

Creating the Future



Helen Grimshaw 'Creating the Future' is a package that has been specifically designed to work with children who have experienced domestic violence. The package contains a leaders workbook, a manual of suggested activity sheets for specific sections of the program, a video, a music CD, posters and stickers. The package has been developed by Chris Burke, Director of the Jannawi Family Centre in New South Wales.

The aim of the program is clear:

"Creating the Future aims to assist children and families to talk about their experiences of domestic violence and abuse, to understand the effects on their lives and relationships, and to develop and strengthen positive relationships based on equality and respect."

The objectives are as follows:

Creating the Future will assist children and adults to:

- Talk about and understand the intentions and effects of domestic violence tactics.
- Clarify beliefs about responsibility for violence and abuse.
- Place responsibility with the person who abuses power in family relationships.
- Develop positive self-beliefs and overcome the effects of domestic violence on lives and relationships.
- Develop relationships that are based on equality, trust, negotiation and respect.
- Strengthen extended family, friendships and social networks and support those affected by Domestic Violence.

Family Services at Wesley Uniting Mission Inc, Adelaide were invited to be involved in this programme by the Conflict Management Research Group at the University of South Australia who are currently being funded to evaluate the program materials and its effectiveness in working with children. We were one of several organisations who were invited to use the package.

Family Services chose to use the material to run a 6 week group program for primary school aged children. All children selected had lived in families where domestic violence was part of their life. All children involved were no longer in violent situations when they agreed to join the group. Two children, however, were still vulnerable as mum remained in the cycle of choosing boyfriends who were violent.

The rest of this article is about some of the lessons, experiences and challenges which we faced as we embarked upon 'Creating the Future.'

The organisation, planning and thinking ahead involved was exhausting, but crucial for the success of this venture. Initially twelve children were invited to join the group, all of whom were visited at home in the pre-group phase. As this was a pilot scheme all parents were obliged to sign consent forms and the children completed pre-group questionnaires. One week prior to the commencement of the group, all children received a personal invitation to come along.

As Wesley Uniting Mission are a non-profit, non-government organisation we had very limited resources to work with. The University of South Australia allowed us to use their premises for free and two male sports studies students volunteered to organise a time for sports and recreation for the children at the end of the group. This period was included in order to allow the children to "let off steam" at the end of a quite intense program. It was also hoped that this would encourage the children to bond together, provide self discipline and to encourage some of the more withdrawn members of the group to join in and grow in confidence. We particularly requested that the volunteers were male, in order to provide more male role models for the children. All other workers and volunteers involved were female.

In the pre-group phase it was also important to involve other agencies and volunteers to assist. Family Services has only one full-time worker (myself), one part-time social worker (15 hrs) and one part-time male counsellor (15 hrs). A local church kindly offered to provide food each week for the children as they arrived at the group after school and we supplied lots of paper plates, paper cups and plastic crockery (don't forget to bring the Hoover... seriously.) A local coffee shop provided a 2 for 1 coffee deal so that mums had somewhere local to wait for the two hour period that their children were in the group. This proved to be quite an enjoyable time for mums.

There was also a volunteer counsellor who went along with the mums each week in order to address any subsequent behaviour problems arising from memories and emotions evoked by the sessions. The children's group was completely confidential, however, I chose to inform the parents of the particular topics that we would be covering each week.

Group Phase

The actual routine of proceedings remained the same each week:

- Food and drink.
- Icebreaker games.
- Re-enforce norms/consequences, re; difficult behaviour/ feedback or questions from last week.
- Video slot.
- Group discussion or small group brainstorms and feedback.
- Individual activities.
- Diary.
- More food and drink.
- Sport.

It may appear strange to provide food just prior to physical activity, but most children required this. After the first week, it became apparent how unfit some children were. Some lacked energy, some were bright red and puffing, all required water and one or two required asthma inhalers. If you plan to include sport, please ensure that you have staff or volunteers who have first aid training and that there is access to a fully equipped first aid kit. Having said this, the children thoroughly enjoyed the time, often throwing frisbies, doing obstacle courses and team games etc.

Strategies for maintaining attention and good behaviour were crucial. Unfortunately we do not have a strategy with which we can guarantee success in these areas, but involving the children in deciding upon the consequences of difficult behaviour seemed to have some merit. The children appeared to be familiar with this system from school and they decided upon the following:

- 1) First Warning.
- 2) Second Warning.
- 3) Time Out.
- 4) Call Parents.

