

Theory of Change: Going
Mellow Parenting Programme

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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.

Problem / Need

Early childhood (birth–3 years) is a critical period for emotional, social, and relational development. Where parents experience adversity including trauma, poor mental health, domestic abuse, isolation, and low confidence, parents can struggle to provide the consistent, attuned care their child needs. Without timely, relationship-based support, difficulties escalate, increasing risks to child wellbeing, family stability, and long-term outcomes.

This directly reflects the GIRFEC focus on early identification and support where children’s wellbeing indicators (particularly Safe, Nurtured, Healthy, and Achieving) are at risk, and the Best Start for Life commitment to strengthening early relationships as the foundation for lifelong outcomes.

Parents referred to Going Mellow are typically living with multiple, overlapping and entrenched adversities, including:

- Current or previous social work or child protection involvement
- Histories of childhood trauma, neglect, or care experience
- Domestic abuse, coercive control, or violence in the home
- Poor mental health, chronic stress, and emotional dysregulation
- Severe social isolation and limited informal support
- Low trust in services

Without targeted, intensive intervention, families experiencing significant adversity are at increased risk of relationship breakdown, poorer child outcomes, ongoing statutory involvement, and intergenerational trauma, placing sustained pressure on child protection, health, and early years systems. 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.

Programme Purpose

Going Mellow consists of targeted programmes for mothers (Mellow Mums) and fathers (Mellow Dads) of babies and toddlers who are experiencing high levels of risk and adversity. The programme brings together three core, integrated components:

- Reflective parent sessions to support emotional processing, insight, and self-regulation
- Supported parent-child activity sessions to practise attuned interaction in real time

- Structured parenting workshops, including strength-based video feedback, to build confidence and reinforce positive change

Going Mellow is a 14-week, intensive, group-based therapeutic parenting intervention designed to:

- Strengthen parent–child relationships
- Improve parental wellbeing and emotional regulation
- Increase reflective capacity in parents affected by trauma and adversity
- Reduce risk and support safer, more stable family environments

The programme is delivered exclusively in a group format.

Target Group

Parents and carers of infants and young children up to 5 years who:

- Are involved with, or at risk of involvement with, social services
- Have experienced significant childhood trauma or loss
- Are living with or recovering from domestic abuse or violence
- Experience high levels of emotional distress or isolation
- Have limited access to safe, consistent support networks
- Require intensive, relationship-based intervention to support parenting capacity

5 Assumptions (Core Mechanisms of Change)

- Parents affected by trauma need time, safety, and repetition to change patterns of relating
- Emotional containment is essential before learning can take place
- Parental well-being and regulation are prerequisites for sensitive caregiving
- Reflective capacity reduces reactive, fear-based parenting responses
- Peer groups reduce isolation and normalise difficult emotions
- Change is more likely when learning is relational, experiential, and practised live

These align with the Mellow Parenting Evaluation Framework domains:

- Parental wellbeing
- Parent-child relationship
- Reflective functioning
- Child social-emotional development

6 Activities (What the Programme Delivers)

- 14 weekly, 5-6 hours group sessions
- Strong focus on emotional safety, trust-building, and containment.
- Therapeutic discussions exploring:
 - Parents' own early experiences of being cared for and how these shape current relationships
 - Parenting in the context of external pressures and service involvement, and the emotional impact this can have on families.

- Psychoeducation on:
 - Child development and emotional needs
 - Co-regulation, routines, and warm boundaries
 - Supported parent-child activities within the group
 - Individualised parent-child video feedback
 - Facilitated peer support and group cohesion

7 Outputs (Immediate Participation)

Parents/carers:

- Attend and participate in the 14-week group programme
- Feel emotionally held, safe, and respected within the group
- Experience reduced isolation and increased peer connection
- Practise new ways of responding to their child
- Engage in reflective conversations about thoughts, feelings, and behaviour
- Begin to identify personal strengths and protective factors

8 Short-Term Outcomes (0-6 months)

Mapped to Mellow Evaluation Framework

Parental Wellbeing

- Reduced emotional distress and stress responses
- Improved emotional awareness and self-regulation
- Increased confidence and emotional literacy

Parent-Child Relationship

- Increased sensitivity and attunement
- Warmer, more positive interactions
- Increase responsive caregiving

Reflective Capacity

- Greater ability to pause and reflect rather than react

- Parents better understand child cues, emotions, and behaviour

Child Social-Emotional Development

- Infants (0-18): calmer behaviour, increased secure-base signals
- Toddlers (19-60): early improvements in emotional regulation

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Medium-Term Outcomes (6-18 Months)

Parental Wellbeing

- Improved coping strategies under stress
- Reduced conflict and escalation in the home

Parent-Child Relationship

- More consistent routines and boundaries
- Increased warmth, playfulness, and repair after rupture

