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## Evaluation of the SKIP Community Circus Programme in Dargaville

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# Executive Summary

This report presents the evaluation findings of a community circus programme for preschoolers in Dargaville, provided via a partnership between Circus Kumarani and the Kaipara SKIP programme (Strategies with Kids, Information for Parents).

SKIP<sup>1</sup> is a national programme funded by central government, which works in communities to support parents to build positive relationships with their children. Circus Kumarani was established in 2003 in Dargaville, and uses community circus as a tool for social development. Community circus involves people of all ages and abilities learning circus skills such as juggling, acrobatics, hula hooping, aerials and unicycling, to improve individual and community wellbeing<sup>2</sup>.

Since 2009, during school term time Circus Kumarani and SKIP Kaipara have provided weekly one hour circus skills sessions for children aged 0-5. This involves a Circus Kumarani teacher (Adrian) working alongside the Kaipara SKIP Coordinator (Yvette) to teach circus skills and creative play and share SKIP's positive parenting strategies.

The objectives of the programme are for children and their parents/carers to learn and have fun together, for children to learn new skills and increase their confidence, motor and social skills, to connect families in the community and support the uptake of SKIP parenting strategies. It is a requirement of the programme that a parent or carer attend and join in the activities with their child/ren.

This small scale evaluation describes this programme, who is coming and why, perceived benefits and impacts for all involved and how the programme could be improved. Evaluation methods were a joint face to face interview with Adrian and Yvette and feedback from 13 parents/carers; eight through face to face or phone interviews and five via feedback forms.

The average class size is 13 children and 8 parents or carers. The majority of children participating are aged 2-3 years, though some babies and four year olds attend. Ethnicity information is not gathered.

Key features of the programme are that it actively brings parents/carers together in creative and active play; provides a safe, friendly, supportive and encouraging environment to learn new skills; and takes a role modelling approach to positive parenting and discipline.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.skip.org.nz](http://www.skip.org.nz).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.circuskumarani.co.nz](http://www.circuskumarani.co.nz) for more on Circus Kumarani and to access research on community circus in New Zealand and internationally, including a literature review on community circus entitled *Building Character and Community – Community Circus, A Literature Review*, April 2012, R. Trotman.



Parents and carers tend to hear about the programme through friends, the SKIP Coordinator or SKIP Facebook page, or via Circus Kumarani. Parents/carers are attracted to the programme because it provides something different, supports children to take calculated risks, is free and regular, is active and includes parents, provides a safe, friendly and welcoming environment and because their children are interested in it. The benefits for the children described below were the main reasons given for continuing to attend the programme.

Perceived benefits for children are increased confidence and willingness to try new things, socialisation and trust building, moderation of difficult behaviour, managed risk taking and positive and fun interaction between children and adults. Children also learn to take turns, cooperate and follow instructions. The greatest changes noticed by parents/carers in their children that they attribute to the programme are increased confidence and willingness to try new things.

Perceived benefits for parents and carers who attend are learning to be a better parent, an opportunity to play and have fun with their children, making friends, trying new things, learning new skills and seeing their children progress.

Wider reported community benefits include increasing social connections in the community, providing a place for parents with young children to go and raising the profile of SKIP and Circus Kumarani.

Opportunities for improvement include having more equipment for the children, simpler activities for younger children, more information on SKIP available, better flooring and mats, giving more encouragement than praise, incorporating a general educational component, a bigger space and more classes so that more children and families can experience this programme.

Yvette and Adrian feel that the opportunity exists to build an outreach programme to reach more children and families or proactively bring them to the Kumarani offices.

Yvette and Adrian would like to see this kind of programme implemented within the early childhood curriculum, with funded support for circus skills teaching in early childhood centres. Circus activity holds strong appeal to most children, and they consider that this type of programme is especially beneficial for children with disabilities or learning and behavioural difficulties, as it is fun, cooperative, confidence building, gets children and parents/carers interacting and appeals to children.

Another opportunity is for playcentres to bring their children to Circus Kumarani and for Circus Kumarani to strengthen its preschool focus, perhaps by providing afternoon circus sessions for preschoolers. All of this is funding dependent, yet is not perceived to be funding intensive.

This preschool circus programme is now considered to be 'embedded' in Dargaville. To reach more children and families and produce greater benefits, opportunities for funded growth can be explored by the two partners involved – SKIP and Circus Kumarani.

Parents, carers, SKIP and Circus Kumarani support the continuation and expansion of this programme.



# Introduction

This report presents the evaluation findings of a community circus programme for preschoolers provided by Circus Kumarani, in partnership with the Kaipara Strategies with Kids, Information for Parents (SKIP) programme in Dargaville.