Three other factors in maintaining attention were:

- a) Keeping activities short and moving quickly from one task to the next.
- b) Positive re-enforcement – using stickers or tiny teddies (small biscuits) as rewards for good behaviour.
- c) Enabling as much work as possible to be on a one to one or small group basis.

The small children responded particularly well to individual attention. In our group there were five adults and nine children, every adult was fully stretched constantly.

The behaviour of the children was not violent but more so distracting. For example, several requests for toilet trips (one pair of wet pants when we refused), running out of the room and around the building, banging and clattering, asking for food etc. The group progressed through the forming, norming and definitely the storming stage. However, we did move to the 'performing' at week 5 of the 7 weeks.

Despite adult frustrations with group behaviour we held our cool, as it was so clear to see the anger and emotional pain that some of the sessions were producing. It is essential that the group is a safe place for the children to talk. Each week we re-iterated the confidentiality of our sessions. Conversation would usually follow a pattern of disclosure followed by distraction. For example, one seven year old girl said to me: *"Sometimes I feel like running away at night, but I can't open my bedroom window (slight pause) Can I have a biscuit please?"*

Small injections of very important information were said quickly, often as though the children knew that they were not supposed to be talking about these issues. Breaking the secrecy was a new and uncertain task for the children. It was significant in the post-group follow up that one child spoke about missing the other children in the group. She said that she no longer had anyone to talk to about her life and she couldn't really talk to her friends at school. It would seem that the children were benefiting from the simple event of meeting together and building friendships with others in similar circumstances to themselves.

A particular emphasis within the program and a theme which flowed through each session was that of identifying and releasing feelings. Anger, fear, sadness and uncertainty were all recurring feelings. One particular boy filled his activity book with violent drawings.

In his pictures he drew himself shooting people with revolver type guns, he drew his school being blown up, and on the final page under the heading *"One thing I would like to change.."* he drew an aeroplane flying into the Twin Towers. The nine year old boy declared that he would like to *"blow up the world."* (this boy and his family are currently undergoing further individual therapy, as are most of the families involved in the program.)

Another boy drew a picture of a "scary experience." In this picture he depicted his father throwing a plate and a clock at his mother. His father had a huge grin on his face and his mum was crying. The boy himself was hiding under the kitchen table. ➤

"Through Young Black Eyes"

Protecting Indigenous children from the impact of family violence and child abuse

In June 2002 the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) produced three publications under the heading *Through Young Black Eyes*. The Handbook and pamphlets aim to inform Indigenous parents and families about the impact of family violence on children and strategies for dealing with these issues. These publications come in the wake of a book produced by SNAICC ten years ago *Through Black Eyes* which was a national resource handbook aimed at assisting communities to develop the strength to talk and take actions against domestic violence.

The new series of publications consists of a handbook, a community leaders guide and parents leaflet and all can be obtained free of

charge by contacting SNAICC. The material aims to provide Indigenous communities with longer term strategies to address issues of family violence and child abuse and in particular to raise awareness about the impact of abuse and neglect on children. The handbook offers explanations of family violence, child physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect, how violence impacts on children, how child abuse and family violence be identified as well as offering explanations about child protection reporting procedures and mandatory reporting legislation.

For Further Information: Contact SNAICC, Ground Floor, 48 High Street, Northcote, Vic 3070. Phone: (03) 9482 9380, or Fax (03) 9482 9157, Email: snaicc@vicnet.net.au

The Nuts and

Richard Fletcher

The Engaging Fathers Project is part of an international initiative to improve children's well being by involving their fathers in all aspects of their upbringing. The project in Australia is based at the University of Newcastle in the Family Action Centre. During 2001, project staff worked in partnership with schools to attract fathers (and father figures) from low-income areas to participate in enjoyable, father-friendly activities in schools. As part of their work, the Engaging Fathers Project team has developed a course for dads: The Nuts & Bolts of Kids & Schools.

In order to determine what fathers needed to become involved in the school and with the children, Ken and Craig, community workers from the Engaging Fathers Project (EFP), ran a series of 'smokos' with fathers. Communicating with children came out on top. The resulting seven week TAFE Outreach course covered communication skills, parenting and partnerships, child development, confidence building and safety measures for children.

