Steps to Confident Parenting

A service-research collaboration

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Steps to Confident Parenting supports parents with an intellectual disability whose children are at risk of out-of-home care.

Parents with an ID are overrepresented in child removal cases, often subject to bias and misunderstood support needs (Varcoe et al., 2021).

Steps builds parenting skills and confidence to achieve sustainable improvements to parental capability and ensure child safety.

Piloted in 2017, Steps is now a multi-agency service-research collaboration across the Barwon and Western Metropolitan Regions.

Program origins

2017

- Meli (then Barwon Child Youth & Family) and Gateways (disability support service) identified an over-representation of parents with an ID in Barwon child protection data.

- They launched Supporting Parents with an Intellectual Disability (SPID) —combining Meli's family services with Gateways' home-based program.

2018

- Funded through Flexible Funding, Tweddle Child and Family Health Service joined the partnership – focus on children under 4 years.

- Deakin University began working with the service delivery organisations to map out a program evaluation.

Growth of the program and research plan

2021

- The pilot was adopted under Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH)'s disability support strategy, with additional funding for Gateways and Tweddle.
- co-health Family Services joins, expanding delivery to the Western Metro region.
- Deakin University received DFFH funding to continue research, including a dedicated Meli research role.

2022 – 2023

- A research governance group was formed
- The program was renamed Steps to Confident Parenting to reflect its strengths-based, supportive approach.

An Integrated Service and Research Model

2025

- Meli and cohealth introduced an internal Parental Coach role.
- Gateways concluded their involvement in the program.

Under the current model, each eligible family is supported by:

- A Family Services practitioner (from Meli or cohealth)
- A Steps practitioner (either a Meli/cohealth Parental Coach or a Tweddle practitioner)

For families who consent to the study, a Deakin researcher conducts three visits over 12 months, coordinated with the Family Services practitioner.

Western Metro Region

cohealth

Family Services

+

0-4 years

tweddle child & family health service

4 - 18 years

cohealth

Steps to Confident Parenting

Barwon Region

MeLI

Family Services

+

0-4 years

tweddle child & family health service

4 - 18 years

MeLI

Steps to Confident Parenting

Collaboration

This service-research collaboration is grounded in:

- A client-centred approach
- Regular communication
- Flexibility
- Problem-solving

Services aim to build long-term safety and wellbeing for families and reduce child protection involvement.

The research team seeks to strengthen the evidence base for what works to support parents with an ID and their children.

The role of Family Services

- Family Services practitioners (Meli and cohealth) provide flexible support to strengthen parenting, family functioning, and child wellbeing.

- If eligible (parental ID, child at risk of out of home care), Family Services practitioner refers parent to a Steps practitioner.

- Family Services practitioner stays engaged throughout and after the Steps service and connects families with researchers.

North Carolina Family Assessment Scale

- Family Services practitioners routinely use the **North Carolina Family Assessment Scale (NCFAS)** during their intervention.

- NCFAS is an observer-rated assessment across eight domains of family functioning, such as Parental Capabilities, Family Safety, and Child Wellbeing (Reed-Ashcraft, Kirk, &Fraser, 2001)

- The research team will analyse NCFAS data over 12 months for study participants.

The role of Meli and cohealth Parenting Coaches

Meli and cohealth Parenting Coaches provide the intensive, home-based component to their Family Services clients with children aged 4 - 18 years.

The support provided is:

- Responsive and individualised
- Phased in gradually and sensitively, catering for challenges with attention, concentration and memory
- Focused on fostering sustainable improvements to routines, parenting strategies and child interaction.

The role of Tweddle practitioners

- Tweddle practitioners support families with babies and children under 4 years through the HoPES program.
- HoPES provides 8-week, 4 hours/week, home-based parenting support.
- Specialises in working with parents with an ID and complex needs.
- Aims to support family preservation and reunification with a focus on family strengths, connection, and parent-child relationships.
- Collaboration with Family Services practitioners to inform future support and planning.

Evaluation of Steps to Confident Parenting

Deakin University has partnered with the service providers to conduct a Prospective Cohort Study.

