



Newsletter April 2014



Grandparents Raising grandchildren Trust NZ Mitre 10
Community of the year.

Tena Koutou, Talofa Lava, Kia Orana, Fakaalofa Lahi Atu, Malo e Lelei,
Bula Vinaka, Taloha Ni, Kam Na Mauri, Greetings to all!



Data base: 5595 Whanau Carers.

Two new GRG Board members appointed:

Jo Anne Thomas

Jo is a mother of a young child, wife and full time Family Court lawyer who appreciates the importance of the role that grandparents have in our young children's lives. She is

passionate about helping the older people in our community to prepare for and protect themselves as they get older. She is also passionate about protecting our young and ensuring that those who care for them are given the best support possible through the legal system.

When Jo has time she enjoys getting outside and being active by challenging herself. However most of her energy is focussed on raising her daughter and family at present. She sees GRG as a great way to combine her expertise with her passion for helping others by taking a global approach through the Board



Peter Talbot

Peter's experience in the Police in his younger days made him aware of the difficult realities of some people's lives and is sympathetic and where possible supportive of their situations. Likewise GRG provides an opportunity to socially contribute and be supportive of Grandparents and Kin-Carers who have taken the responsibility of raising grandchildren and children for a variety of reasons.

A qualified lawyer Peter's career has been as a private client investment advisor and is employed by Craigs Investment Partners in Takapuna Auckland. He has been the Investment Advisor to an Investment Sub-Committee of Auckland Crippled Children Society a charity he is likewise very supportive of.

A timely reminder.

Our daughter had left our granddaughter in our care while she had things going on in her life. Amongst them were an eating disorder which caused her to be hospitalised as her body was showing signs of her organs shutting down, question mark over her mental stability, not settling in any residence over 6/10 month period, having different men in her life etc. Granddaughters' father had removed himself to Australia and we could not contact him. At that stage I decided it might be a good idea to gain day to day care of our granddaughter legally but my husband doesn't like conflict, so I did not push for it to be done.

Things ticked along until back in October 2013 when our daughter did not like being told to take her attitude and don't come back until she sorted it. As a result of that she took our granddaughter, who is now 12, and we have not been able to have visits with her. As we were our granddaughters sole carers and support network for nearly 11 years we are trying to have this access put back in place for her.

We sought legal advice and because of not putting in place legal day to day care all those years ago there is nothing we can do. At moment we are waiting for mediation to try and get positive processes in place. This will be dependent on how our daughter feels about things at the time. This is and has been a very hurtful and emotional time for all concerned.

Please, please to stop this happening to other grandchildren, think ahead to the future and put these things in place. The grandchild might want to go and live with the parent. That is okay and it can happen, but as is in our case, sometimes the legal backup is necessary to protect our grandchildren.

New Groups and Co-ordinators:

Kaitia: Dianah Roberts 09 408 3489 molmolismum@gmail.com

Dannevirke: Malcolm Johnson 06 3740407

Papamoa: Rawinia Mcredie 07 562 7269 rawiniamacredie@kinect.co.nz

Papakura/Pukekohe: Delphina Galvin 0275053808 delphinagalvin@live.com

Finding the Right Source of Support: Is a GRG Support Group Right for You?

Understanding different sources of support:

When you have a challenge in your life, "sources of support" in your community are like the "basic food groups" for your health. Each support can provide you with different benefits - and each has its own limitations

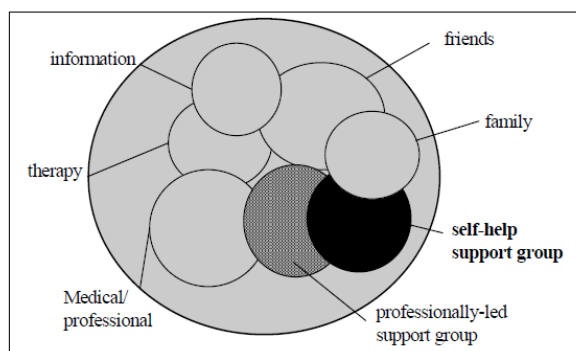
Self-help support groups:

Self help support groups (such as GRG groups) bring together people who share a

common desire to find mutual support that will increase their wellbeing and build their personal strengths.

Key features are that:

- They are ongoing (not time-limited);
- The emphasis is on personal experience, sharing and learning together;
- Members give each other emotional (and sometimes also practical) support;
- Groups are flexible, relevant and self-managed. Members run the group on their own (i.e. they are not professionally-led therapy groups);
- Members may also be involved in information, education and advocacy;
- The number of members varies widely between groups;
- No two support groups are exactly alike.



Why do it?

People join self-help support groups for many different reasons. And people use groups in different ways as a support to their lives. You may attend a meeting only once or twice... or you may become a regular member. The main message of self-help is: It's up to you!

Evaluating a group: *Is this working for me?*

Once you have visited or joined a group you may want to evaluate your experience, looking at the benefits and limitations of this form of support. Every group and every individual is unique. No group will offer you everything but it is worthwhile to consider what you like best and what you would like to change in a group (this evaluation can be an individual and/or a group process). Depending on your conclusions, you might work to make improvements within the group or you might look for support elsewhere.

