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**BALANCED PARENTING**  
**WITH YOUNG CHILDREN:**  
**Relationship Focused Parent Training**  
**Within a Dialectical Framework**

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Clinical Psychology

at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

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**CLARE MARY COUCH**

**2009**



# ABSTRACT

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While traditional behavioural parent training programmes have assisted families with concerns of child behaviour problems, they have not kept abreast with recent conceptualisations of the development of problematic behaviours in the parent-child relationship. Research has indicated that understanding of this relationship needs to go beyond bidirectional explanations and that a dialectical framework better describes the complexity of this relationship, which, in turn, should be reflected in the parent training programmes offered.

Therefore, this study provided a parent training programme focused on balance in the parent-child relationship, which encapsulated the complex, dialectical nature of this intimate relationship. A central implication when adopting this notion of balance was that all aspects of the programme were addressed at the parent and child level. In addition, multiple factors were addressed that included mindfulness and acceptance, dealing with emotions, understanding development, and addressing parental attributions. It was only within this overarching concept of balance and relationship factors that behavioural skills were introduced. Mechanisms of change were identified by investigating parental emotional schemas through their narratives about themselves, their child, and the programme.

This research involved 23 parents with their 3-4 year-old children in a parent training programme where both the parent and child met weekly with a therapist in group parent training. The groups involved 2-hourly sessions for 5 weeks, modelled on a “coffee morning” where parents met and discussed issues and the children played alongside in the same room. A research assistant was available to play with and tend to basic needs of the children. Measures at pre-, post-treatment, and at follow-up targeted child behaviour problems, how much of a problem these were for the parents, parents’ sense of competence, parental attributions, and what was useful for parents in the programme.

Results indicated that at post-treatment parents were able to address and maintain balance in their parent-child relationship and this reflected multiple dimensions of a dialectical understanding that had not been evident prior to the intervention. There was an increased mindfulness of both parent and child’s needs with a strong emphasis on an increased understanding of the child as an individual in their own right. Parents reported an increased recognition of the importance of

dealing with emotions, with improved skills to be able to do this, an increased understanding of accommodating development, and an appreciation of needing to address parental attributions.

In addition, there was a decrease in parent-reported intensity of child behaviour problems and how problematic these were for the parents, which were corroborated with parental verbal reports of improved child behaviour. Mechanisms of change that were identified included changes in parental attributions, parents being able to share with other parents, accessing “expert” knowledge from the programme facilitator, and gaining parental strategies. Implications for practice were discussed with suggestions for behavioural parent training programmes. In conclusion, limitations of the research and directions for future research were indicated.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This research process over the last two years has been challenging, fun, exhausting, and stimulating. There are many people that I am indebted to for their help and support throughout.

Firstly, my special thanks to the parents and children who participated in this research, without whom it would have been impossible. I was impressed with the parents' dedication to attending this programme, which reflected their commitment to wanting to parent their children well. Thank you for your full participation and especially for your efforts in the video reports, as it is fair to say that this was the least favoured aspect of involvement for most parents. Thanks also to the teachers and parents at the early childhood education centres who supported this research.

To my supervisor Ian Evans, thank you so much for your encouragement, direction, and support and for helping me develop a mere interest into this exciting research. I am grateful for the times when I came into your office not sure of where I was heading, and your clarity and guidance always sent me off with more to read, think about, do, or write. Your help has been invaluable, thanks.

Thanks also to Janet Leathem, my second supervisor, who was always encouraging me to keep on track and reminding me of how this research fitted into the wider concept of the Clinical Training programme. Your support has been greatly appreciated.

I am indebted to the many people who helped in this project as research assistants. To conduct this programme in the manner which it was designed would not have been possible without these tireless people who gave of their time and other commitments to help with practical activities and, especially, to play and interact with the children. I hope you had fun with the children and I am really grateful for the time that you gave.

Thanks to the staff at the Massey University Psychology Clinic for their support of this project by allowing the programme to be conducted there. Converting the main seminar room to a child's play space, particularly, was not the typical meeting held there and I am grateful for your tolerance, especially when glitter was spilt on the chairs that would later be used for clinic business or training seminars. Thank you to Duncan Babbage and Susan Watson, senior psychologists, who provided clinical supervision: your advice as the project continued and your ongoing

interest in the research was gratefully received. Thanks also to the Massey University Technical staff that patiently educated me and gave practical assistance with video and technical matters. This study received ethical approval from the Central Region Health and Disabilities Ethics Committee.

And finally, there is no way that I could have completed this project without the love, support, and patience of my family. You have waited so patiently while I have been busy in this research process and allowed me to work on it, sometimes for long periods at a time and at the expense of other family activities. I appreciate that it has been a long journey for us all, from reading and writing, to being out and about running the programmes, to writing 'the book', it has been a busy and consuming time. My love and gratitude goes, especially, to you all.

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# FOREWORD

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Parent training is a fascinating field and there are numerous research studies to testify to this. Yet still, there are unanswered questions because the relationship between a parent and a child is complex, affected by multiple factors both between the two individuals and by wider contextual factors. My interest in this field has grown over time and I wish to explain some of my background that brought me to this particular research study.

My undergraduate degree which I gained after leaving school was a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry and I worked in this field for a few years. I had started this degree with an interest in psychology and chemistry but dropped the psychology when course requirements clashed. While I did not continue on the psychology route at that stage, I did spend two years doing youth work with tertiary students in between laboratory work. At this stage I took a break from the paid workforce and parented my four boys while being involved voluntarily with the Playcentre movement. It was here that I spent ten years studying and learning, at a practical level, about early childhood development and education, while dealing with families from a wide variety of cultures and socio-economic groups. In addition, I completed the New Zealand Playcentre Federation Certificate, which is a nationally recognised, field-based Early Childhood Education qualification. It was through both formal and informal involvement at Playcentre that my interest was fostered in child and parent education.

In addition, through this participation I saw that there were many issues beyond educational needs that required attention and therefore, chose to extend my work with children and families by working in the mental health sector. I returned to studying psychology, completed a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in psychology at Massey University and entered into the Doctor of Clinical Psychology training programme. While this training is comprehensive my particular interest continued to be with children and their families, so when the opportunity arose to do research, it was in this field that I chose to study.

When reading the literature I was interested that, while behavioural parent training had been popular, there were other factors that needed addressing and traditional programmes did not seem to address the complexity of the relationship between the parent and the child. It became apparent that parents could

simultaneously hold quite conflicting views of their child – at one level they could love their child and a certain characteristic, but then also find that characteristic frustrating. It was also a concern that these programmes did not address parents' needs, emotions, and development when dealing with their children. I became aware that while these current programmes taught strategies for dealing with incidents of misbehaviour, it did not address the way that the parent perceived the child, or what their schema were about their child.

It became apparent to me that there were many unanswered questions and my interest was further raised to discover how parent-training programmes could be delivered more effectively for parents who have common concerns about their young child's behaviour. It was from this base that I began the route of this current research study.