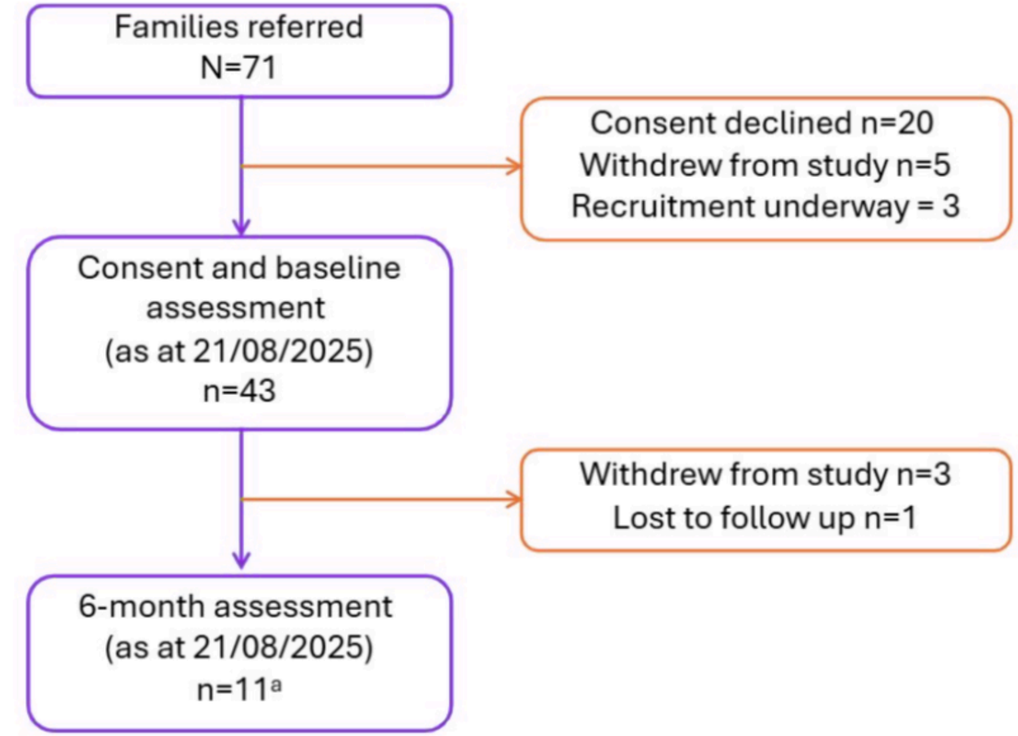
- Target: 100 parents over 3 years
- Primary outcome: Statutory child removal at 12 months post intervention
- Secondary outcomes: Family functioning, self-regulation, child behaviour

Data collected at intake, 6 & 12 months:

- Child protection outcomes using DFFH data;
- NCFAS for family functioning
- Me as a Parent for parent self-regulation
- Toddler Development Instrument, Middle Years Development Instrument, Mood and Feelings Questionnaire, and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire for child behaviour.

Study Recuitment

Figure 1. Participant Flow Chart August 2025.