Components of a good group:

I feel safe to open up and talk.	There is change and laughter.
I feel supported.	Members graduate and celebrate.
I learn, give, and receive.	Membership goes up and down.
I make friends.	It feels right for me.
I can be a leader too.	I can leave the group or rejoin when I want to.
I feel safe to address feelings of tension or conflict when they rise and there is discussion about this	

(Note: Some of the above information comes from the Ontario Self-Help Network www.selfhelp.on.ca)

GRG Support Groups Network:

You don't need to be sure about joining a group before attending a meeting or two. Tell the Coordinator that you are considering a GRG support group. Ask questions. Ask if you can visit their group to learn more. When you do make phone calls to contact a Coordinator, remember

they are volunteers; they may not be able to talk or call you back immediately so please be patient. Most of our Coordinators are raising their grandchildren too.

Huntly members, Any Huntly member interested in attending a members' get-together should contact our Hamilton Coordinator, Kerry Batten, immediately. Kerry's phone and email details are: 07 560 0291 kebatten@gmail.com

New Plymouth, 'Are you a New Plymouth member interested in attending an informal Coffee Group meeting?? Please contact Denise Hunter on (06)751 3704 or 027 3306 441 to discuss a suitable time and venue to get together. Why not pick up the phone and call Denise right now!'

Our free phone 0800 number:

I am sorry to bring this up again, but our last month's phone a/c was \$800 quite a shocker. Please if you have free toll calling nationally, help us by using this. If you are calling head office from Auckland also use 4806530 not the 0800 number for Di. If you do need to use the 0800 number then please phone once and if person not available please leave a name and return number (including area code) message. We are getting calls from someone out there who phones 10 times every minute, regularly and each of these calls costs us \$\$\$.



phone them at night

This is also a timely reminder that calls 9am-5pm **are acceptable**, members should not be phoning after this nor at 9 and 11.30 pm at night. This seems to be happening a lot at the moment. Please remember these call go directly into Geoff's, Di's and Field Officers homes. Our wonderful Cos are volunteers who work from their homes as well and are raising grandchildren too, so please be considerate and not

Flu Jab time:

These vaccines are now in your local Doctors surgery, for many of you these will be free of charge, get them early as your grandchildren need you well.



taonga o toku ngakau (The greatest treasure of my heart) Ko taku
mokopuna e (Is my little grandchild)

Member Support Manager: Di & team (as a caregiver you are part of our team)

heoi ano, na. *E te Atua, aroha mai..... O God shower us with love. Ka kite*

Ka Whangaia ka tupu, ka puawai
That which is nurtured, blossoms and grows

www.grg.org.nz or www.kin.org.nz or www.raisinggrandchildren.org.nz Email office@grg.org.nz

Member Support Manager: Di Vivian



Empowering Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Conference 2014 Highlights

Providing a re-cap for those who attended and an insight into the key highlights and news for those of you who couldn't attend, Kate Bundle, GRG Trustee and producer of this year's National Conference shares her review of the highly informative and outstanding presentations we had from this year's speakers.

Keynote Address: Minister for Social Development **Paula Bennett**

It was a high energy start to our 3rd National Conference: Empowering Grandparents Raising Grandchildren on the 5th and 6th of March 2014 in Auckland. The Minister for Social Development, the honourable Paula Bennett flew in to Auckland for the purpose of [speaking to our members](#). Her brief being to tell us about the \$35 million in funding promised over four years for extended family members caring for children.

Ms Bennett has been a champion for our cause in the Government vocalising in the media on many occasions her recognition and appreciation for the difficult job grandparent and kin carers do to raise the children in their care. Talk is one thing and there has been a lot of talk about what vulnerable children need, but as she rightly points out, we have now moved into what she refers to as the "Action Phase." The Ministerial Reference Group (of which our Chair Diane Vivian was a member) made recommendations in 2013 as to how the \$35million should be spent. As a result we have already seen the new School and Year Start-Up Year Payment which has assisted almost 6,400 carers, being around 73% of all those eligible. She told us that there have been over 1,500 payments granted in the Auckland region, more than 750 in the Bay of Plenty and around 500 in the East Coast, Canterbury, and the Southern region. All up those payments totalled just over \$3million.

By my calculations, taking into account the increase in take-up of those **School and Year Start-Up** payments over the next three years, that leaves about \$20million (approximately \$5million per year) left in the pot for the **Establishment Fund** (for when a child is first placed in the care of a grandparent/kin carer to cover the initial needs like bedding, car-seats, clothing and other essentials as necessary) and the **Extraordinary Care Fund**. She spoke passionately about the purpose of this fund and is clearly excited about this new initiative.

This **Extraordinary Care Fund** will be a discretionary fund of up to \$2,000 available from July this year, and is designed to help children facing significant obstacles in their lives. It does not cover expenses like direct medical costs, because as she puts it "we don't want to double up with the support provided by other agencies and funds, but it does recognise children showing special promise in sports, music or other activities who are capable of achieving at the highest level, if we can give them a boost." She went on to describe that "some may not have access to the equipment, lessons or coaching that can help them become the best they can be - so any support we can provide is well worth it."

