

Getting answers for worried parents

When a retired engineer noticed more parents struggling with complex issues, he took it upon himself to track down experts to answer those questions. **Mariné Lourens** spoke with him.



Bruce Penny created Listening to Families, a website with videos answering questions from parents navigating a range of health challenges for their kids. IAIN MCGREGOR/THE PRESS

Bruce Penny might be retired, but the 75-year-old former engineer is not idly spending his time fishing, gardening or lounging about the house. Instead, the Christchurch man spends his days helping families navigate various mental and physical health issues by finding expert answers to the questions that keep them up at night.

About three years ago, Penny created a website, Listening to Families, featuring videos covering numerous topics in which health experts answer questions from real parents. The aim was to provide a free and accessible space where parents can get their questions answered about issues they struggle with but have no-one to ask for advice.

The topics are varied but are all within the realm of mental and physical health – from ADHD, autism, trauma and school attendance to eczema, allergies and eating

challenges. Penny said the idea for the website came during the end of his career after he had left civil engineering and worked as a facilitator in the health sector for a decade. He would constantly come across parents struggling with issues and nowhere to turn for answers.

With a health sector increasingly under pressure, finding your way to the top of a waitlist to have a consultation with a doctor, psychologist or other health worker has become more difficult. When you do get the opportunity to see someone, time is usually limited, he said.

“When you meet with a clinician you get your 15-minute consultation and because they’re pushed for time, by no fault of their own, the majority of that time is spent

talking at you. It’s very hard to absorb all that information, let alone relay it to your partner when you get home, which is what really troubled me.”

The first ideas for topics came from people he met who opened up about the challenges their family was facing. “I started asking them to tell me what the questions were that crossed their mind at 2 o’clock in the morning when they were tossing and turning, and I’ll see if I can get them answered.”

Using his connections in the health industry, Penny would find an expert who would be able to answer these questions and ask them if they’d be willing to film the answers on video. He said to this day he has never asked someone to help who has refused. Over time the videos on the

website increased to more than 60 topics – and Penny said he has a list of over 20 topics more that he still needs to get to.

“There is nothing on the horizon to say that the problems we’re facing as a community are not going to continue to increase at an increasing rate. So the demand for content that will help families support their children is just accelerating.”

Recently, the videos have been turned into podcasts, introduced by Jason Gunn, and are now available on Spotify, Apple Music and the Listening to Families website. “The difficulty is that people are busy and they haven’t got the time to sit down and watch a video, but they have got time to listen to a podcast as they’re driving to or from work or busy around their home. So the transition from video to podcast was to make the content more accessible,” said Penny.

He is adamant he is not the one who deserves the praise for the success of Listening to Families. If it weren’t for “a whole group of people” getting behind the project, it would not have been possible, he said.

This includes the Māia Health Foundation who assists with funding, Stephanie Rolinson and Hoon Hay Te Kura Kōaka deputy principal Emma Worsfold, and Penny’s 14-year-old grandson Will Penny who helps with the IT side of things.

Every family who has contributed questions and every expert who has selflessly offered up their time to answer them, all play a part in achieving the ultimate goal – helping families. “We’re not out trying to save the world,” said Penny. “We’ve got very modest aspirations and that is if we can help one family today, if we can reduce the risk for one mum or dad, then that is already good enough.”

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