



The Champion Centre  
Tamariki Toiora

## **The Relating & Communicating Programme.**



***Tuia te rangi e tū iho nei. Tuia te papa e takoto nei***

**“As the sky joins the earth,  
so people depend on one another”**

*Being able to communicate, be in emotional relationship with others, and learn from others is vital to every child's development.*

*For a range of reasons, some children find this difficult and need support from the Champion Centre's innovative and world-leading Relating and Communicating Programme.*

### **Who is the programme for?**

The Relating and Communicating programme is for children who have difficulties in their ability to be in relationship with others. These difficulties may be shown through making limited eye contact, finding unfamiliar situations and change difficult, being rigid or repetitive in play, finding it difficult to understand others, and finding it difficult to communicate in ways that most people around them understand. Such children are usually very anxious because they cannot make sense of their world, particularly the world of people.

Children referred to the programme have been accepted into one of the Champion Centre's early intervention programmes via the Early Intervention Coordination Service (EICS) process, which starts with a referral from a paediatrician.

The Relating and Communicating Programme is an additional programme that parents and children are invited to attend for a period of time, either instead of (or sometimes in conjunction with) a multi-disciplinary programme. Families have weekly individual sessions with a therapy team that may involve an occupational therapist, speech language therapist, psychologist and music specialist depending on the needs of the child. Activities are all designed to be emotionally reassuring and playful; and are individually tailored to the interests and needs of each child.

## What does the programme do?

The Relating and Communicating programme involves a sequence of steps, described below, to help each child engage and communicate with family members and peers.



## **The Relating and Communicating Steps**

### **Step 1**

When children have difficulty processing sensory information, they are often highly sensitive to light, sound, touch, or movement and become anxious, withdrawn or 'act out' to communicate how they feel. The team's first step is to learn what the child finds difficult to process so that the sensory overload can be reduced. Then activities and the therapy space itself can be designed to help the child become, and remain, calm.

### **Step 2**

The second step is to find an activity and place in the therapy room where the child feels calm and can observe and receive the world without being anxious. It might be, for example, that being swung in a blanket or being encased in a big bean bag, is a safe place from which the child can observe without having to plan how to move, or organize his/herself for action. From this contained, undemanding place, the activity of relationship can make its start.

### **Step 3**

This step is a time of consolidation and repetition to give the child a chance to revisit a stage of early imitation of the parent, absorbing facial expressions, and finding a place where interactive joint play can begin. Finding that place of calm for a child can often take several sessions, and may need to be revisited in times of stress or tiredness. Sometimes those sessions may feel like a return to when the child was an infant. Rocking and singing is frequently encouraged to help the child feel safe and contained by the love of the parent for the child.

### **Step 4**

Once parents know how to help their child return to a calm, alert place, the therapists will encourage the child to begin to work on their sensory understanding of themselves in the world. Touch and movement are particularly important because these are crucial for a child to develop their sense of self. Touch helps a child understand the boundary between their own body and the rest of the world; and movement helps develop a mental map of where that body is in space. Repeated activities involving touch and movement make the child's world more predictable and understandable.



### **Step 5**

As the child becomes less anxious, more aware of their body in space, and more able to pay attention to the world, they become more able to enter into attentive, joyful and sustained engagement with their parent, often called 'moments of meeting'. These 'moments' may involve slow and repetitive movements, often supported by singing, and paced so as to be meaningful to the child. Often children are supported in a sheet, bean bag or in the arms of a parent, as this helps the child who processes information slowly, to engage in joint attention and joyful interaction without having to pay attention to organizing their movements.

### **Step 6**

Within the periods of engagement, communication can flourish. Children may need to revisit the early communication systems of gazing at the parent, indicating what they are interested in by looking at it, looking to the parent for reassurance, and taking turns through imitating body movements, gestures and facial expressions. Parents are also encouraged to use language and informal singing to code the child's experience ("you are jumping, going up and down, swinging, running etc."), to help children use language to support understanding and memory. These action words are often the first children say and use as their own.