We still don't know the ins and outs of the application process or eligibility criteria as the fund is still in its design phase, but this will undoubtedly be a fantastic resource for support for **some grandchildren** who can **demonstrate an extraordinary need**. We will watch this space carefully and bring you all the information we can about it in the next few months.

Principal Family Court Judge Laurence Ryan and Hana Ellis, Barrister & Mediator:
New Family Court Changes

Significant changes to the Family Court processes are coming into effect on 1 April 2014. The good news is that if you already have proceedings on foot before the Family Court under the Care of Children Act 2004 or a court order in place then these changes should not affect you. Similarly if the care of your grandchild is being resolved under the Children Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989, or the proceedings are sufficiently urgent to proceed without notice to the other parties, these changes have no effect.

The bad news is that if you have not yet resolved or formalised the care of your grandchild with a court order, or proceedings have not yet been filed in the Family Court, the changes will affect you and not necessarily in a good way. Neither Principal Family Court Judge Laurence Ryan or barrister and mediator, Hana Ellis was able to disguise the concern they have about the potentially negative impact on the children involved as well as the parties seeking the Court's help.

So what are these changes? In brief, if you have a non-urgent dispute over the care of your child the first step is to go to "out of court mediation" called the Family Dispute Resolution process (FDR). Lawyers for the parties are not allowed to be part of this process and the FDR mediation occurs with just the parties and a mediator involved. You can get legal advice from a lawyer before the mediation, but if you can't afford a lawyer and you are eligible for legal aid, you can only get a maximum of 3 hours legal advice with your lawyer (including the time before and after the FDR mediation) so you need to be careful to spend that time wisely.

If an agreement is reached at FDR, this agreement can be submitted to the court for a consent order. However the Judge still has to be satisfied that the agreement is in the child's best interests. Under the law, the Judge must also take steps to ascertain a child's wishes. One of the goals of the new changes is to keep the costs involved in appointing lawyers for children and psychologists down. Not a bad thing in and of itself, but I got the clear impression that this is an area where even the Judges have a lot of concern about the new process. This is because the consequences of ratifying an agreement, without ensuring that (a) the child is happy and (b) the proposals are actually in the child's best interests is not easy without engaging a psychologist or lawyer for the child to find out in an age appropriate way. Putting a child at further risk is certainly not what any judge would want on his or her conscience.

If the mediation goes nowhere and an application has to be made to court, your family legal aid service lawyer is only able to give you one hour to help with your court applications, but they can't go to court with you. You also have to pay a \$220 application fee, unless there are exceptional circumstances and this fee is waived by the Court.

Some people who have spent a lot of time engaged in the Family Court over the years and are probably fairly adept at navigating their way through it might consider these changes a good thing, as expressed by some of our members on our Facebook page. "Keep the lawyers out and the legal bills down" as some might say. A note of caution though, as most people find the Court an alien and daunting experience where tensions and emotions are high. It will be hard enough for some to get their documentation in order, even with one hour's help from a lawyer, but the new process means you will have to be extremely organised, keep track of court dates and ensure that you are well prepared for your court appearances so that you are best placed to communicate to the judge what you think needs to happen.

In her presentation, possibly the most important tip from Hana Ellis, was to make sure you have documented all the important information about the children, the parties, names, ages, dates of birth, a summary of the situation, your concerns and what you hope to achieve through the court process **BEFORE** you even see your lawyer. That way, the time spent with your lawyer can be used wisely getting the advice the lawyer can give you based on their professional expertise and experience without wasting time on information gathering. If you are not eligible for legal aid, you will need to privately engage a lawyer to assist you, but unless the judge decides the case is likely to go to hearing and the parties ought to engage a lawyer, he or she can not represent you in court.

Dr Simon Rowley, Brainwave Trust

Why the Early Years Last Forever

Over the past 16 years the Brainwave Trust has been doing a fantastic job of raising the public's awareness about new findings in brain research, how a child's early life impacts on their brain development and how this translates for their physical, social, intellectual and emotional development. We were fortunate to hear from Dr Simon Rowley, one of New Zealand's pre-eminent neo-natal paediatricians and a trustee for Brainwave.

Interestingly, our brains weigh about 300g at birth and 1400g as an adult, but more significantly, by the end of the first year our brains weigh about 950g and at three years about 1200g. It also turns out that the connections between our billions of brain cells are only about 15% connected at birth but 85% during the first three years. So an enormous amount of growth is going on in those first few years.

Our genes provide the basic blueprint, but experiences influence how or whether genes are expressed. It is 'attachment' to a significant person in those early years that is the relationship through which all development occurs and as researcher Urie Bronfenbrenner puts it, for healthy brain development and secure attachment you "just [need] an adult who is crazy about you and who will give you time." Unfortunately for many of our grandchildren, their start in life has been less than ideal and they bear the emotional scars of the abuse and neglect they suffered as infants. A large United States study shows that the incidence of four or more adverse effects events in early life (such as parental separation, mental illness, alcoholism or abuse) predisposes a child to lifelong adverse physical and mental health consequences.