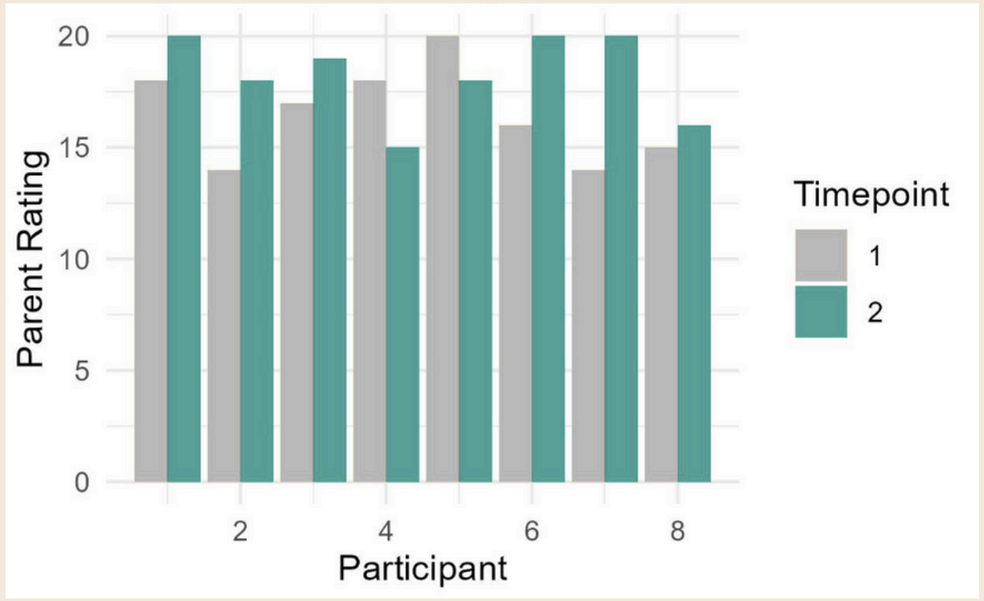


Interim analysis findings

Figure 2. Self-Reported Parenting Ability

Four self-report questions were posed about each parent's parenting ability in the previous 3-months.

Higher scores are interpreted as better parenting ability.



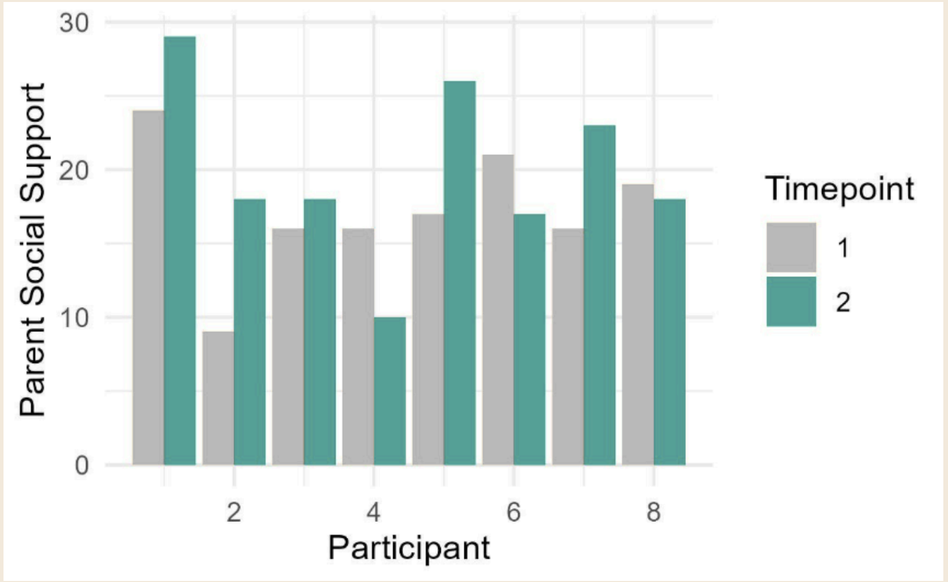


Figure 3. Perceived Social Support

Six self-report questions were asked of parents about how much social support they felt they had in the community in the past 3-months.

