

# empowering parents for healthier kids and stronger families

IWK researchers are developing innovative programs that give parents tools and support to address their children's mental health problems. If left untreated, these could lead to more serious problems down the road. Their goal: healthier, happier, stronger families and kids with brighter futures.

## 'THERE'S MORE LAUGHTER AND CLOSENESS'

**Owen Chandler** is a super-enthusiastic, energetic and engaging eight-year-old with a knack for having fun. But there was little time or energy for fun before his mother adopted the parenting strategies behind the *Strongest Families* program.

"Everything was a struggle," says **Lesli Chandler** of Owen's everyday behaviour. "It would take two hours to get ready for school and meals were a major challenge. We were both frustrated and stressed out."

Lesli was feeling hopeless, but then a friend told her about *Strongest Families*, a parenting program developed by psychology researchers at the IWK. She decided to take part in a three-month pilot test of a coach-led parenting group conducted entirely by phone.

"The coach put us at ease and the parents in the group felt comfortable sharing their stories," says Lesli. "I discovered there wasn't anything wrong with Owen or myself and learned specific ways to avoid problems and encourage positive behaviours. Our relationship is much better now and we're both so much happier."



**Dr. Patricia Lingley-Pottie** has shown that parents and children develop strong bonds with telephone coaches through the *Strongest Families* program. This distance program removes barriers that make it difficult for families to complete mental health treatment.

## SUPPORT FOR STRONGER FAMILIES JUST A PHONE CALL AWAY

*Untreated childhood mental health problems can track into adulthood and lead to serious social, emotional and economic consequences.* That's why researchers at the IWK are creating practical programs that help families overcome these problems while their children are young—without the cost, inconvenience, wait times, or stigma of seeing a therapist at a mental health clinic.

"Essentially, we're taking the care to families in their homes at times that work for them," says **Dr. Patricia Lingley-Pottie**. She is a researcher and clinical manager of *Strongest Families*, a distance treatment program that provides evidence-based educational modules and regular telephone coaching sessions to help families effectively deal with such problems as anxiety and attention-deficit and disruptive-behaviour disorders, as well as nighttime bedwetting and recurrent pain.

Patricia started with *Strongest Families* in 2001, when it launched as a Canadian Institutes of Health Research-funded pilot project called '*Family Help*.' As research co-ordinator, she worked alongside project lead **Dr. Patrick McGrath** to design and test the various elements of the program. She later began her own research, with support from an IWK Research Services scholarship, and successfully defended her PhD thesis in March 2011.

"I wanted to know if the telephone allowed coaches and families to develop a strong therapeutic bond," says Patricia, explaining that the bond between therapist and client has a major impact on the success of mental health interventions.

Patricia has found that telephone contact can actually enhance the bond between coaches and families. "The telephone removes barriers between people that appearances can create," she explains. "It also allows people to feel anonymous, so they open up and share without fear of being judged."

For struggling families, such comfortable and convenient support can make all the difference between completing a treatment and dropping out. "*Strongest Families* was designed to identify and remove barriers to care," Patricia says. "As a result, our dropout rate is less than 10 per cent and families report high levels of satisfaction."



## BETTER NIGHTS, BETTER DAYS

**Dr. Penny Corkum**—along with her graduate students, **Jenn Vriend** and **Fiona Davidson**—has learned that even an hour less sleep than normal can substantially decrease children's ability to focus, learn and control their behaviour next day. "This is especially true if the child already faces learning or behavioural challenges," she says. "To compound the problem, children with mental or physical health issues are more likely to have trouble falling and staying asleep." Penny is now leading a national \$2 million Canadian Institutes of Health Research-funded multi-centre trial of an Internet-based treatment intervention. It provides parents with strategies for managing their children's behaviours and routines so children with sleep problems get the shut-eye they need.