Dr Rowley provided a fascinating presentation on the physical brain, its component parts and the impact of stress and heightened cortisol levels on brain cells and functioning, which in excessive concentrations can adversely affect development and behaviour. The good news though is that the brain is plastic in that it is highly adaptable and can be influenced by positive experiences. Encouragingly, the research shows that **it is never too late to change the life and world of a child. With intensive rehabilitation, love and nurturing the brain does have the ability to change outside these critical times.** This as he pointed out, gives us a second chance to intervene and help these children to recover. This ability does become more and more limited as time goes by because the brain becomes less and less able to adapt, proving the importance of intervening as early as possible where an infant or young child is at risk. If you ever get an opportunity to hear a Brainwave Trust presentation; don't miss it.

Zac Johns and Elizabeth Sayegh

Zac and Elizabeth are two inspiring young entertainers who were raised by their grandparents. They delighted us after lunch with their performance of three numbers including Zac's fabulous



jazz piano solo, a classical opera piece and my all time favourite *Summertime* from *Porgy & Bess*, during which Elizabeth's beauty, poise and her exquisite voice and tone brought tears to my eyes and I'm sure I wasn't the only one!

Tricia Corin, GRG Field Officer and Benefits Advocate

Sandy Biggs, Work & Income New Zealand

Karen Bishop, MSD

*Understanding Eligibility for Financial Support and
Benefit Entitlements*

Accessing income support under the Social Security Act can be very problematic for many grandparents raising grandchildren. The legislation itself isn't always straightforward, the Work and Income policies tend to change regularly and on top of that, the interpretation of the law and policies by frontline Work and Income support staff is not always consistent. The key message to take away from this session is that help is there. If you are having problems, contact our field officer and Benefits Advocate Tricia Corin.

Sandy Biggs presented statistics that show that as at 31 March 2013, 8,614 caregivers are in receipt of the Unsupported Child Benefit or Orphan's Benefit for 12,069 children. I note that since then, based on the Minister's own speech, (<http://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/grandparents-raising-grandchildren-conference>) these figures have increased to 8,786 carers looking after 12,393 children.

Tricia has an in-depth understanding of the legislation that is virtually unrivalled. She is helping many of our members through the Benefits Review Committee hearing process as well as appeals to the Social Security Appeals Authority. An important development for GRG in addressing the needs of our members has been Minister Paula Bennett's decision in 2013 to link Tricia Corin with Karen Bishop, the National Manager for Strategy and Service Development at Ministry of Social Development in Wellington. This relationship has been very constructive in identifying issues for resolution, cases where policy and the law are being applied inconsistently and in many cases helping to resolve the hard cases. This is a work in progress, but one that is highly beneficial to our cause as we work to ensure that grandparents who ought to be getting benefits such as the Unsupported Child Benefit get that financial support for which they are eligible, even in cases where they have been knocked back by the service for years. Click here for the link to Tricia's presentation.

Pio Terei, MNZM

Reflections on the Past, Parenting and Being Raised by Kin

Providing the perfect counterpoint to the morning's more serious topics we were delighted and entertained by Pio Terei's highly amusing accounts and anecdotes of his upbringing in the Far North with extended whanau. He shared with great humour many of his life lessons learned along the way and his own parenting experiences with his two sons.

Imparting the message of the importance of honouring all the cultural parts in our backgrounds and families whether they are Maori, Polynesian, Asian, or European, I still chuckle at his account of his young boy's insistence to a flight attendant on a plane trip one day that he was "Asian". Apparently the flight attendant, knowing who Pio was, was not convinced. But in spite of that his

son did not relent. Later, Pio asked his son, “hey boy, what was all that about, telling that lady you are Asian?” His reply “yeah, we are ‘asian’, you know, you always told us we are also ‘Croatian’!” Can’t argue with that!

Catherine Atchison, Partner, Martelli McKegg

Alan Gluestein, Barrister

Who will look after my grandchildren when I am gone?

Thinking about our own mortality and what will happen to our loved ones when we die or can no longer look after them is not something most of us really want to think about. But as death becomes us all at some point, think of it we must!

Catherine Atchison, one of New Zealand’s leading trusts and estates planning lawyers, outlined some of the options for protecting against future uncertainty through estate planning, while stressing that every situation is unique. Perhaps the most important matter grandparents raising grandchildren need to address is to ensure you have executed a Will that sets out what you want done with your property and assets. If you have concerns about what will happen to your grandchild in the event of your untimely death, your Will is possibly the simplest method for establishing a trust to provide for your grandchild.

Unfortunately only a parent can appoint a testamentary guardian in a Will – i.e. that is someone who can be trusted to make the important decisions about a child’s life, education, medical and other important issues until they are 18. Grandparents – even if appointed by the court as a guardian of a child with sole day to day care while they are alive, are unable at law, to appoint a testamentary guardian to step into their shoes on their death. This will be an issue if the parent or parents are unfit to make appropriate care and guardianship decisions about the child. Potentially this scenario is one where the grandchild/ren, on the grandparent’(s) death is a situation of risk. This is because unless the parent or parents’ guardianship has been stripped by the Court before the grandparent’s death, the parents automatically have the guardianship rights in respect of that child. Executing a Will that creates a trust, which must be administered by someone you trust to consider the child/ren’s best interests can be a safeguard against this.

