

Tuning in to Kids

Emotionally intelligent parenting

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Tuning in to Kids is an evidence-based, emotion-focused program that helps parents support the development of emotional competence in their children. The program brings together parent education techniques and child clinical psychology. Robyn Parker talked with one of the authors of the program, Dr Sophie Havighurst, and project manager Dr Katherine Wilson, about the development of the program and the ongoing evaluation and research that underpins it.

How children handle their emotions plays a central role in how well they are able to navigate their world. The importance of emotional competence in children is widely recognised within the education sector, but few programs exist to equip and support parents in fostering their child's emotional functioning. Tuning in to Kids provides information, strategies and resources for parents of 4–5-year-old children to help them promote emotional intelligence in their children and improve their child's capacity to understand their own and other's emotions. Research evidence on which the program is based (and which is outlined in the Tuning in to Kids program manual) demonstrates that emotionally competent children are better able to concentrate in school, manage conflict and deal with upsetting events or situations, and they have better health and higher quality relationships throughout their lives.

The program aims to build on parents' existing capacity to engage in Emotion Coaching—the empathy, support and listening often used in their adult relationships—by guiding them in how to respond to and engage with their child's emotional life so that the child can learn to understand and regulate their emotions.

Background to the program

The Tuning in to Kids program came into being when its two primary authors, Ann Harley and Dr Sophie Havighurst, joined forces to develop an effective way of addressing the emotional aspects of parent–child relationships, which are generally not attended to in behavioural parenting programs. Drawing on their complementary professional backgrounds in parent education and clinical psychology and research, they have integrated knowledge and concepts from the fields of parenting and psychology, and techniques from the work of prominent parenting and relationship researcher John Gottman into an emotion-focused parenting program. Knowledge about child development is woven through the program to help parents understand their child, and to ensure that their expectations of their child and the language and resources they use with their child are age-appropriate.

Professional networks and collaborations have facilitated the development and evaluation of the Tuning in to Kids program. Support from the Victorian Parenting Centre facilitated the early writing and piloting of the program. As the program was being developed in parallel with Dr Havighurst's PhD research, interviews with research participants supplemented feedback from early program participants to inform the evolution of the program. The program has also benefited from the contributions and support of two prominent Australian child researchers, Professor Margot Prior AO and Professor Ann Sanson.

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A later catalyst to the development of the program was the formation of a partnership with ParentsLink at MacKillop Family Services in Melbourne. This has facilitated ongoing research and evaluation of the program and in particular, the strengthening of the research design through the use of control groups. Conducting this type of research and evaluation in an agency setting presented a number of challenges for the program managers, facilitators and the agency. These included the need to maintain strict boundaries between participants in the control and intervention groups, and adhering to research protocols within an agency setting while not negatively impacting on agency practices or increasing workloads. Comprehensive discussions took place with facilitators and the agency personnel involved in the administrative aspects of running the program, and close monitoring of procedures by a member of the evaluation team preserved the integrity of the data collection to the extent possible.

The program

The aim of Tuning in to Kids is not to just teach the “ABCs” of emotional competence. Among its goals are to help parents be supportive of their child's emotional world and to value the emotional connection and intimacy available to them through the appropriate application of this approach. A key aspect of this process is for participants to understand the contribution of their own emotional world to their parenting. One of the greatest challenges to the program's development was integrating material related to parents' own family-of-origin—how they were parented,

how emotions were expressed, received and responded to in their family, and how this is reflected in their own parenting. This issue is not often included in parenting programs and many parents in Tuning in to Kids programs have found it to be particularly confronting. The development team spent a great deal of time identifying and implementing ways to gently and safely lead parents through this section of the program.

Within the program, attention is also paid to what parents can expect of children at different developmental stages, for example in terms of the way they view the world, their fears or the language they are able to use or understand. Time is allocated to reviewing concepts and skills from the previous week and discussion of parents' experiences with emotion coaching or other skills in the intervening period. Elements of a session may be rearranged, shortened or lengthened in response to the group's needs and dynamic.

See Box 1 for brief information about each program session.

The facilitators

Helping parents learn about emotion coaching is not easy, and requires a great deal of the facilitator in terms of their own capacity to tune in to emotions as well as their knowledge and use of emotion coaching, understanding of parenting and child development issues, and skills in group process and management. Facilitators must be able to judge whether, and how far, to press participants, particularly as some parents will be resistant to or unprepared for the content of the program or the ways in which they may be asked to participate. For more information about training as a Tuning in to Kids facilitator and the program manual, visit the Tuning in to Kids website.¹

Expansion and evaluation

The program's origins in clinical psychology and research mean that evaluation and research are embedded in the provision of the program, and the ongoing emphasis on research and evaluation in turn ensures that the program maintains its strong theoretical and practice base. The evaluation of the pilot (reported in Havighurst, Harley, & Prior, 2004) identified positive outcomes for parents and their children in terms of improved interactions between the parents and children and enhanced behavioural and social functioning of their child. Parents reported being more encouraging and less dismissive and critical of how their child expressed emotions, and often applied emotion coaching in their interactions with their children. Children's behaviour improved—especially in those children with higher levels of problematic behaviour. Although this was a pilot study and no control group was employed, the findings at this early stage in the development of Tuning in to Kids demonstrated its promise.

