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**Working On-line – developing on-line support groups for stepfamilies**

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(I acknowledge with thanks the contributions of Nicole Millis Project Worker, and Kylie Moore Locum Project Worker, SAVI Online Program through many discussions and reviewing an earlier draft of this paper.)

**Introduction**

This presentation describes SAVI's work in progress in connecting families into a virtual stepfamily community, implementing the Victorian Government sponsored *My Connected Community* (MC2) program, which is part of its larger focus in developing strategies to enhance community access to the on-line environment.

SAVI plans to develop 15 support and discussion groups for stepfamilies, and professionals working with them, over a 2-year period from February 2002. A volunteer moderator will facilitate each group. This presentation reflects our work and reflection to date about possible applications and challenges this program and its technology may have. In keeping with the theme of this conference, SAVI believes this program represents a step forward in resourcing stepfamilies' survival needs for validation and empowerment.

**Why Stepfamilies?**

Stepfamilies are often compared unfavourably with nuclear families as a deficient version of mum, dad and the kids, rather than being understood as a unique family form with its own needs and possibilities. Stepfamilies have always existed, but are increasingly common in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as 46% of marriages fail and 1 in 3 marriages is a remarriage. In addition, one third of stepfamily couples do not formally marry (ABS: 1997,2000)

- Few targeted resources exist for stepfamilies, and they often feel isolated and invisible.
- Their experience is officially discounted and invisible as most are not counted in the census – only those where children 'live-in' (7%), not those where children visit (SAVI estimates an additional 13%).
- Stepfamilies are complex, and they function differently from nuclear or sole parent families.
- Building their new family can be a bewildering process.
- They have high needs for education and for accurate information.

The Stepfamily Association of Victoria Inc. (SAVI) is a community-based organisation which commenced 21 years ago to help stepfamilies survive and grow. SAVI develops and provides information, support, and education resources for stepfamilies, and training for professionals.

SAVI sees its role as a service provider, and as a social catalyst working to increase social capital, to create understanding, empowerment, successful families, and a more supportive social environment.

**Why online services?**

Delivering information services on line is fast becoming accepted practice in Australia. On line courses are also being encouraged by government in post-secondary education in

contentious and less developed in relation to counselling and support based services. SAVI has been interested for several years in exploring the potential of on-line services.

A key issue for SAVI is how to deliver support over distance to families who may be geographically and/or socially isolated. With minimal funding available, any program has to be cost-efficient as well as producing effective outcomes.

This project offered the potential to link participants across distance from rural, regional and remote settings, and from metropolitan regions who are not able to access targeted stepfamily support services to help them survive. It also offered potential to link people who may be reluctant to talk about their issues face-to-face.

Our research revealed one Australian online group, Ausprem, which after 2 years of planning developed a successful online support group for parents with children born prematurely, based on a similar international group Preemie-L. Ausprem was used as a model for the MC2 program.

In their experience,

“The way online groups develop is organic ... They flourish if the time is right, the need is there, the energy of people who care about it continues to sustain it, and if the rules and culture of the group are evolved by the group ... rather than being imposed” (Casey, 2001)

White (2001) sees engagement and reciprocity as the essential ingredients in developing a sense of community online.

We believed stepfamilies could potentially meet these criteria. What we needed to know was were there any other necessary conditions, and would the website structure offered through MC2 work, within the time frame and resources available?

**Our goals** were to

- Develop an *online community* able to link isolated stepfamily members and provide an opportunity for them to raise their concerns or celebrate their family’s experiences
- Provide an online forum for professionals in the community dealing with stepfamily issues

**Our objectives** were to

- Identify, develop and resource 15 discussion and support groups over 2 years, using e-mail forums and other web-based resources such as chat-rooms
- Recruit, train and resource volunteer Moderators for each group
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the program in meeting stepfamilies’ needs for information and support

## **Planning**

Funding translated into less than one day per week for a project worker over 2 years.