Reflective Capacity

- Parents independently applying strategies in daily life

Child Social-Emotional Development

- Improved emotional regulation and communication
- Reduced behavioural concerns

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Long-Term Impacts (18+ Months)

Child Social-Emotional Development

- Stronger attachment patterns
- Improved emotional, social, and cognitive outcomes
- Fewer behaviour problems, improved co-regulation and communication
- Better readiness for nursery and school

Family Functioning

- Safer, more stable home environments
- Reduced intergenerational trauma patterns
- Increased resilience and confidence in parenting

System-Level Benefits

- Reduced need for ongoing crisis or statutory intervention
- Improved engagement between families and services
- Stronger targeted early-intervention pathways

11 Summary Causal Pathway

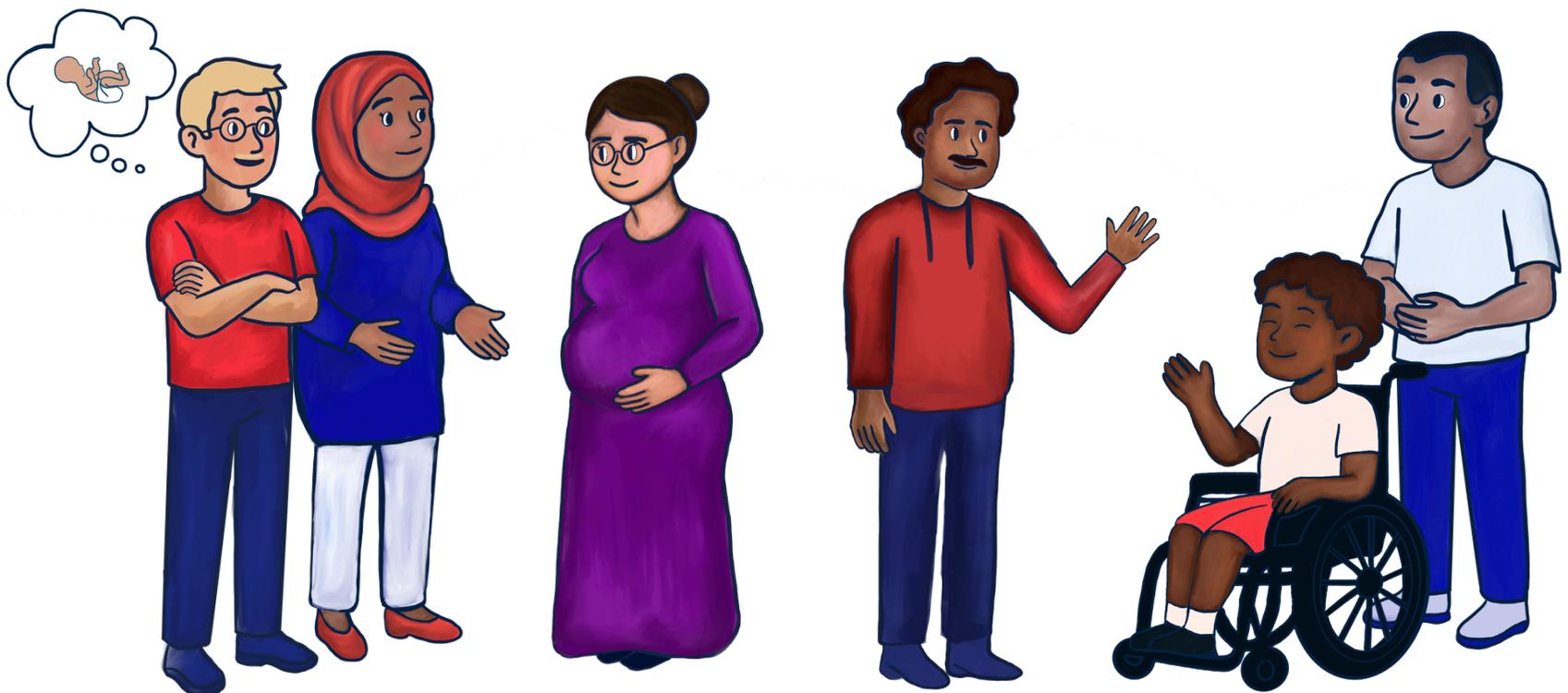
For parents and families experiencing significant adversity and complex support needs, where children's wellbeing indicators are at risk, relationship-based, intensive therapeutic group work:

- Improves parental wellbeing, emotional regulation, and reflective capacity, strengthening parents' capacity to provide safe, nurturing care
- Strengthens parent-child relationships and attachment security, supporting children to be safe, nurtured, and healthy
- Reduces risk and promotes more stable, predictable family environments, aligned with early intervention and prevention priorities
- Leads to improved child outcomes and reduced long-term demand on statutory and universal services



Mellow

all about relationships



FIND OUT MORE AT
www.mellowparenting.org



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