The program has been evaluated in a number of community settings with specific groups. The research team at Mindful² have now completed an efficacy trial of the program with 218 parents of preschoolers from a community

1 <www.tuningintokids.org.au>

2 Mindful is the Centre for Training and Research in Developmental Health, University of Melbourne, and hosts the Tuning in to Kids program. See <www.mindful.org.au>.

Box 1: Tuning in to Kids—Program sessions

Each session uses a range of activities, including role-plays, reflection, small group activities, discussions, examples viewed on DVD, and worksheets. Home activities are also provided as further tools for practice. Some items or activities may be held over for later sessions, depending on the facilitator's reading of the group's needs and progress.

Session 1: Setting out—How to raise emotionally intelligent children

- What is emotional intelligence?
- Why is it important?
- What is emotion coaching and why does it improve children's behaviour?
- Connecting with children around emotion

Session 2: Naming the emotion

- Awareness of emotions
- Tuning in to the child's emotions
- Meta-emotion and its impact on parenting

Session 3: Understanding the child's emotional experience

- Developing empathy
- Reflecting feelings
- Building emotion coaching skills

Session 4: Problem solving and self-care when emotion coaching

- Consolidating emotion coaching skills
- Parenting styles
- Problem solving

Session 5: Emotion coaching your child's anger


- When emotion coaching is/is not appropriate
- Understanding and responding to anger and angry behaviour

Session 6: Emotionally intelligent parenting—now and in the future

- Review and reinforcement of the principles and skills of emotion coaching
- Review of the program

sample. This trial has shown that the program is effective in improving parenting around children's emotions and this is associated with improvements in children's use of emotion talk, and reductions in anxiety and behaviour problems. The program has also been evaluated with preschoolers with behaviour problems, and a new trial of the program is being undertaken with primary school aged children with behaviour problems as part of the Austin and Bendigo Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services' Schools Early Action (CASEA) Project—a Victorian Government project for preventing antisocial behaviour problems. A new effectiveness trial of the program is also being undertaken in the Knox Council Region—where practitioners from different agencies deliver the program to parents of preschoolers in the Eastern region of Melbourne. This is the first “real world” trial of the program. Other developments in Tuning in to Kids are using the program with parents of anxious preschoolers and the development of a father version of the program—led by Dr Katherine Wilson, Project Manager of the Tuning in to Kids research.

The preschool and early primary school age-years are an ideal time to begin helping parents support their child's developing emotional competence, particularly as many mothers have yet to commence or return to work and are able to become engaged in the program. Since programs are usually run during normal working hours, few fathers are able to attend even though they may be keen to participate. There are plans to run more programs in the evenings and to adapt the program specifically for fathers of preschool children. The authors are also planning programs for parents of young children with disabilities, for Indigenous parents, and for parents of children in the early years of primary school. A multi-modal intervention is planned in which parents receive the emotion-focused program and their children participate in a social/emotional program. However, parents are not the only possible targets of developing an emotion coaching approach to interacting with children and young people. The program is also likely to be offered to child and adolescent mental health workers and other mental health workers.



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Whenever the Tuning in to Kids program expands to a different target group, structures and processes are put in place to enable data collection. The Tuning in to Kids program is trademarked.³ As such there is some level of confidence that the program is being delivered as intended, however it is accepted that individual facilitators will want and sometimes need to “tweak” the program for their client group. Data regarding the fidelity of the program delivery are currently being gathered. Facilitators taking part in this study complete a checklist at the end of each session to indicate which of the activities were covered. They then participate in a weekly consultation/supervision session to review what was and was not covered, how the activities went, issues that were raised, how group dynamics unfolded and were handled, and so on. As well as providing one-on-one supervision with one of the program authors, these sessions enable the program authors to identify any patterns in the changes and their effects in order to make improvements to the program itself or to the training.

Summary

Tuning in to Kids is a prime example of practice and research combining to create an evidence-based program that produces positive results for both parents and children. The establishment of the partnership with MacKillop Family Services (and now Knox Council) has been critical to the development and evaluation of the program. The value of fostering such relationships is demonstrated in the growing evidence and practice base of the program, and the provision of training and supervision to agency staff. The strong evidence base, professional and comprehensive manual, and emotional/relationship focus of the program are selling points that appeal to practitioners and their managers. The evidence thus far points to the program being a valuable source of support, skills and knowledge to help parents become more confident in their parenting and more effective in their communication with their children.

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References

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³ The use of the Tuning in to Kids name and resources is only available to facilitators who have trained with Mindful staff.