The evaluation of this programme was funded by the Lotteries Community Sector Research Fund, as part of a wider research project seeking to support the development of community circus in New Zealand. This research project is a partnership involving Circus Kumarani in Dargaville and researchers' Rachael Trotman and Alex Woodley<sup>3</sup>.

## Background

Strategies with Kids, Information for Parents (SKIP) provides support, information and parenting strategies for parents and caregivers of 0-5 year olds<sup>4</sup>. SKIP aims to build the capability of communities to support parents to build positive relationships with their children. Many areas of New Zealand have a local SKIP Coordinator, who works with local communities and organisations to further this aim.

The SKIP Coordinator for the Kaipara area including Dargaville is Yvette Gilchrist<sup>5</sup>. In 2009 Yvette connected with Circus Kumarani and a joint venture was established to provide weekly one hour circus skills sessions for 0-5 years olds and their parent/carer, at the Circus Kumarani centre in Dargaville township. These sessions run during school term time and provide an opportunity for children to use circus disciplines such as balancing and juggling to develop physical and social skills alongside their parent or carer, and for parents and carers to learn SKIP parenting strategies. The class is based around the six principles of SKIP<sup>6</sup>.

Since the classes began in 2009, occasional outreach circus sessions have been held in Ruawai and other locations, to try and connect with a wider range of families. Several playgroups have also come to the Kumarani offices and participated, including a Tongan playgroup and Te Kopuru Playcentre. This evaluation focuses on classes held in Dargaville at the Kumarani centre.

Up to 20 children aged 0 to 5 years attend each class, plus their parent/carer. Most children attending are aged 2 or 3 years, with a generally balanced gender mix and an

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<sup>3</sup> See the Circus Kumarani [www.circuskumarani.co.nz](http://www.circuskumarani.co.nz) and Auckland Community Circus [www.communitycircus.co.nz](http://www.communitycircus.co.nz) websites for research findings to date. These relate to an online survey of the New Zealand community circus sector (2011) a literature review on community circus (2012), stakeholder interviews with national and international community circus experts (2012), and evaluations of three other circus programmes (2012).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.skip.org.nz/> for more on SKIP.

<sup>5</sup> Yvette is based at Kaipara Abuse Prevention Inc, she can be reached on skipkaipara@gmail.com or phone 09 4397009.

<sup>6</sup> These are love and warmth, talking and listening, guidance and understanding, limits and boundaries, consistency and consequences, a structured and secure world.

ethnicity profile reported to reflect that of Dargaville, though no record is kept of the children's ethnicity. The programme is funded through SKIP Kaipara; this covers the Kumarani teacher's time and is small scale funding.

## Programme objectives

The programme integrates positive parenting strategies with active and creative play for children and parents/carers to experience together. The objectives of the SKIP circus programme in Dargaville are as follows.

- Provide an opportunity for children and their parents/caregivers to learn and have fun together.
- Teach the children some new skills.
- Build the children's confidence, body awareness, communication and social skills, motor skills and self-esteem.
- Connect parents and families with others in their local community.
- Teach and support the uptake of SKIP parenting strategies.

Attendance at the programme is free and voluntary, with no pressure to attend.



## Objectives of this evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to describe the SKIP circus programme and identify what participants of the programme gain from it. Specific objectives are to identify:

1. Who is coming to the programme and why.
2. Perceived benefits and impacts of the programme, for children, parents/carers and the wider community.
3. How the programme could be improved.

## Methods

The methods utilised were as follows.

Method	Description
1. Key informant interview	On 1 May 2012 a joint face to face interview was held with the Kaipara SKIP Coordinator and Circus Kumarani teacher of the SKIP circus programme. The aim was to gain background on the programme and their views on its impact, benefits, ideal future and potential improvements.
2. Feedback from parents/carers	Face to face interviews were held during August and September 2012 with eight parents/carers attending the classes with children. A further five parents/carers completed a short feedback form in April 2012. The feedback was focused around what people liked about the programme, impacts and benefits for children, themselves and the wider community, and what could be improved.



Feedback from the key informants was collected by the author and from the parents and carers by the Circus Kumarani Project Manager.



# Findings

The findings present the key informants' perceptions of the programme and those of the parents and carers interviewed.

## Key informant interview

The joint interview involved Yvette the Kaipara SKIP Coordinator and Adrian, the male teacher of the circus skills SKIP sessions. During the weekly hour long sessions on Tuesday mornings 10.30 – 11.30am during school term time, Yvette and Adrian work together leading children and parents/carers through circus activities and integrating parenting tools, tips and strategies throughout.