Alan Gluestein, a barrister with considerable experience dealing with grandparents raising grandchildren in the Family Court talked about what happens when grandparents are caring for a grandchild with intellectual disabilities who is over 18 years of age. The Care of Children Act 2004 (CoCA) guardianship rights no longer apply and grandparents in this case face the invidious situation where legally they have no legal right to make any decisions on behalf of their disabled grandchild. In this case, the grandparents can apply to the Court for an order under the Protection of Personal and Property Rights Act 1993 to be appointed as their grandchild’s welfare guardian, and if they have any assets or income, their property guardian. The procedure isn’t quite as simple as under the CoCA and requires substantive medical evidence to support the application.

Grant Cleland, Chief Executive, Workbridge

Transitioning a disabled grandchild into the workforce

Grant Cleland, the Chief Executive of Workbridge talked about how the organisation assists disabled children into the workforce enabling them to realise their desire for independence. Workbridge is an employment agency with over 90 employment consultants across 23 agencies

throughout New Zealand. Its role is to get jobs for disabled people and to administer Support Funds on behalf of the Ministry of Social Development. They arrange around 3,500 to 4,000 jobs a year working with small, medium and large businesses and have secured around 40,000 jobs for disabled people over the past 10 years.

Planning for the disabled child's transition into the workforce starts to occur no later than the age of 14 years. That process aims to develop their academic potential as well as functional transition skills and is driven by the student/whanau with the student actively engaged in determining/implementing their future goals. To facilitate this transition, partnerships are developed between the school and community supports at least 2 years before the young person leaves school with the transition programme integrated within the structure of general education rather than as a separate and parallel programme.

Conference Dinner

*With Dame June Mariu, Tracey Martin MP
and entertainers French Toast*

It was a great way to end an information-packed and inspiring day with dinner and *French Toast* providing a relaxed and convivial set of recognisable and well-loved numbers à la Edith Piaf style.

Unfortunately I arrived late for the Conference Dinner due to my own parental responsibilities, and I missed hearing Dame June Mariu speak, but I did get to hear Tracey Martin, Deputy Leader of New Zealand First. Tracey has become another voice and champion for our cause in Parliament and her private members bill, the Social Security (Clothing Allowances for Unsupported Child and Orphans) Amendment Bill was drawn in the ballot last year. Parliament voted unanimously in favour of the Bill to go to the Social Services Select Committee and she had just arrived from Wellington where they had had the first day of oral submissions. Together with Diane Vivian, submissions were presented to the committee last Wednesday on behalf of the GRG Trust. If passed, the proposed legislation would bring the financial support available to caregivers in receipt of the Unsupported Child or Orphans Benefits a step closer to parity with foster carers and would make a considerable difference to many of our members. Time will tell whether it gets passed as we are in an election year where I suspect the focus of the Government will be to present a balanced budget and make policy that attracts the votes. But the good fight continues and we are extremely fortunate to have people like Tracey in our corner, who can articulately champion our cause with courage and conviction.

Paul Nixon, Chief Social Worker, MSD

The Importance of Kinship and Grandparent Care

Our second day kicked off with an interesting insight into the work of our Chief Social Worker in aligning the research on grandparent and kinship care with the work of Child Youth and Family. Following the Green and White Papers on Vulnerable Children a lot of work has been going on within the MSD looking at vulnerable children in our society and how Child Youth and Family and the State in general can best support them and their families with wrap around services. This three-year strategy is called *Ma Matou Ma Tatou*, and has as its core focus, the theme "We, and all of us together – are changing young lives."

New Zealand has 1.2million children and in 2013 there were 148,000 notifications to CYF. Of those there were 22,000 cases of substantiated abuse. With the high volume of notifications the front-end work of CYF is a significant challenge. However emotional abuse stood out as the most prevalent type of abuse being more than twice that of cases of neglect, four times that of physical abuse and six times that of sexual abuse. Maori make up almost half of all cases CYF deal and 60% of children in care are with family, mostly grandparents. Gateway assessments reveal very complex needs in terms of social and behavioural, health and education issues. It will come as no surprise to grandparents raising grandchildren that the “toxic trio” of risk factors are substance abuse (alcohol and drugs), domestic violence and untreated parental health problems.

Paul talked about the Dunedin longitudinal research study on families which he said “has found a very clear correlation between child poverty, social isolation and abuse”, with the conclusion being that “investing in the children is the answer because that has lifelong effects”, and as the brain research has shown, the adverse events in the early years as he put it, has a “profound and fundamental effect on later health.”

“Where notifications don’t require our intervention to protect children and young people, this doesn’t mean that the child, the young person, or the whanau doesn’t need help” Paul says, but how the support services can best be delivered, integrating the State, NGOs and community based services to assist families is the challenge and focus of their three-year strategy. For so many of our children in kin care a lot is riding on the changes and initiatives coming out of this new strategy and let’s hope for more positive outcomes for them and their families.

Nathan Mikaere-Wallis, Brainwave Trust

Teenage Brains: What on Earth is Going on inside their heads?