Each week a presenter covered the main topic area while Ken facilitated. Craig attended most sessions to ensure that the links were maintained with the Aboriginal men in the group. The presenters were strongly advised to make the sessions interactive and to leave plenty of time for discussion. Particular care was taken to build a respectful atmosphere where different (even unpopular) notions could be openly discussed. The men were not pressured into speaking on each topic, but there was no shortage of conversation. Getting men to talk about all aspects of parenting was easy. The challenging part was managing a group of men who were not used to 'group discussion'.

What the dads said about being in the course

"I didn't really know what to expect so it was a plus for me. I don't think anyone really knew what it was going to be all about. I've never been in this situation before, as far as a bunch of blokes who are talking their own problems."

"Everyone is in the same situation, you're not just the only one sitting out there on a limb; I also met a few top blokes in the course in the last five to six weeks. It's been interesting."

"There's nothing out there that teaches parenting. I mean, when I had a kid I was hoping that the wife – because she's a girl – would know it all, but in fact she didn't. In fact I think I knew a little bit more than her, which is really nothing, but there's no course for parenting. You have the kids and then it's all trial and error and flying by the seat of your pants, so it's good to get some information on parenting."

"It helps clarify your own feelings on parenting, because you're doing things and you're wondering, 'Am I going about it the right way or the wrong way?', and then you come here and there's a lot of feedback. So you think, 'Oh, am I doing it right or not? Should I pull up on that and change?' So it's giving you a larger view of parenting from a lot more people and it's also good to understand there are other people going through the same difficulties as yourself. You're not Robinson Crusoe."

Comments from dads on the effect of the course

"I just seem to be more relaxed, I feel, in explaining things now. Rather than jumping down their throats I think about it first."

"I've relaxed in my situation around my children and all that. The way I speak to them. Instead of jumping down their throat I'm talking to them on their level and it has calmed me right down."

All the children in the group echoed the theme of self-blame. The audio visual material used on the course was particularly good at dispelling this lie. It was clear that although some children were able to say out loud "I am not to blame", inside they were not convinced. However, it seemed that by the end of the 7 weeks, more children were able to believe this. It was necessary for constant re-enforcement from the adults involved, for re-enforcement from the materials used and perhaps most importantly from each other. We also encouraged parents re-enforce this point individually with each child.

One final point which must be mentioned is that despite their circumstances most children were quite defensive about their fathers. Often the children displayed anger and frustration at their mothers for not being able to protect them. There was also some anger at mothers for taking the children away from their fathers. In one session that focused particularly upon relationships with mothers and fathers, one child stated that "It's not Dad that's the problem, it's Mum. Dad would like to see us more, but Mum won't let him and now we have to go to mediation." She even felt it necessary to speak this out in front of the group.

In one particular video scenario, it is left to the audience to decide what has happened to dad at the end. It is interesting to note that when the same scenario was shown to a group of adults and to a separate group of children, the responses were quite different. The adults made statements such as: "Dad moved out.", "He's locked up" and "He's buried in the garden." The children made responses such as: "Dad got a job, and now he has some friends to talk to so he's calmer", "Dad went to counselling" and "Dad moved out for a while." The children still seem to have hope that circumstances will change.

As a reward for 6 weeks of intensive work, week 7 was a Party & Presentation evening. Each family brought a plate of food to share and parents stayed for the first half hour. When all the food was eaten, the children played party games, had loud music, did the limbo etc. for approximately one hour. It was a pleasure. In the final half hour, parents returned to see their children receive a certificate, a piece of cake and a balloon (budget constraints!) All the children were sad that the group was ending.

As workers, it seemed that the group was only the beginning. It had been like "opening a can of worms" and now work had to start within the individual families concerned.

In the 2 weeks following the group, each child was visited and a post-group questionnaire completed. All the activity sheets, brainstorm, booklets and questionnaires are currently with the research and evaluation unit at the University of South Australia. The results of these findings will be published and passed onto the government authorities by the end of the year.

Currently Family Services are working with all except one of the families involved in the group. We are also grateful to the Grange Domestic Violence Support group who have supported and continue to support the mothers.

Unfortunately continued support is not offered in our area for children in domestic violence situations. 'Creating the Future' goes some way towards addressing this problem and therefore we are happy to announce that we have recently received a grant from Morialta Trust for \$3000 which will enable us to run the Kids Club Program again.

For further information contact the Wesley United Mission, 80 East Street, Torrensville South Australia 503. Phone: (08) 8352 8492.