The space at Kumarani is limited and activities are sometimes adapted to take this into consideration. Yvette and Adrian note that the sessions create a safe, friendly, supportive environment for children and parents/carers to learn new skills and play together.

A core feature of the programme is the requirement for parents/carers to actively take part and interact with their child/ren, rather than drop them off or sit on the sideline. The children reportedly love seeing their parent/carer having a go at circus activities and interacting physically with them.

Thus a role modelling approach is taken by the programme, with parents and carers becoming teachers and trying things: "Kids light up when parents do a roly poly". This can be a challenge for shy parents too but their children get to see them giving things a go and are more likely to try things themselves. Yvette and Adrian also role model positive parenting and discipline strategies and encourage parents and carers to pick them up.

The programme is considered to be parent friendly, with attendance voluntary. Some families come occasionally and others attend every week.

Common things witnessed from the programme are described by Yvette and Adrian as follows.

- Shy children coming out of their shells and becoming the 'star' of the circus – confidence building
- Difficult behaviour lessening and moderated as activities are cooperative and occur in a relaxed environment
- Children becoming more willing to try something new and responding well to seeing their parent or carer playing and trying things.

Benefits for the children are perceived as follows:

- Confidence
- Motor skills
- A safe environment, warm, caring and secure
- The children see their parent/adults playing
- Positive interaction with other children, making friends
- Able to try things they don't tend to have at home (such as diabolos, hula hoops and walking on big globe balls)
- Managed risk taking
- Their parents are given strategies for positively managing behaviour
- Acceptance of or acceptance from others, including children with behavioural issues or disabilities

Having a male circus teacher is seen as a positive, especially for children who don't have a father or a positive male role model, as they get to experience a nurturing male figure.

Perceived benefits for the parents and carers who attend are as follows.

- Positive parenting strategies to use with their kids
- Networking with others, making friends
- An opportunity to play with their children and interact positively with them
- Learning new skills, fitness
- Learning with their children and mutual respect

Wider reported community impacts include increasing connections in the community and among families, raising the profile of circus and attracting other children to circus, as children show what they have learnt to others.

Key needs or opportunities for improvement for the programme include having more equipment for the children, a bigger space, having the programme at different times (ie more than one session a week), providing afternoon sessions and including a more general educational component.

Opportunities have been taken to bring in various sectors of the community, for example Te Kopuru Playcentre and a Tongan playgroup came to Circus Kumarani for one session, and the programme has been taken to other communities outside of Dargaville, for example Ruawai. Greater co-operation with early childhood centres and expanding the programme into these centres was seen as an opportunity for the programme. At present some parents take their children out of kindergarten to come to the programme but this has implications for the families and the Kindergarten if it occurs on a regular basis.

For Yvette, the ideal scenario would be for this kind of programme to be implemented across the early childhood curriculum, with funded support for circus skills teaching in early childhood centres. This kind of programme is considered to be especially beneficial for children with learning and behavioural difficulties, in terms of the way it builds confidence, gets children and parents interacting and creates a supportive environment to try new things.

In Dargaville, Yvette would like to see kindergartens and playcentres bringing their children to Circus Kumarani for circus sessions. Adrian would also like to see further development of Circus Kumarani's work with preschoolers. This work could have wider implications - the potential exists for the SKIP organisation and the early childhood sector to integrate circus skills learning into their programmes.

This SKIP circus class is now seen as being embedded in Dargaville. No further advertising is needed as participation is often at capacity for the building, but for the programme to grow a bigger space and more teachers and funding is required, though this is not considered a resource intensive programme.

Adrian notes that Circus Kumarani is regularly asked to provide classes for free and that what they can offer always comes back to the need for sustainable funding streams.



## Feedback from parents/carers

*"I feel it is an environment where the children feel safe and can express themselves. It empowers them and is challenging and fun. We just love it!"*

This section summarises the feedback on the programme from the eight parents/carers interviewed and those who completed feedback forms (13 people in all).

The parents and carers interviewed had been attending from between almost four years (the start of the programme) to the last four months. Most had had one or two children participating in the programme, though one caregiver of 8 children had had four children taking part in the programme. Regularity of attendance ranged from weekly to around once a month, though most were regular attendees either fortnightly or weekly.

These parents and carers heard about the programme through one of the following avenues:

- From a friend
- Directly via the SKIP Coordinator or SKIP Kaipara on Facebook
- Personal contact with Circus Kumarani staff
- Through seeing signs and attendance at other Circus Kumarani activities

### **What attracted you to the programme?**

Key reasons given for being attracted to the programme are that it provides something different for children to do, takes children out of their comfort zone, provides good socialising, is free and regular, is active and includes parents, provides variety, is a friendly and welcoming environment and that children are interested in it.