If like me, you have a teenager in the house you’ll be familiar with the exasperated feeling that overnight, somehow, your son or daughter’s brain is AWOL. Gone! Departed! Nada! When it dawned on me that my now 13 year old had entered that twilight zone known as adolescence I suddenly felt like I did when I held him as a newborn for the first time. HELP! Where are the instructions for this?

Cue Nathan Mikaere-Wallis and the brilliant research and knowledge being shared on the teenage brain by Brainwave Trust. Nathan is a fantastic presenter, with a style that injects serious technical physiological and neurological information about the workings of the brain with humour and candour. As he puts it, “it might not seem like it but twice as much neural activity is going on in teenage brains” as in adult brains and the frontal cortex (the largest part of the brain), responsible for rational, complex thought, judgment controlling impulses and decision-making is going through enormous change and development during the period of adolescence.

The light-bulb moment came though when he explained that the reason why it doesn’t seem like there is much going on inside their heads is because the frontal cortex is effectively “shut down for renovations!” These “renovations” begin around 11 years of age and are complete by around 25 years of age.

As adults we tend to reside in our frontal cortex about 90% of the time, whereas for teenagers it is only about 10%. The remaining 90% of the time is pre-occupied in the limbic system of the brain which includes the hypothalamus, the hippocampus, and the amygdale. This region is primarily responsible for regulating our emotions and it has a lot to do with the formation of memories. Tellingly, it is also responsible for regulating your hunger, thirst, response to pain,

levels of pleasure, sexual satisfaction, anger and aggressive behaviour. Now the pieces of the jigsaw start to fit together and explain why teenagers engage in risky behaviour and seem so moody all the time!

Another big light-bulb moment in Nathan's presentation was when he explained the role of the amygdala. The amygdalae are two almond-shaped masses of neurons in the limbic system and it is this part of the brain that during the teenage years is over-active leading to the more extremes of desire, passion and anger. But it is also the amygdala's role to interpret the facial fusiform area – that is the expressions in your face. Faces are of course among the most important visual stimuli we have, giving us critical information within a fraction of a second about a person's mood and identity - important for all social interactions. In a study comparing teenagers and adult's perception of a series of faces exhibiting different expressions and emotions, together with brain imaging scans it was found that the adults were able to correctly identify expressions such as fear. Instead of fear, all the teenagers' could see was an expression such as shock, anger or surprise. Imaging scans revealed that the teenagers and adults used different parts of their brains to process what they were feeling. The teens mostly used the amygdala, which guides instinctual or "gut" reactions, while the adults relied on the frontal cortex, which governs reason and planning.

Nathan gave a humorous account of his own experience with his teenage son, whose ability to correctly perceive his facial fusiform area was clearly compromised. Staring blankly towards the kitchen where his son was performing some task, while he was thinking deeply he was suddenly met with the angry outburst from his son, "What? What are you looking at?" Shaken out of his reverie with a non-committal response of "Nothing" was met with a stream of thought delivered in a torrent from his son in which he said he thought his father thought he must have been doing something incorrectly while performing the said task. Seeing the amusing irony of what just happened, Nathan said he responded along the lines that his son just thinks that because as a teenager his facial fusiform construct is impaired. Not to be outdone, his son (who clearly has learned a thing or two about the teenage brain development from his father along the way) responded with equal wit that "No you just think that because you are an adult operating out of your frontal cortex and you think you know everything!"

I'd experienced much the same thing with my own son a week before when, with an impassive expression on my face and lost in my own thoughts, I was suddenly and summarily accused of "always looking angry" at him. With the benefit of all that I learned during Nathan's session, I am now endeavouring to glide through my day with a smile on my face, making sure I grin frequently at my moody teenager. I am pleased to say it has improved our communication and state of harmony in the household enormously. I recommend giving it a go!

Nigel Latta, Clinical Psychologist

Complex Problems Don't Need Complex Solutions

From one high energy and humour-filled presentation to another we heard from Nigel Latta, clinical psychologist and TV personality, his take on how to cope with teenagers and their behaviour, especially those who have suffered abuse and neglect. His view of the big picture is that there are some basic principles to remember and that you don't solve complex problems by making it more complex. The first of which is to remember it is all about relationships and the most important thing teenagers need to learn is self-control. Many of the teenagers he deals with have anger management issues and he considers one of the most important lessons he can

teach them is to learn how to “zip it” or in more colloquial terms how to “shut the f@#\$% up!” It is also advisable he says, for parents to learn this when dealing with emotional outbursts from teenagers. Knowing when to be schtum, take a deep breath and walk away is important for enabling more reasoned communication when everyone’s emotions have calmed down not to mention preserving one’s own sanity as a harried parent.

Don’t make their problem your problem, Nigel explained with the analogy, “If you carry them around everywhere they won’t learn to walk.” He went on to say, “The way the world works is if you’re dumb, it will try and kill you. That’s just the nature of the world. Do dumb stuff and bad stuff happens to you.” For them to learn the way the world works, social skills, manners and solving their problems, they have to learn to do it themselves. Rather than trying to sort out their problems for them, instead challenge them by asking, “What are you going to do about this? How will you solve it?” The reality they will learn of course is best summed up with Nigel’s inimitable humour, “Life’s a bit shit sometimes.”

