



The Sydney Morning Herald

Date: Wednesday, 05 April 2006
Page Number: 3
Edition: First
Supplement: MAIN

Market: NSW
Circulation: 236,046
Published: MON TO SAT
Editorial: [email the editor](#)
Item No: P9927655

Size: 180.81 sq. cm.

Time out for a tip or two on toddler taming

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Medical Editor

QUIET, calm and concentrating hard, Noa Suzor pushes toy cars around a plastic garage. It looks like an archetypal childhood scene, but for Noa and his mother Tania DiLoreto, this is a breakthrough.

For once, they are working together constructively, without the usual escalating cycle of defiance and shouting.

This is play therapy, and there are rules: Noa is not allowed to leave the table or throw or bang the toys; his mother must not ask him questions, and has to follow whatever game three-year-old Noa determines while praising his good behaviour as specifically as she can.

"Excellent work, good boy!" says Ms DiLoreto, coached with whispered instructions from clinical nurse consultant Sue Morgan. "Mummy's so happy when you're gentle with the toys."

The family attends a toddler clinic, opened last February by the charity Karitane to meet an increased demand from families seeking support for severe behaviour problems in very young children.

The organisation is best known for providing practical feeding and settling instruction for people with newborn babies. But the nurses who run residential programs for bewildered families noticed it was frequently older children causing the most damaging disruption to family life, with disobedience, tantrums or violence.

More than half of the toddlers who joined the 10-week program displayed physical or verbal aggression at the outset, according to an evaluation of its first year. By the time they graduated, that had fallen to 13 per cent, researchers will tell a Karitane-hosted conference on child development in Sydney this week.

"When parents are not enjoying the children, you have to look very closely at what's happening in the family," said Mrs Morgan, who facilitates the structured play program. "When you've got to be always saying 'no', it's hard to enjoy the child."

Bryanne Barnett, a child and adolescent psychiatrist who chairs Karitane's board, said any

parent who had more than one child aged four or younger would inevitably experience stress, but financial and work pressure meant more families were cracking under the pressure.

"Any parent who is not adequately supported – and I'd suggest many more parents aren't – is likely to be having difficulties at this stage," Professor Barnett said.

Where problems were severe, intensive one-to-one therapy programs could reinforce positive, loving discipline in parents as well as encouraging better behaviour in the toddlers.

"Why is it that someone who may be six feet tall feels helpless in front of a rampaging two-year-old?" said Professor Barnett.

"The answer is always in parents' heads." Some parents were reluctant to get tough with children because they felt they might lose their temper; others were genuinely frightened by the behaviour, she said. Some children would have difficulty integrating into school if their aggression went uncorrected.



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Easy does it ... clinical nurse consultant Sue Morgan whispers advice to Tania DiLoreto on how to deal with her son, Noa Suzor, at a toddler clinic yesterday operated by Karitane