The program was divided into 4 stages:

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|----------|--|
| Stage 1. | Develop program policy and volunteer training documents            |
|          | Prioritise first 6 groups  |
|          | Recruit and train moderators, implement and evaluate groups        |
| Stage 2. | Recruit and train moderators, implement and evaluate next 5 groups |

Stage 4. Maintain program, monitor and evaluate

Technical support to train project staff and volunteers was to be provided by MC2 staff. (Any community group can access this training, and the MC2 program at [www.mc2.vicnet.net.au](http://www.mc2.vicnet.net.au) )

### **Potential groups**

Based on issues which service users presented in education programs and telephone support calls over the last 21 years, a list of potential groups was developed, including

- ‘Welcome to SAVI’ open group
- Stepmothers and Stepfathers, Long Distance Parenting, caregiver mothers and fathers
- Teens and adult children of stepfamilies
- Culturally and linguistically different stepfamilies
- Repartnering issues in later life
- Stepfamily education course participants
- Moderators and SAVI members
- Stepfamily counsellors and educators

We expected that

- Membership would fluctuate and groups would change over time
- Some groups might require more effort to start up than others
- The project would have the flexibility to make any necessary adjustments

We planned to evaluate the project on the groups’ outcomes for participants, the effectiveness of the MC2 model, and the groups levels of activity.

### **Implementation – How have we gone about this?**

All of us - project staff, volunteers and participants - have felt that we are ‘feeling our way’ in a somewhat unfamiliar virtual environment, unfamiliar particularly for service delivery.

The MC2 program is also in its infancy – SAVI is in the first round of projects funded, and only one other project partner also has a focus on providing social and emotional support. This collaboration and our limited information about Ausprem and Premmie-L, have been our limited sources of practice wisdom.

Given that for SAVI this was a new program adapting to a different environment for delivery, we aimed to be very thorough in developing policy and training guidelines. Following the Ausprem model, we chose to implement initial groups as a trial, with publicity limited to our contact list. (This also appears to be the approach MC2 program managers have taken, as there seems to have been little broad PR for the website.) This allowed time for a group to emerge organically, time for us to assess the usefulness of the model as a vehicle for providing support for stepfamilies, and to road test our procedures and understanding of the internet medium.

Project Worker: Core roles for the project worker have been developing program guidelines and training, resourcing new moderators, developing groups and adding information to the website, ongoing technical mastery of the MC2 site as it evolves, problem solving issues as they arise, and monitoring the program’s development.

Moderators: In keeping with the MC2 Code of Conduct, we have defined their roles as to

- encourage discussion online and
- ensure the group is as safe an environment as is possible.

We are still evaluating what level of commitment is required, and are currently requesting moderators to actively spend a minimum of one hour a week over two sessions, responding to participants, and adding content to their group. We have learned that our limited resources mean we need moderators to have good internet skills, as well as specialist stepfamily skills and knowledge, making them a challenge to recruit.

### **After 12 months**

We are less advanced in program delivery than we had initially planned. However from our trial we are clear that the program as we have set it up does work.

Three groups have been very active – our Welcome group, largely for information dissemination; the Stepmums group, which is growing fast, and offers a well used self-help / support forum; and our Moderators group, which provides training, support and networking for our widely dispersed team of moderators. Several additional moderators have been recruited and other groups are commencing – Men in Stepfamilies, SAVI Members, Stepfamily Education Course participants and Stepfamily Educators.

Participation is taking some time to build up, which we understand is not unusual for new sites and groups. We can now promote not just an idea, but a real program offering real benefits. We believe we now have a sound basis for promoting the groups more widely.

‘Welcome to SAVI’ is an open group, to which anyone can log in, read content and post messages. Other groups are ‘closed’, with membership required. Members receive an email welcoming them, and inviting them to introduce themselves when they first log in to the group. This enhances the group environment, and promotes a sense of safety and confidentiality.

Our experience with the *Stepmums Group* resonates with Casey and Hardy’s (1998) description of the value and efficacy of the Ausprem mailing list. They describe list members

- desperate for information
- ‘looking for survivors of the experience to tell them that they too will survive’
- looking for and finding social support,
- normalising their experience with other sharing similar experiences
- validation of the reality of their experiences
- looking for others with similar need to talk
- needing to be heard and understood.