While Nigel mused that “80% of [his] work is teaching parents how to punish kids more effectively,” I couldn’t help feeling that in many ways his common sense and simple approach to problem solving is more of a guide to life for all of us. Particularly when you hear his simple lesson and tenet that in fact “Life is suffering.” “Accept the life you’re currently living. Choose what you want to think and feel. Just drink your cup of tea. Savour it. Be in that moment and accept that you can’t do anything about [the problem] at that moment.” Taking the stress out of a situation and letting things calm down, he says, is one of the first steps to finding the solution to the problem.

The secret to overcoming the bad stuff that life throws our way he says is “resilience”. It’s a word that is often used in child behavioural analysis and therapy. Some people have more resilience than others and will overcome some of the worst upbringings and make a success of their lives. He pointed to a US study of 35 girls from difficult backgrounds that had previously resorted to alcohol and/or drugs to cope with adverse situations in their lives. Turning their lives around, they each reported that there was a pivotal moment in their lives when they had changed their view on the world.

Nigel explained that in one’s life “moments are important” and we should not “get hung up on the idea that change has to be some sit down deep and meaningful session.” He says you can’t plan them, but pivotal moments happen all the time, whether it is something that someone says or does that triggers a new outlook - big changes in people’s lives are possible.

What he does believe though is that “none of us can do it alone” and in this respect the role that grandparents play in raising their grandchildren is critical. As Nigel also points out, from the beginning of time, man has lived in blended families for one reason or another, whether because of death, disease, illness, loss or otherwise and taking care of each other in blended families is all a natural part of human history.

Shane Harris, SAFE Network

Sexualised Behaviour of Children and Youth

What’s Ok, What’s Not, Why Not and What Can I do About it?

Children and adolescents engage in and display a range of sexualised behaviour that is healthy and normal for their age, Shane explains but sometimes that behaviour can be cause for concern because it is unusual for their age or it makes others feel uncomfortable, confused or hurt.

Shane's session and down to earth presenting style was engaging and interesting as he outlined the ages and stages of development in children against the backdrop of the 'cycle of need' and the 'role of attachment' in the process.

Basic developmental psychology he explains rests on the premise that there are developmental blocks at various stages during a child's life and each developmental block depends on the foundation of the previous blocks being sound. "Get the bottom part right and the rest will stand up pretty well," he says. For example between the age of 0-1 babies are learning either to trust or mistrust their situation or caregivers. When a need is met, that translates to 'hope' that the next time they cry out, their needs will be met. If not, they become mistrustful of the situation and exhibit heightened anxiety and distress.

At each stage through to the age of 18, a child develops a sense of self and learns the limits of their self-expression in society and self-control. Children who exhibit alarming sexualised behaviour (i.e. when it is not normal for their age or appropriate), typically have had some adverse event(s) occur at some stage in their development that has given rise to a need either to experience the pleasant feelings of arousal in order to feel a sense of control. This may include engaging in behaviour that involves trying to control others through sexual behaviour. It is worth reading Shane's presentation which is posted on our website. SAFE Network (www.safenetwork.org.nz) also has some excellent publications and hand-books available to fully explain the circumstances in which sexualised behaviour is a cause for concern and when help is needed. What is interesting though is that for the most part, inappropriate sexualised behaviour or engaging in abnormal sexualised behaviour with others as children typically stems not from a desire to hurt another person but to seek comfort, solace and to satisfy some emotional need that has not been met at some stage causing disruption to their normal development. The good news is that with the right kind of therapy and help from organisations like SAFE together with strong and healthy adult love and care in a positive consistent family environment, these behaviours in children can be turned around.

Pat Buckley, Managing Director: Amped4Life
Heads Up on NZ's Youth Culture and Drug Scene
Guiding Grandchildren to Make the Right Choices in Life

Concluding the conference was a hard-hitting and highly charged presentation from Pat Buckley of Amped4Life. Pat's story is as incredible and inspiring as it poignant and sad. For many of the grandparents raising grandchildren present, his story is not unlike the one that saw their own children lose their ability to parent because of their abuse of drugs and/or alcohol. Pat though, is the embodiment of someone who has experienced a pivotal moment in his life where he made a choice to take a positive path. Beating his addiction to heroin after three overdoses that nearly killed him; his twelve months in rehabilitation marked the start of a life that has become a mission to inspire school children and our youth to make good choices. He has delivered his message to thousands of schools throughout the country. As he puts it, "Life can change with one bad choice." Pat unashamedly eschews the "harm minimisation" strategy promoted by some New Zealand organisations and educators on the subject of illicit drugs and so-called legal highs. For some children taking a drug just once is too much and the irreparable damage it does to their lives is simply not worth trying to pretend that there are so-called 'safe' ways to take drugs.

