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Theory of Change: Mellow Ability Parenting Programme

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1 Vision:

We want every child – wherever they are in the world – to be part of a safe and nurturing family that will allow them and future generations the best possible start in life.

2 Problem / Need

Families raising children with disabilities or additional support needs often experience sustained emotional and practical pressures. Alongside increased caregiving demands, parents and carers may struggle to come to terms with a diagnosis or emerging additional needs. This process can involve feelings of loss, grief, guilt, blame, and shame, which are frequently experienced in isolation and without adequate support. When these feelings remain unprocessed, they can negatively affect parental wellbeing, confidence, relationships and the capacity to respond sensitively to a child's emotional and relational needs. Parents and carers may struggle with:

- Understanding their child's communication, sensory, emotional, or behavioural needs
- Responding sensitively to distress, dysregulation, or challenging behaviour
- Balancing caregiving demands with their own mental health and wellbeing
- Navigating stigma, reduced social support, and fragmented services

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- Maintaining warm, attuned relationships under ongoing pressure

Without tailored, relationship-based support, these pressures can negatively affect parental wellbeing, parent–child relationships, and children's social and emotional development, increasing the risk of family breakdown, exclusion, and long-term inequalities.

3 Programme Purpose

Mellow Ability aims to strengthen relationships between parents/carers and their child with additional support needs (4 – 7 years), by improving parental wellbeing, reflective capacity, and confidence, enabling parents and their children to enjoy resilient, emotionally thriving lives. The programme centres parents' lived experiences and creates a safe, emotionally containing space where parents are supported to be open and honest about how they feel.

Through reflective discussions and the use of techniques informed by models such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and theories of grief and loss, parents are supported to process complex emotions, reduce self-blame, and develop greater self-compassion. This enables parents to recognise strengths within themselves and within their relationship with their child.

Delivered as a structured, therapeutic, and strengths-based group programme, Mellow Ability also draws on practical relational approaches such as video feedback, Intensive

Intensive Interaction and Discover, Notice, Advise, Value (DNAv). Together, these approaches support families to better understand their child's communication, respond sensitively to their individual needs, and build nurturing, resilient family relationships.

4 Target Group

Mellow Ability is designed for parents and carers of children with disabilities or additional support needs, particularly those who may benefit from intensive, relationship-based and emotionally containing support. This includes families:

- Parenting children with developmental delay, learning disabilities, neurodivergence (including autism), sensory processing differences, communication needs, or complex health needs.
- Who are newly navigating diagnosis, assessment, or emerging concerns, as well as those adjusting to longer-term caregiving roles
- Experiencing high levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, grief, isolation, or reduced informal support
- Who may feel excluded from, or underserved by, mainstream parenting programmes
- Where parents are experiencing mental health challenges, including anxiety, low mood, trauma-related stress, or burnout
- Who benefit from peer connection with others who share lived experience, reducing stigma, shame, and isolation

5 Assumptions (Core Mechanisms of Change)

- Secure attachment can be strengthened when caregivers feel emotionally supported, validated, and understood
- Parental wellbeing directly affects a parent's ability to engage in sensitive, attuned caregiving
- Parents may experience grief, loss, guilt, blame, and shame in relation to diagnosis or additional needs; when these emotions are acknowledged, normalised, and held safely, parental confidence and emotional availability increase
- Reflective capacity helps parents make sense of their child's behaviour and communication, reducing misattribution and self-blame
- Children with additional support needs benefit from predictable, attuned, and emotionally containing caregiving
- Learning is most effective when drawn from lived experience and grounded in real parent–child interactions
- Peer support reduces isolation and stigma and strengthens resilience

Aligned with the Mellow Parenting Evaluation Framework:

- ·Parental wellbeing
- ·Parent–child relationship
- ·Reflective functioning
- ·Child social–emotional wellbeing

6 Activities (What the Programme Delivers)

Mellow Ability delivers a structured, therapeutic, and strengths-based group programme that:

- 14-weekly, 5–6-hour group sessions for parents/ caregivers of children aged 4-7 years.

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- Uses techniques informed by Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to support emotional regulation, psychological flexibility, and values-based parenting
- Supports parents to reduce self-blame and develop greater self-compassion
- Helps parents recognise strengths within themselves and within their relationship with their child
- Supported parent–child interaction and have a go activities
- Draws on practical models such as: Intensive Interaction, Discover, Notice, Advise, Value (DNAV)
- Uses individualised, strength-based video feedback to highlight moments of attunement, connection, and responsiveness
- Builds peer support and shared understanding within the group

7 Outputs (Immediate Participation)

Parents/carers:

- Attend and actively participate in the 14 structured, therapeutic group sessions
- Feel safe, welcomed, and emotionally contained
- Feel less isolated and more understood
- Engage in reflective conversations
- Experience increased positive interactions with their child
- Increased parental sensitivity, confidence, and attunement
- Facilitators observe improved caregiver sensitivity, reflective capacity, and strengthened parent/carer–young person relationships.

