Coming to HKTR/Mellow Parenting helped Ripeka understand what was impacting on her confidence as a parent and what was underpinning her parenting fears. The course helped her to gently and slowly turn these fears into parenting goals and choices. Whilst she was able to see her attachment with Tui as strength, she was also able to consider the impact on him if she continued to restrict his relationships and his opportunities to explore his world. Being able to look at the long term impact on Tui while gaining a new sense of calmness helped Ripeka gain confidence to work on these parenting issues.

As a result of doing the Mellow Parenting Programme Ripeka spoke to her mum and ex-partner about how she was feeling. She could express what she needed from them to enable Tui to have a safe and happy childhood, which included putting Tui into part-time ECE while she returned to work. This was a very difficult task as Ripeka's whānau had strong beliefs about children being cared for by immediate family. It took courage for Ripeka to share her fears with her mum and despite family pressure she enrolled Tui into Kōhanga Reo. She has overcome her anxiety by using relaxation techniques she learnt on the parenting programmes and by talking to staff at the Mangere East Learning Centre. Achieving this goal has helped Ripeka feel more in control of her feelings and gain confidence in her ability to make good parenting decisions which can keep Tui safe while also giving them both opportunities to thrive.

Being a single parent has its challenges. Ripeka believes her greatest parenting achievement has been allowing Tui to feel close to her and his dad after they separated. "We put our adult issues aside and focused on loving him, making him the centre of our worlds. He knows he is loved and that he can love all of us." She believes she gained this understanding after attending her second programme. It became stronger for her once she started learning the impact family life can have on children's development. She began to notice what was happening for Tui, who was now a toddler. "Instead of just thinking he's pissing the bed

again, I started to notice he was missing his dad. If I hadn't done this programme I would have just been angry with him and totally missed the signs." Noticing this made Ripeka talk to Tui about how he was feeling and made sure he know when he would see his dad next, and could talk to him on the phone.. Ripeka felt this made a huge difference not just to his bed-wetting but about how he felt about himself.

Ripeka has enjoyed having ongoing parenting conversations at the SKIP parenting workshops and sharing parenting tips with other parents. Being with others who want the best for their kids encourages Ripeka to keep reflecting on her relationship with her son. Ripeka believes Tui is confident and outgoing because of the changes she made. Tui is three years old and can communicate well with adults at home and at Kōhanga. Ripeka has taught him to express his feelings by listening to him and she has taught him to count and take big deep breaths when his feeling upset – something he often reminds her to do if he notices she needs it too.

Ripeka works in the community now and she encourages parents to connect with parenting education and Early Childhood Education. Ripeka believe Maori are strongly influenced by their love for tamariki and future generations. She would like more positive stories of how children's lives have been improved by whānau strengthening their parenting knowledge and support. She believes the idea that parenting should just come naturally and parenting education and support is only for 'bad parents' stops many Maori parents seeking support. Ripeka would love for more of her whānau to learn about child development and think about what they want to pass on to our children is encouraging this by sharing how well her son is doing and leading by example. Ripeka believes parents wanting to break the cycle of childhood abuse need ongoing support and programmes available in their local community.

Links

Information about Mellow Parenting and Mellow Bumps

<http://www.mellowparenting.org>

<http://www.mellowparenting.org/index.php/international/new-zealand>

Information about Incredible Years

<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/SpecialEducation/OurWorkProgramme/PositiveBehaviourForLearning/ProgrammesForParents.aspx>

Information about SKIP

<http://www.skip.org.nz>