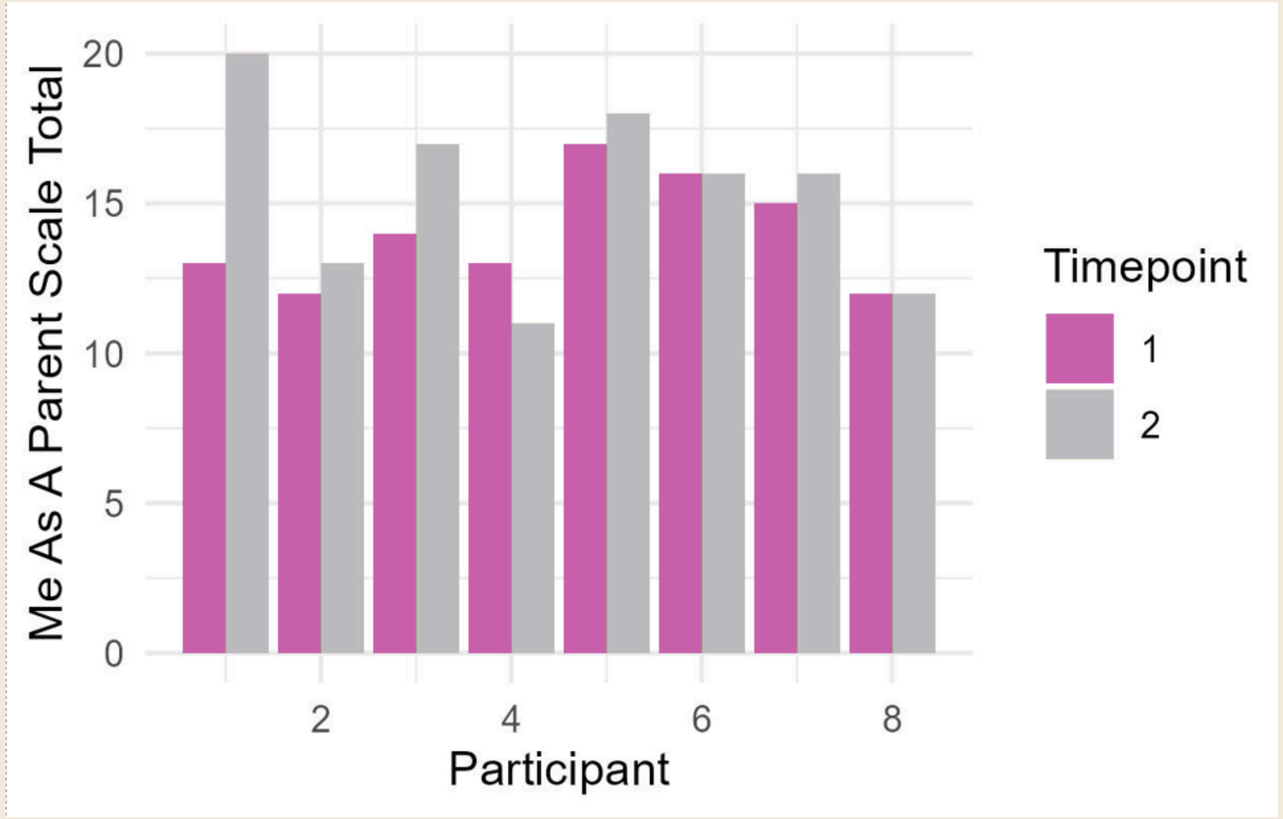
Higher scores indicate greater levels of support.

Interim analysis findings

Figure 4. Me as a Parent Scale

A four item self-report scale asking about a parent's confidence in their ability to safely parent their children in the previous 3-months.

Higher scores indicate greater levels of confidence.