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8 Short-Term Outcomes (0–6 Months)

Mapped to Mellow Evaluation Framework

Parental Wellbeing

Improved parental well-being

- Increased emotional validation and self-compassion
- Improved confidence in the parenting role

Parent–Child Relationship

- Increased emotional availability and sensitivity
- Warmer, more accepting, and attuned interactions

Reflective Capacity

- Improved understanding of the child's behaviour, communication, and needs
- Greater ability to pause, reflect, and respond rather than react

Child Social & Emotional Wellbeing

- Increased emotional safety and co-regulation
- Improved engagement and responsiveness

9 Medium-Term Outcomes (6–18 Months)

Mapped to Mellow Evaluation Framework

Parental Wellbeing

- Greater acceptance and integration of the child's diagnosis or additional needs
- Increased resilience and reduced emotional distress

Parent–Child Relationship

- More consistent, nurturing, and emotionally containing caregiving
- Reduced relational stress in daily routines

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Reflective Capacity

- Parents independently apply reflective and relational strategies in everyday life

Child Outcomes

- Improved emotional regulation and communication
- Strengthened attachment behaviours

10 Long-Term Impacts (18+ Months)

Child Development

- Improved social, emotional, and relational outcomes
- Increased inclusion, participation, and confidence

Family Functioning

- More stable, nurturing, and resilient family environments
- Reduced parental burnout and long-term stress
- Reduced isolation and increased confidence in accessing and engaging with community and peer support
- Stronger integration into local community, early years, disability, and family support networks

System-Level Impact

- Reduced reliance on crisis or statutory services
- Improved coordination across health, disability, and family support systems
- More equitable access to effective early intervention for families of children with additional support needs

11 Summary Causal Pathway

Mellow Ability works by creating a safe, therapeutic group space where parents' lived experiences are valued and complex emotions are acknowledged and supported.

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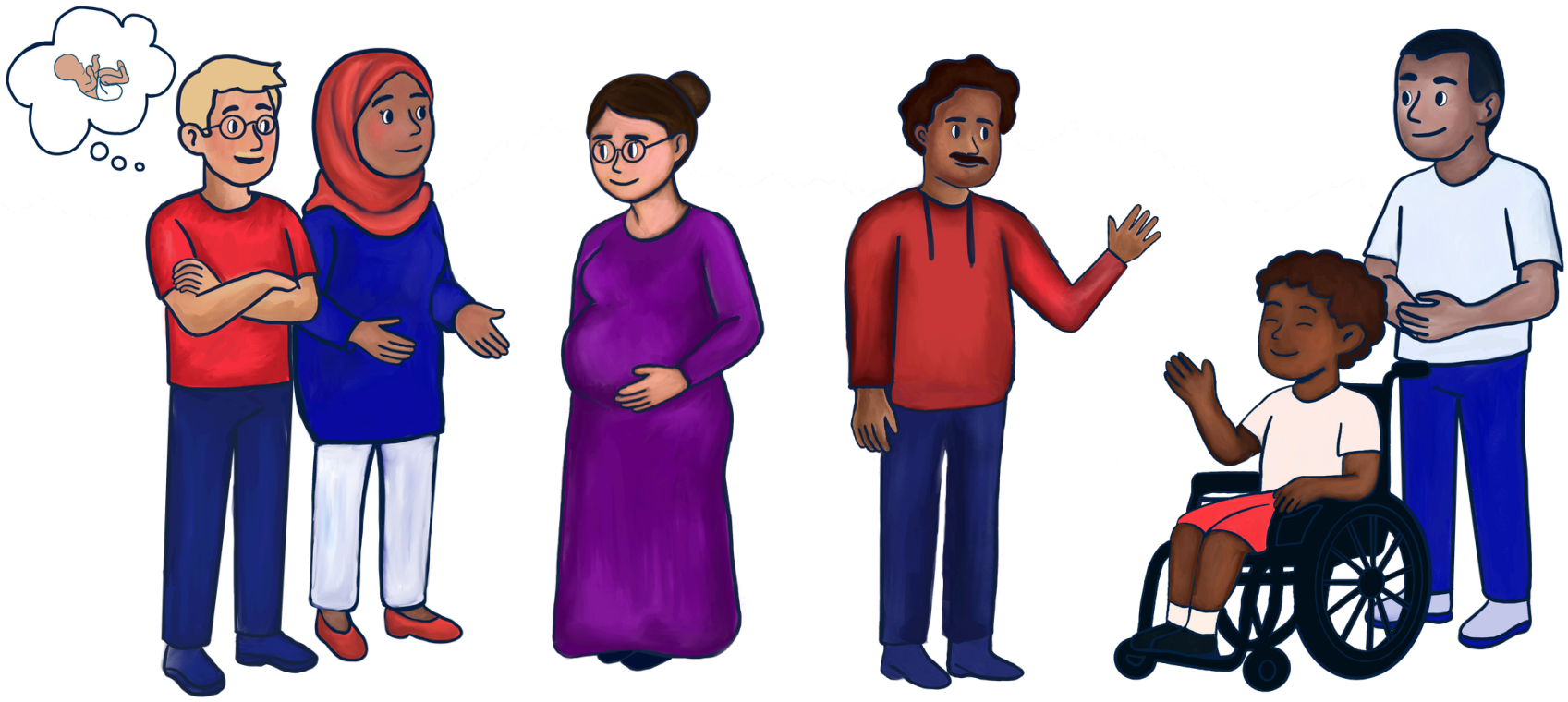
By reducing feelings of guilt, isolation and strengthening parental wellbeing and reflective capacity, the programme supports more attuned parent–child relationships. These changes enable children with additional support needs to experience greater emotional safety and regulation, leading to more resilient families and improved long-term outcomes.