It remains to be seen whether other stepfamily groups have a similar sense of need and develop their own passion to sustain them. While there is no research on online support for Australian stepfamilies, Faulkner (2002) asserts on the basis of several years’ experience hosting a stepfamily website that Australian stepfamilies seem to have great interest in information, but reluctance to post and share experiences, unless people have exhausted their own resources.

### **Potentials**

Our experience to date with the Stepmums group is in line with Ausprem’s. We see potentials as including

- flexibility of access, from home or community internet outlet, at any hour
- overcoming isolation, geographic or social
- enhancing connection and validating concerns
- confidentiality – a welcoming, accepting environment
- anonymity eg a Hotmail address and username alias is acceptable

A further potential for SAVI relates to our structure as largely a dispersed workplace, rather than gathered in the one location. MC2 infrastructure offers possibilities to enhance communications among widely dispersed staff, volunteers and management committee.

## Challenges

Key issues we have encountered include

- Groundwork  
Thorough preparation to build a stable foundation for the program has taken much longer than estimated. We believe it will pay off over time.
- Developing relationships on-line  
Experience of establishing virtual communities differ. Where an existing network of groups goes online, the sense of group identity and trust which they have already built may transfer to the new medium (MS Society, 2002).  
For new online groups, it seems that many people will “lurk” - log in and read, but be initially reluctant to post messages.

Anecdotal feedback also suggests that the two-step membership procedure, joining both the MC2 site and then individual communities, while it offers safeguards and statistics, may not be as user-friendly as other independently hosted online communities. In addition the comprehensive features menu can be confusing for inexperienced web users. It is difficult to assess the impact of this on site use. Offsetting this is the convenience of having a purpose-built website independently developed, hosted and maintained.

- Understanding differences between the on-line environment and face-to-face or telephone environments, and implications for service delivery. We are still on a learning curve.
- Recruitment, Training and support of moderators  
Resource constraints have led us to look for moderators with internet and stepfamily knowledge and skills. We have found that moderators with limited internet experience require significant support to become more familiar with using forum-style sites.
- Confidentiality  
MC2 Code of Conduct and Privacy Policy also stress confidentiality, and provide for removal of anyone who breaches standards of responsible conduct eg by passing on emails or online content to non-members. Group owners such as SAVI and moderators are responsible to monitor interactions within their groups.

MC2 (or anywhere else on the Internet) cannot absolutely guarantee security of any posting, and this suggests that people should think twice before posting anything which is highly confidential or sensitive. However this needs to be held in tension with the needs of individuals who may be seeking support, and perhaps is analogous to confidentiality in a face-to-face group. Here also, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Rather, we work to set up an environment which maximizes a sense of safety and trust. Some safeguards exist in the presence of staff and gradual development of group norms.

While anonymity may encourage service users who are reluctant to present for face to face or telephone counselling and support services, it also presents a challenge for organisations. As we are not hearing or seeing the person, we have less information than meeting face to face, or talking on the phone.

We do not know that anyone is who they say they are. People can use an alias and a different email address if they like, and some may feel safer doing so. It is up to each individual to decide how much they want to share, and our guidelines on-site encourage everyone to take responsibility for this.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that the project targets an existing, real and strongly felt need, and that over time participants will be well motivated to continue with the program and be active on-line. The success of the Stepmums group is certainly strong evidence for this. It seem each new group may take several months to develop momentum.

We have gone through a teething process in relation to understanding the medium, formulating the program, and problem solving concerns such as confidentiality and safety. We can foresee changes to projected groups based on demand, and availability of moderators.

The two year project time frame will be fully utilized in trialing and evaluating which groups and strategies are most successful, what modifications are required, and in working through challenges of service delivery in the online environment.

As always, developing resources and building a program within a very limited budget calls for creative and flexible approaches. The next challenge will be to maintain the program when the pilot project is completed.

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