The next time your grandchild slips into conversation that "Oh it's only marijuana Nan", ponder this: Pat's own descent into the hell of drug taking started with one joint at 14. Mixing with the

'wrong' people was just the start and before long he was offered heroin, and the life that followed saw him bury 53 friends from drug overdoses, violence and car accidents as a result of the insidious and damaging effect of drugs. Marijuana or cannabis is not the harmless drug that pro-legalisation advocates try to pretend. It is a drug that affects your brain, damaging the nerve cells and in developing teenage brains the damage is more profound, potentially affecting them for life. It is addictive, damaging to lungs and overall health and has also been proven to bring on or intensify psychotic mental illness, including depression and paranoia. Scarily, today it is more likely to be laced with other dangerous drugs like methamphetamine ("P"), PCP or Ketamine (horse tranquilizer), all of which have serious psychological and neurological effects.

With horrific and tragic photos of the effects of drug use, Pat spoke passionately about the dangers of the drugs that are circulating in New Zealand at present. There are too many drugs both legal and illegal to name here and as parents and grandparents we really must educate ourselves on the types of drugs available and be on the look-out for signs and symptoms of drug use. With the use of the internet and online sales, clever marketing and branding it is easy to be fooled into thinking that these drugs are ok because they can be purchased and delivered by registered courier to your door.

See <http://www.amped4life.net.nz/information/category/12/drug-facts> for articles on the various types of drugs, brand names, ingredients and their effects.

Synthetic cannabis, the source of much agony for parents and controversy in New Zealand right now, he says, has already claimed at least one life, with the death of a bright young boy who after using, literally became so physiologically and neurologically damaged that he ended up as a vegetable on life support before he died. 'Synthetic' cannabis is in fact a misnomer as it is not a synthetic version of THC (the main component of cannabis), but a psychoactive chemical that is designed to mimic the effects of cannabis. It is created by spraying natural herbs with synthetic chemicals. Disturbingly, the "legal highs" industry has been marketing products under the 'synthetic cannabis' label, when in fact the chemicals used to lace the herbal material include anything from benzodiazepine (a prescription drug that can have severe withdrawal symptoms and a host of severe side effects) to Zaleplon, a hypnotic drug, with a sedative effect used for treating insomnia. Zaleplon should never be combined with alcohol as it increases the risk of death from respiratory depression and asphyxiation from vomiting. The trouble is our teenagers don't know what is in these products and are fooled into thinking that because they are "legal" or "herbal highs" they are okay, when in fact they are incredibly dangerous. The same scenario applies to the "party pills" that are being sold as "legal highs" in dairies and clothing stores. These typically contain BZP (a common name for the synthetic drug N-benzylpiperazine) which is a stimulant that is approximately 10 to 20 times more potent than amphetamine. These drugs are currently under investigation in New Zealand and are illegal in the US and two states in Australia. BZP produces stimulant and hallucinogenic effects similar to MDMA (ecstasy). To date tests have found in some cases these have also been laced with a range of other banned hallucinogenic substances including cocaine. Knowing all of this, it is difficult to understand how anyone in good conscience could suggest that there is a safe way to take these drugs when you don't really know what is in it and what interactions it could have with other prescription medication or alcohol, let alone knowing what 'other' substances are present. An important and practical piece of advice Pat gave us was to make sure that if our teenager ever is found drunk or 'out of it' or comes home in that state, stay with them all night. Put them in the recovery position. Do not let them sleep alone and if they appear unresponsive or have difficulty breathing, or call an ambulance immediately. Never leave them alone.

Links

- Minister's Speech on 5 March 2014
<http://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/grandparents-raising-grandchildren-conference>
- Hana Ellis, Barrister
<http://www.familylaw.org.nz/public/find-a-lawyer/lawyer?mid=F003167>
- Family Court Changes
<http://www.justice.govt.nz/family-justice>
- Brainwave Trust
<http://www.brainwave.org.nz/>
- Catherine Atchison
<http://www.martellimckegg.co.nz/our-team/catherine-atchison.aspx>
- Alan Gluestein
<http://lawyer-auckland.co.nz/alan-gluestein/>
- Workbridge
<http://www.workbridge.co.nz/?page=1>
- Work and Income New Zealand
<http://www.workandincome.govt.nz/about-work-and-income/news/2013/new-payments-for-carers-of-someone-elses-child.html>
- Child Youth and Family
<http://www.cyf.govt.nz/>
- Nigel Latta
<http://www.goldfishwisdom.org/>
- SAFE Network
<http://www.safenetwork.org.nz/>
- Amped4Life
<http://www.amped4life.net.nz/>

Speakers Presentations and Papers

A number of the speakers' presentations are available to view online at www.grg.org.nz

GRG Submissions on the Clothing Allowances Bill

The submissions (oral and written) presented to the Social Services Select Committee on the Social Security (Clothing Allowances for Orphans and Unsupported Children) Amendment Bill are also available on our website at www.grg.org.nz

Kate Bundle.

Please feel free to send/email this report on to others whom you think may be interested.

Please pass this on to other grandparents/kin carers you know of.

GRG Trust Head Office hours are 9am – 2pm daily. (We raise grandchildren too)

Views expressed in this newsletter may not be the views of the GRG Trust.

We are a voluntary not-for-profit organisation.

All donations to the GRG Trust are tax deductible.

Abbreviations:

GRG – Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust

BOT – Board of Trustees

CYF – Child Youth and Family Services