- Supports parents to process grief, loss, and complex emotions
- Reduces self-blame and improves parental wellbeing
- Strengthens reflective capacity and attuned caregiving
- Improves parent–child relationships and children's emotional wellbeing

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FIND OUT MORE AT

www.mellowparenting.org

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Mellow Ability Parenting Programme Logic Model

Purpose/Goal: To support expectant parents, especially those with additional social care needs, to reduce antenatal stress, improve wellbeing, and begin forming a positive, nurturing bond with their baby before birth.

INPUTS:

Mellow Ability practitioner manuals/resources

Theoretical framework grounded in attachment and social learning theory

ACT & grief/loss theories

Sensory processing & interaction models

Trauma sensitive & responsive based group model

Structured parent/caregiver -child interaction sessions

IT equipment i.e.

laptop/tablet and monitor

Safe, welcoming programme space

Food, transport, and timing flexibility

Evaluation tools aligned with the Mellow Parenting Framework

Implementation policies, procedures and guidelines

MELLOW ACTIVITIES:

Training Coordination

Deliver 3-day training to practitioners

Training evaluation Certificates

Reflective Consultation & Accreditation support

PRACTITIONER ACTIVITIES:

Recruitment of parents/caregivers

Pre-programme visits and relationship-building

Pre-programme evaluation and baseline measures

Delivery of structured group-based sessions

Facilitation of therapeutic discussions and peer support

Supported parent–child interaction and play

Post-programme evaluation and review

STRATEGIES:

Strength-based support

Emotional containment & Facilitated peer support

Reflective Practice
Strategies to reduce anxiety and depression

Strength based video feedback

Adaptation to children's developmental and sensory needs

PROGRAMME STRUCTURE:

14-sessions, 5–6-hour group-based sessions

Therapeutic discussions on stress, relationships, confidence, and well-being

Psychoeducation on child development in the context of disability, including physical, social, emotional, sensory, and communication development

Support with routines, warm boundaries, and co-regulation, tailored to children's individual abilities and additional support needs

Individualised parent/caregiver–child video feedback

Supported parent–child activities tailored to individual abilities

OUTPUTS:

Increased capacity for practitioners to deliver

Parents/caregivers attend at least 75% of sessions

Have a Go Activities completed by parent/caregivers

Reduced isolation and increased peer connection

Increased opportunities for the parent/caregiver to engage positively with child tailored to individual abilities

increased opportunities for parents/caregivers practicing new communication strategies with child tailored to individual abilities

Improved parent/caregiver child relationship (Tunnel)

Improved parent/caregiver wellbeing (WHO-5)

Improved caregiving experience (AC-QoL)
Improved Parenting Confidence (TOPSE-LD)

OUTCOMES:

Short- Medium term:

Improved mental health and wellbeing of the parent/carer

Increased parent/caregiver confidence and self-belief.

Reduced feelings of isolation among parents/caregivers.

Improved understanding of child phase of development.

Strengthened parent/caregiver relationship & communication skills with their child.

Greater awareness of personal hotspots and reflective capacity.

Long term

Improves parental wellbeing, reflective capacity, and attuned interaction.

Stronger family relationships and increased resilience.

Reduced reliance on crisis or statutory services

Improved coordination across health, disability, and family support services

More equitable access to effective early intervention for disabled children and their families

Assumptions:

1. All resources for effective programme delivery are available (Funding, Human resources, Training and Supervision)
2.There are sufficient services with trained practitioners that provide support for meeting the complex needs of children and families.