

RISING — to the — CHALLENGE

Stories from the Covid-19 crisis



New ways of continuing community connection has been important for Parenting Place during the Covid-19 lockdown. Here Parenting Place facilitator Kirstin Fleming virtually connects with Cat Dow and her 17-month-old daughter Cara during a Space session.

PARENTING PLACE: SPACE – FINDING NEW WAYS TO SUPPORT NEW PARENTS IN THEIR BUBBLES

By Nicholas Moody

New parents grappling with the dual challenges of a new baby and lockdown have been thrown a lifeline by Parenting Place through their parent support programme Space for you and your baby (Space).

Space is a postnatal programme delivered by Parenting Place and a national network of partner organisations that supports and connects mums, dads and their whānau as they navigate the first year of a baby's life.

Since lockdown in late March, its weekly face-to-face sessions have transitioned to group video calls to keep the sense of community alive.

“That first session felt like a revelation,” says Romy Wood, whose son Caleb was only 7 weeks old when the country went into lockdown.

“It was reassuring to understand I was not alone, and I was doing OK as a mum. I look forward to each week because it feels like, for a moment, I have left my bubble to connect with other mums who can relate to my new life,” she says.

Parenting Place facilitator Kirstin Fleming says being a new parent is isolating enough, but the pandemic has amplified this isolation and prevented parents enjoying many of the simple joys of parenthood from seeing grandparents to visiting friends.

“It is almost an isolation, within an isolation – a double bubble. More than ever they want to hear from other people going through the same challenges at the same time,” she says.

Session topics have been adapted for online delivery and now often involve calling in specialists to share their expertise, one week it could be a paediatric physiotherapist, the next a relationship counsellor to advise on couple chemistry.

Fleming says while the course components remain largely unchanged, checking on mental wellbeing has added significance at this time of great uncertainty.

“There is a real emphasis on ‘How are you doing?’ Which we do in the face-to-face sessions, but in these unprecedented times, more than anything they just need to talk – it’s a lifeline.”

This ability to support new parents online through the lockdown has had some unexpected benefits – the number of parents logging on to Space’s online sessions has jumped compared to the numbers attending face-to-face sessions before the Covid-19 crisis hit.

Partner organisations have even set up a limited number of new groups in lockdown. The Anglican Diocese started four groups in Auckland, and Playcentre has begun several new groups in other parts of the country.

Dave Atkinson, partnerships director at Parenting Place, says this spike in online engagement highlights a great opportunity to involve more young parents in the long term.

“Getting out of your house with a young baby can feel like running through concrete. So, when you can click a link and connect to your group from the comfort of your lounge it reduces a lot of the participation barriers for young parents.”

More than 25 partner organisations deliver Space’s 20 to 40-week courses across New Zealand – in 2019 more than 3,400 new parents participated in 300 Space courses.

Parenting Place and the integration of the Space programme into their wider offerings is being supported by NEXT and The Tindall Foundation.

With such a broad reach, Atkinson says they have reimagined how to deliver all their programmes digitally.

Its Term 2 curriculum is geared for online delivery and is likely to remain that way for some time, until the uncertainty of being in big groups passes.

Atkinson is excited about the opportunity to fast track online content which has a long-term benefit to parents who cannot physically attend sessions.

“It doesn’t replace what we do face-to-face, but it is another way to reach more people who wouldn’t normally be able to attend, or enables us to support parents who are really isolated in that first phase of parenting,” he says.

NEXT representative Mike Ferrand says Parenting Place has provided a crucial service to new parents at a time of unprecedented uncertainty.

“We know how important the first 1,000 days of a child’s life are and it’s really encouraging to see how parents have been doing everything they can to bond with their babies in the most challenging circumstances,” he says.

“Space, and Parenting Place’s other programmes, have enabled that – and as a result we will have a more resilient group of new parents and babies as we navigate the unknown path ahead.”