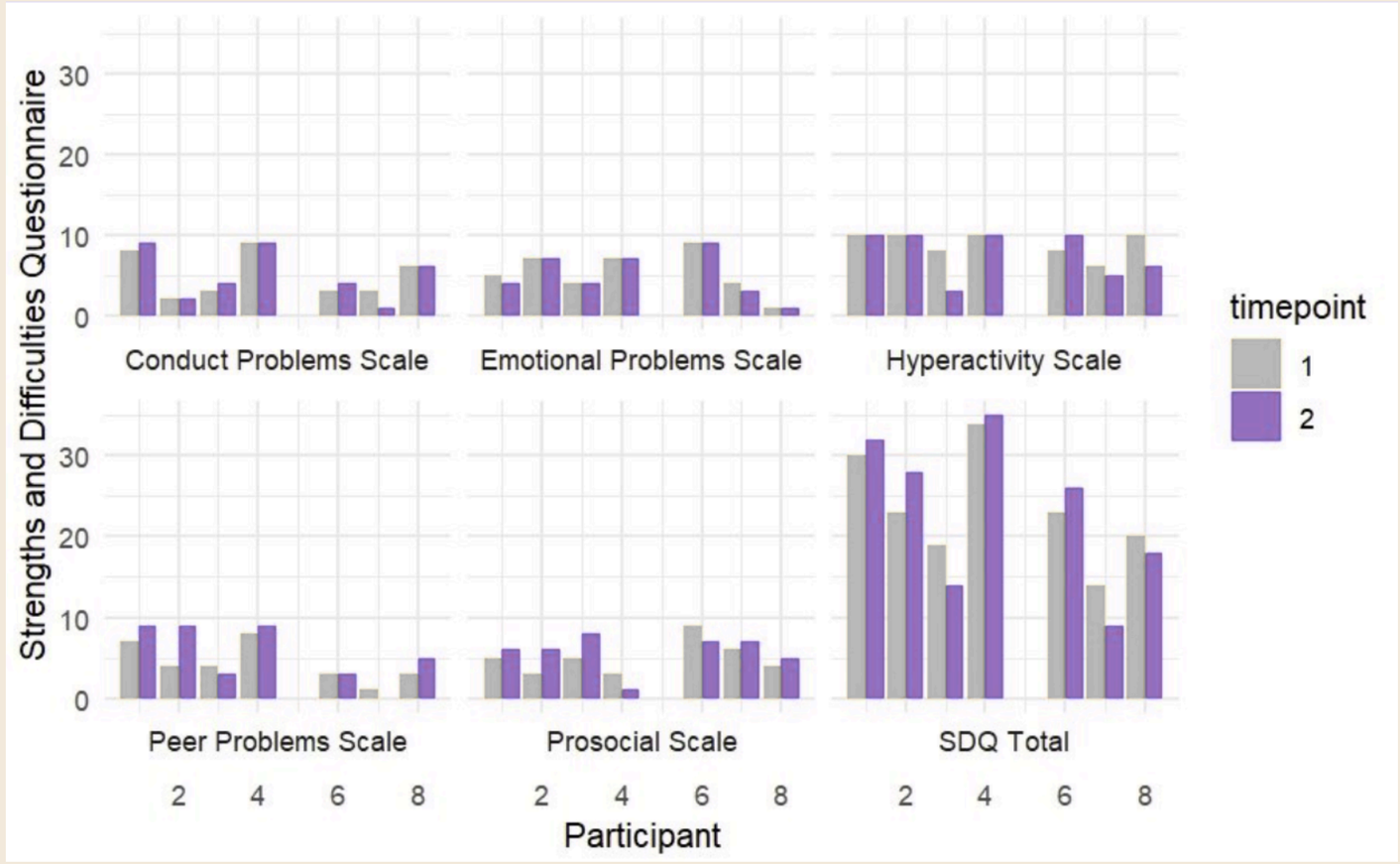


Interim analysis findings

Figure 5. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

A parent report measure of child psychological and behavioural attributes and problems.

Higher scores indicate a higher degree of the measured domain.



Bridging research and practice

- Building a rigorous evaluation requires ongoing communication and collaboration
- Consultative approach supports transparency and alignment with needs and experiences of clients and practitioners
- Two regular meetings to maintain coordination:
  - Operational Meeting – focus on program delivery (practitioners)
  - Governance Meeting – oversight of evaluation integrity (all stakeholders)
- Practice and referral pathways have been refined to accommodate the study and ensure appropriate service allocation
- Strong governance has enabled rapid response to recruitment challenges
- Sustained effort across stakeholders to promote the program and the study

Benefits beyond the study

- Two doctorial students investigating additional complex factors (mental health and intergenerational disability)
- Increased organisational familiarity with research
- Opportunity to update clinical pathways
- Access to funding options
- Lead sector toward evidence-based practice in this area

What is next?

- Two years of recruitment
- Comparison cohort
- Facilitation of inter-agency training in Steps to Confident Parenting intervention
- Expansion of research partnership to evaluate and support other programs

MeLI cohealth tweddle child & family health service DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

“People used to say that I wasn’t a good parent and now I feel like I am a good parent. The program has helped with my confidence.”

A parent who completed Steps to Confident Parenting

References

Varcoe, J., Doery, E., Little, K., Benstead, M., & Toumbourou, J. W. (2021). Parent Support for People with an Intellectual Disability: Report One – Literature Review. Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development (SEED), Deakin University.