Knowing someone who already attended attracted several parents, including one father who had heard that other dads go along.

### **What keeps you attending?**

*"Crazy people providing awesome stuff for kids".*

*"My daughter enjoys it. It's kinda cool knowing that it is pretty unique to Dargaville."*

*"My boy says – come on Dad let's go to circus!"*

The fun and enjoyment the children experience was the main reason given for continuing to come to the programme. "My boys love it so much. I really enjoy the excitement they get out of it." Some parents noted that their child/ren ask to come and talk about it at home.

The family-like atmosphere was a drawcard, plus being able to get involved, the quality of the teaching and encouragement given, the fact that it is a small group, that it is something unique to do and that the children build confidence and learn new skills.

### **What has your child gained from the classes?**

*"My under two year old has developed confidence, self-esteem, socialising and trust. She stayed in her pushchair and screamed when approached by the teacher – now she initiates contact and communication with the teacher and other adults."*

The main benefits for children noted were increased confidence, learning new skills, improving their motor skills and fitness, communication skills, learning to take turns, learning to interact with and trust others, becoming more independent, learning to cooperate and follow instructions, making friends and good social contact for children and adults alike.

### **Any changes you have noticed in the children that you can attribute to the programme?**

The greatest change they had noticed for their children from the programme was increased confidence and trying new things:

*"Confidence, greater self-esteem."*

*"Confidence to go out into the group – which for him is a big thing!"*

*"Confidence in trying new things, exploring beyond his boundaries"*

*"More confident, not afraid to try new things. "*

One parent noted that circus skills advance children in their development, by making their neurons connect faster and stronger. Another parent noted that their children had better balance and coordination and played games at home that they play at the circus.

### **What do you like most about the programme?**

*"People don't laugh at you, they encourage you to have a go."*

*"It provides people with a sense of belonging and a place that is safe."*

*"The staff have made the effort to learn the children's names and interests which makes them feel important, special and in a safe environment."*

Things people most liked were learning and trying new things, the social interaction, safety and intimacy of the group due to its small size, the easy going and non-judgemental, family oriented atmosphere and the people who run the programme. The programme includes parent and child bonding, provides boundaries and rules, everyone

can express their opinions and ideas, people learn alongside each other and there is good support and an encouraging network.

### **What could be improved/changes/added**

The main suggestion was the need for a bigger space as it sometimes got crowded in the current premises and more people could come to a larger space. Other suggestions were:

- Better flooring and more mats
- Simpler activities for younger children
- More information on SKIP
- More encouragement rather than praise
- More diabolo for the older children

### **What have you personally got out of the programme?**

*"I am inspired each week by the role-modelling of both Adrian and Yvette in how they relate to the children and the way they interact with the children. They are both passionate about their work and it is infectious. Their enthusiasm is contagious. I am a better parent because of their encouragement, listening ear and advice."*

*"Time with my boy. We can do stuff together and he talks about it after."*

Parents and carers noted gaining enjoyment from seeing the children and adults having fun. They liked to see the increased confidence in the children and their willingness to try new things. Several parents noted making new friends, becoming less shy themselves in new situations and more open to trying new things.

Learning more strategies for parenting was noted by two people, as was having a place the children could go that is safe and encouraging.

### **Any impacts to the wider community?**

*"Being better parents has got to have an impact on the community."*

*"Happy kids – confident kids!"*

Wider community impacts reported include being better parents, connecting with other people in the community, developing positive relationships and providing a safe place for people with young children to go. Suggestions made were to expand the programme and bring more people in:

*"They [other people] should come and check it out because they will like it – instead of moaning that there is nothing to do. I was like that – used to moan there was nowhere to take my kid."*

*"More kids could come and learn new things. They might get interested in something and want to learn it more when they are older. It's a good thing for our little town."*

Several people suggested promoting the programme more widely, via the newspaper and Dargaville Facebook page.

*"It's a good opportunity for the whole community to have this facility and the programme in Dargaville and not every town has the opportunity."*



## Conclusion

This evaluation describes a small, innovative programme that is highly valued by its providers and participants and considered an asset in the Dargaville community. The findings point to significant benefits from the programme for children and parents, which ripple out into the wider community.

The key issue raised by this evaluation is whether there are the resources necessary to continue and/or expand this programme through finding larger premises, creating partnerships with early childhood centres and/or providing this programme in an outreach capacity. Opportunity exists to bring circus skills teaching into mainstream early childhood education and to 'bring the circus' to hard to reach children and families, via SKIP, Circus Kumarani and community circus providers nationally.

