Home and School Scaffolding: The evidence

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Whilst horses can walk within an hour of birth and Blue Wildebeest can outrun a hyena within a day, humans come into the world unable to walk, talk or do anything for themselves for the greater part of the first year of their lives. This leaves infants incredibly vulnerable. They have to learn to trust their caregivers with their lives.

Evidence shows that children who form this trust with their parents or caregivers are at reduced risk of developing childhood anxiety and depression, especially in girls (McLaughlin, Zeanah, Fox, & Nelson, 2012). However, this impact also extends to older children. Duchesne and colleagues (2009) report that children who had a secure attachment to their mother in primary school had less anxiety symptoms, and less worries about the transition to middle school than those insecurely attached. A child's relationship with a trusted caregiver is therefore paramount.

When a child heads off to school, new significant adults enter their lives: teachers. They play a crucial role in this next step in a child's life, as shown by Bergin and Bergin's literature review (2009). Numerous studies were found by them that suggested having a secure bond with a teacher (from early childhood to secondary school) helps children to learn, establish friendships, and minimises misbehaviour. They also cited an incredible longitudinal study by Hamre and Pianta (2001, as cited in Bergin & Bergin, 2009) which tracked a class of children from kindergarten to eighth grade in America. They found that a negative relationship with a kindergarten teacher predicted lower grades throughout school

all the way up to eighth grade! Studies such as these demonstrate the immense impact that teachers can have on a child's development and success.

With such influential relationships already present in children's lives, after crises such as the Christchurch earthquakes occurred, it makes sense to deliver an intervention through these avenues. But how?

Teachers, by their profession, are already equipped with tools to help students learn. One such technique is scaffolding: a technique at the core of Kotuku Creative's concept of Home and School Scaffolding.

Scaffolding is where teachers and caregivers carefully craft their communication with children so that they're not prompting too much or too little, and therefore maximising potential learning. For example, if a child is learning to read a new book and gets stuck on a word, the caregiver might ask the child what the first letter sounds like, then the second. Slowly the child figures out the entire word for themselves. The following quote captures the goal of scaffolding effectively:

> "The child is viewed as a building, actively constructing him- or herself. The social environment is the necessary scaffold, or support system, that allows the child to move forward and to continue to build new competencies." (p. 26, Berk & Winsler, 1995)

In this way, *Maia and the Worry Bug* (Burgess-Manning, 2015) and *Wishes and Worries* (Dickson, 2015) encourage families and teachers to build a scaffold for Christchurch

children, on which the children can build not only their literacy skills but their coping skills. But the question remains: Does this scaffolding partnership actually work?

Extensive research suggests that fostering partnerships between parents and schools has significant positive mental health benefits for children. A small selection of this research is summarised below.

Ackley and Cullen (2010) utilised a science-based best practice model called 'Families And Schools Together' (FAST) targeted at 5-12 year old children and their families. This program resulted in a statistically significant increase in the quality of family relationships and strength of the children (as reported by their parents). There was also a significant decrease in peer issues. FAST has been implemented in 18 different countries, and has transformed family dynamics through its structured group work programs with parents, children and schools.

Much like Ackley and Cullen, McKay and his colleagues (2010) found that encouraging partnership between home and school was beneficial. However, their research was more specific. They investigated the impact of a range of different programs which were particularly targeted at the increased mental health issues faced by ethnic minorities in America. One of these programs is called *Project Step Up*. This initiative allows youth to help plan the implementation of mental health services at their high schools. *Project Step Up* also engages in family outreach and collaboration with school staff to further encourage positive mental health outcomes for children. Preliminary evidence suggests that this program significantly reduces mental health symptoms in the youth who take part.

Likewise, Olvera and Olvera (2012) cite a number of studies that support home-school partnership, but they also put forward a research-based proposal on how to effectively encourage family-school collaboration. Emphasis is placed on any intervention being ethnically valid. For example, providing resources in the parent's language and recognising important cultural values, such as *respeto* in Latino communities (acknowledging and honouring people according to the family hierarchy). This is especially relevant for New Zealand communities, as our country is becoming increasingly multicultural. In particular, it is important that Maori cultural values and language are respected and celebrated. Translations of *Maia and the Worry Bug* and *Wishes and Worries* into Maori, as well as using a diverse mix of characters are great steps to increase ethnic validity.

Whilst Olvera and Olvera put their focus on ethnic validity, Wang and colleagues were interested in the longitudinal impact of parental involvement on adolescents (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Following extensive research, results showed that higher parental involvement predicted higher levels of mental health, as well as higher grades between the ages of 15-17. Although Kotuku Creative's interventions so far target younger children, it is encouraging to note that the patterns of home-school collaboration they are already encouraging in childhood will be beneficial in adolescence.

It is important to note that Wang's study is not alone in predicting academic success from parent-school partnership. There are a multitude of programs that have utilised such partnerships to improve academic outcomes. Literacy programs which encourage such collaboration result in considerable improvement of children's reading skills (Barone, 2011; Cook-Cottone, 2004; Huang, 2013; Noble et al., 2012; Richgels & Wold, 1998; Scanlan, 2012) Similarly, other researchers have designed maths programs which use existing parent-

child and teacher-child relationships to improve numeracy skills (Kessinger, 2014; Lehrer & Shumow, 1997; Noble et al., 2012).

In terms of resources specific to New Zealand, there is a thorough report which was prepared for the Ministry of Education titled *Successful Home and School Partnerships* (Bull, Brooking & Campbell, 2008). It includes case studies of schools in New Zealand utilising promising initiatives to encourage closer relationships between families and schools, as well as further literature supporting home and school partnerships. To learn more, see the following link: https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/28415/28416

Overall, these studies suggest that the concept of Home and School Scaffolding is grounded in a strong evidence base. It is hoped that by implementing this approach, Christchurch families can develop clear communication across homes and schools about the nature of anxiety and develop strategies to combat it.

If you are a Christchurch parent or teacher who has utilised *Maia and the Worry Bug* and/or *Wishes and Worries* and would like to offer your feedback, we would love to hear it. Massey University is currently conducting independent research into the efficacy of these resources. To complete their survey, please go to the following link:

http://www.massey.ac.nz/worrybug

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