

Sleep-deprived mums Kate Barclay-Sellers with baby Angus and Michelle van Duyker with baby Alexander share a laugh at Tresillian in Wollstonecraft. Picture: Renee Nowytarger



Happy families



Tresillian may be pitched as a sleep school for babies, but it's also a lifeline for their parents. Renata Gortan reports

New parents will attest there's a reason sleep deprivation is used as a form of torture. While broken sleep is expected at the start, it becomes a health issue when it happens for an extended period of time.

Michelle van Duyker's son, Alexander, was waking up to five times a night at 10 months. When the 38-year-old from Cammeray burst into tears in her GP's office, he referred her to Tresillian.

The early parenting support service in Wollstonecraft is colloquially known as a sleep school for babies, but it helps with everything from breastfeeding to sleep issues and challenging toddler behaviour.

Van Duyker booked into the four-day, five-night residential program where nurses and medical professionals observe mothers with their children. She believes Tresillian wasn't for Alexander, it was for her.

"They're training me as well as him," she says.

"It's more for the parents than it is for the baby. We need help. It's just a fancy loony bin for sleep-deprived mothers and fathers.

"I'd heard of Tresillian from my midwife at Royal North Shore but didn't think about it again until my doctor referred me. At the time, I couldn't finish a sentence, my memory was completely shot, I had severe mood swings and was arguing with my partner. It had a huge impact on my daily life."

The new flagship centre at Wollstonecraft will be able to help a lot more families like van Duyker's.

The \$16.4m development includes a 14-bed residential facility operating seven days a week, common dining, recreation and child play areas and expanded day services for parents and their children.

According to Tresillian's 2023 annual report, the website received 598,800 visits, the helpline had 15,890 calls, and there were 2200 telehealth consultations and about 5000 residential visits.

Tresillian was established by the NSW government and children's charities in 1918 when the infant mortality rate was 10 per cent. Officially called the Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and Babies, it became known as Tresillian because of the nameplate on the front door of the first property it worked out of.

Tresillian chief executive Rob Mills says that what started as a sleep, health and settling school more than 100 years ago has evolved into a facility looking after the entire family's mental health.

"We see families coming in for admission and struggling for answers around sleep and settling, but we often identify some level of postnatal depression and anxiety, which affects a parent's ability to

parent," he says. "It's almost a chicken and egg scenario – it's hard to see where it starts off."

Tresillian's headquarters had been in Willoughby for 96 years, but the facility had seen better days. The new flagship, funded by a combination of a NSW government grant of \$500,000, donations, philanthropy, Tresillian fundraising activities and proceeds from the sale of Tresillian's Willoughby site, is located on its Wollstonecraft property. Historic Carpenter House was donated to Tresillian in 1940 by Sir Walter and Lady Carpenter.

The facility expanded from 12 beds operating weekdays to 14 beds operating seven days a week.

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Rob Mills,
Tresillian chief executive

"It means we can see 90 per cent more families than we could at Willoughby," Mills says. "We've seen better attendance by dads, the rooms have queen-size beds so if they have to work during the day they can come in at night or on weekends. Both parents need to learn the skills needed and support each other."

Amazingly, the statewide service is covered by Medicare. Access to Tresillian's team of doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers and more is free.

"We're an early parenting service that provides support and education around the first 2000 days of a child's life, from postnatal to the preschool years, where we know we are going to make the most difference in developing the family unit and forming strong bonds of attachment," Mills says. "We provide education and support on how to meet their goals as parents."

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Kate Barclay-Sellers, 41, from Cherrybrook opted for a four-night residential stay in November with her son Angus, 17 months.

She says Tresillian didn't just offer practical help, but also emotional support.

"I needed someone to keep me honest in the night, when I was most vulnerable, exhausted and emotional," she says.

"They taught me good settling techniques that we still implement. The nurses supported me in being firm and holding that boundary when I needed to, told me when to step in and how long to leave it.

"Having experts there meant the indecision and doubt was taken away from me and I felt more confident.

"You get so caught up just surviving that being able to have all of this support with nurses who've seen it all means you don't feel so alone. They know what they are doing, what works, when to change it up and the different strategies.

"I really want to encourage mums to consider these services. It's so important we talk about how being a mum is hard, but there is support out there."

Residential nurse unit manager Fran Kenna says Tresillian has a child-focused point of view and offers education to help parents follow a child's lead.

"Although babies cannot say what they want or need, they are programmed to communicate using much more subtle cues, often before they start crying. We help parents to observe and read these cues, so they can meet their child's needs earlier," Kenna says.

"We help parents observe these communication cues, by watching the baby with them. For example, in a play or feeding session the baby starts to show signs of tiredness through a subtle look away, grimace to the face or twisting of their body. By working alongside and helping parents to notice their



Cammeray mum Michelle van Duyker with baby Alexander, now 14 months old, and nurse Cheryl Madden at Tresillian. Picture: Renee Nowytarger

baby's body language, we can help them to understand what their child is trying to say to them."

Kenna likens Tresillian to the village modern mothers are missing – albeit one based on research.

"Families are inundated with parenting information through social media and Google, however we find families are looking for an evidenced-based approach," she says.

"The nurses and midwives working at Tresillian have specialised qualifications in child and

family health nursing, often including additional qualifications in other relevant specialty areas such as lactation or mental health.

"Sometimes parents arrive for help for an issue and discover when working with the nurse that there was a completely different reason for the presenting issue than they thought."

Like all research, sleep strategies change constantly and Kenna says one of the biggest myths is that Tresillian uses the "cry it out"

method, where babies are left to cry until they fall asleep.

"We know that ignoring a baby's communication cues is detrimental to many aspects of their development, including the developing relationship between the parent and infant," she says.

"Some parents arrive at Tresillian believing they will be supported to learn 'control crying', which is certainly not the case. Control crying has been demonstrated through scientific research to be

damaging to infant brain development.

"We help parents to recognise their child's tired signs and help them support their child learn to go to sleep through what is called responsive settling, which involves being present and available to respond to their child's needs for as long as their child needs. We know this supports healthy brain development, future independence and lifelong positive, healthy relationships."



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