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For immediate release

Home-tailored early intervention programme gets international attention

An early intervention programme, tailored by Waitemata DHB to cater for some of society's most vulnerable parents, is now being used overseas.

Secure Beginnings is run by the DHB's Child Youth and Family Mental Health Services in partnership with the west Auckland-based Dayspring Trust – a non-government organisation providing a raft of community-based counselling and support initiatives designed to improve maternal wellbeing.

The service was originally established in 2014 as a 20-week group programme developed by the US-based Circle of Security International.

But a 16-week, one-on-one manualised version has since been created locally – providing a service that offers greater choice and is easier to access for many of its participants.

Secure Beginnings is designed to strengthen the attachment relationship between parents and their children. It teaches parents to respond better to their children's emotional needs - rather than focusing only on a child's behaviour.

Results are encouraging and a manual developed especially for the programme is now being used in Australia and the US.

Dr Susanna Galea-Singer, Waitemata DHB's Director of Specialist Mental Health and Addictions Services, says many of the participants have come from backgrounds where drugs, alcohol, trauma and family violence have helped shape their own parenting behaviour.

"From the research, we know that children with secure attachment to their parents do better in school, in jobs and in other areas of life," she says. "Those with poor attachment often do worse. That's the bottom line and often they grow into the people who are more likely to struggle in many areas and may require support from Mental Health Services. Secure Beginnings is an early intervention programme designed to break that cycle."

Dr Galea-Singer says participants are monitored for a year after completing the programme. Results show a 100% success rate as people maintain the increased level of skills, empathy and confidence to tend to their children's needs. To date, none of the 37 parents or children who have completed the course have had to access mental health services again.

"It changes a person's understanding of what it is to be a parent and that means these people also make changes in other areas of their lives as a result," Dr Galea-Singer says.

"Some might go and do a budgeting programme; or get a job; or leave a partner who is violent. Others might find a healthier home to live in or go and see their doctors more often."

Participants are often referred to Secure Beginnings through mental health services. Some come via Oranga Tamariki and others are from various parenting courses. A few have heard about the program and self-refer.

“These are all people who want to change the way that they parent in order to create better outcomes for their children,” Dr Galea-Singer says. “The programme is hard, which is why it is also transformational – people are being asked to stare in the mirror, look at what they are struggling with and think about how they might change the way that they parent in order to better support their children’s emotional needs.”

Waitemata DHB and Dayspring Trust worked with Circle of Security International to create the 16-week individual programme currently offered to parents who are unable to take part in the 20-week group initiative.

An evaluation shows that both programmes are equally effective and the individual option makes the model-of-care more accessible than before.

“It allows us to work with people at a time and place that works better for them,” Dr Galea-Singer says.

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