## **Step 7**

Our extensive experience with this programme, developed at the Champion Centre, leads us to anticipate that as children near the end of their time in the Relating and Communicating programme they will be calmer and better able to manage their feelings of anxiety, joy and excitement. We will see them giving attention to play partners and sharing experiences with them; not focusing just on equipment or objects. Their play becomes more flexible, creative and social.

### **The Programme is evidence based**

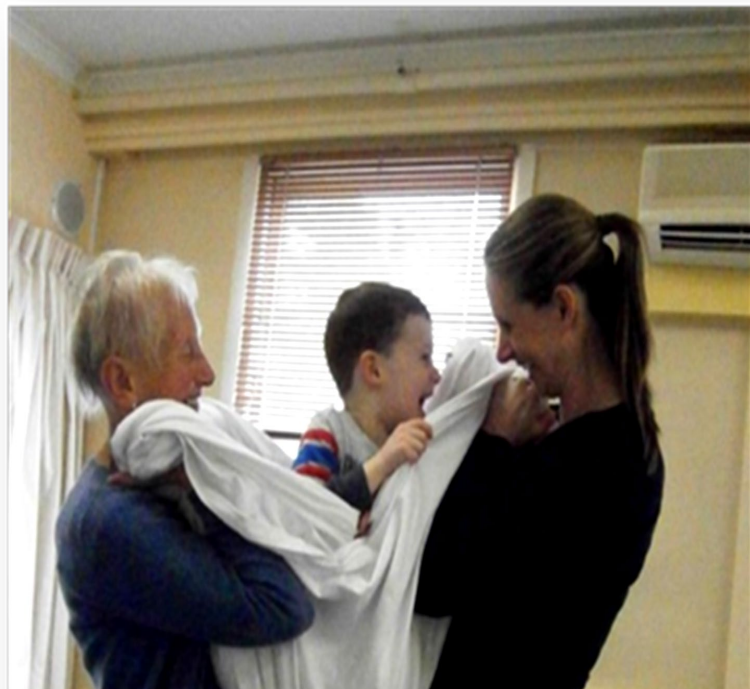
Our work is based on our experience and our understanding of neurological development. The brain is hierarchically organized with the lowest part, the brain stem and lower brain, developing early and being functional from birth. This part of the brain is involved with the regulation of all our primary body functions – our heart beat, breathing, digestion, sweating, pallor. These systems function without any consciousness, but they respond to stress by speeding up the heart and breathing, slowing digestion, making the body ready for action. In these situations it is harder for us to access higher levels of the brain. That is why we begin with achieving a calm, regulated state in all the children we work with, before we move on to the next step of the programme.

The midbrain integrates incoming sensory information, from the environment and also from our own body. It is also where the limbic system sits, which is the seat of our emotions and of memory and is involved in every action or plan that we undertake. That is why, once the child's lower brain is more organized, we work on helping children understand their emotions and on connecting emotionally with the most important people in their lives.

The upper part of the brain is the cortex where thoughts are formulated and language and reasoning are possible. That is why we do not put the focus on language until we have the lower and mid-brain aspects of development in place. When children are anxious, poorly regulated and socially disconnected they are not easily able to access this higher level of the brain and can make little sense of their world. As a result, they may show their fear through reactions that appear angry and can be destructive to themselves and others. With calm lower brain levels, these reactions are less likely.

It is important to emphasise that this programme is different to many developmental programmes. It aims to help children truly understand their world and to experience it with genuine emotion; not just behave as if they did. This is a relationship based programme, not a behaviour based programme. Meaning is built through the emotional memory when parents and children find joy in being and playing together. It is also a programme based around the family and asks parents for their commitment and energy in working with the team to support their child.

Once they have 'graduated' from the Relating and Communicating Programme, most children will move on to another programme within the Champion Centre which will focus on the development of the full range of skills necessary for school entry.





# The Champion Centre

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*Removing barriers. Unleashing potential.*

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