



Solving the Jigsaw: Changing the Culture of Violence

PROGRAM PROFILE

*The National Child Protection Clearinghouse is keen to publish information about child abuse prevention services currently operating across Australia. If you are a service provider and would like to see your service featured in a future newsletter we would be delighted to hear from you.
Ph: (03) 9214 7888 or
email: katiek@aifs.gov.au*

Emergency Accommodation and Support Enterprise Inc.
P.O. Box 958 Bendigo Victoria 3552
Ph: (03) 5443 4945
Email: carlam@netcon.net.au
Contact: Carla Meurs

The Emergency Accommodation and Support Enterprise (EASE), based in Bendigo, Victoria, is a community-managed organisation which provides support and accommodation to women (and their children) escaping domestic violence; young women who are pregnant or parenting; and women with alcohol and drug problems. Since 1997 EASE has extended its work to include the prevention of violence in the community through the development of the school-based program *Solving the Jigsaw*.

Project aims

Solving the Jigsaw was introduced by EASE in recognition of the serious impact on children of their exposure to domestic violence in the home, and the knowledge that its existing service was only reaching a small number of these children. By introducing a program into schools, it was thought that a large number of children who might be exposed to domestic violence could be reached, offering an opportune point of intervention to break the intergenerational cycle of violence.

The *Solving the Jigsaw* project aims to increase the feeling of safety and 'culture of well-being' of children by building optimism and resilience in students and parents. It also aims to create a safe environment where open dialogue and discussions about challenging topics can take place. The project

aims to assist children to develop skills in conflict resolution, assertive communication, decision-making and anger management, while also promoting positive regard between students, teachers, parents and external support services.

Recruitment of schools

In order to gauge interest in the project, EASE initially approached eight primary and secondary schools in Bendigo and the surrounding rural areas. The brief listed the proposed key issues, topics and objectives of the project, as well as outlining some of the possible ways in which the project could be integrated into the school timetable.

The detail contained in the brief was intentionally minimal to give a quick overview of the project but also to allow for participating schools to be involved in a consultation process to fine-tune the content and process of implementation into their curriculum.

A Reference Committee was also set up which consisted of representatives from EASE, the schools, parents and services in the region. Once the program was operating, the Committee met bi-monthly. It provided a forum for dialogue between EASE and the schools, and allowed for decisions to be reached regarding implementation processes, age levels to be targeted,

and the nature of parental and community involvement in the program. It also enabled any operational and staffing issues to be addressed, and for project outcomes to be monitored.

The response to the project was extremely positive, with six out of the eight schools sent the brief expressing interest in being involved. EASE then made an application to Youth Services for funding of \$50,000, but only obtained \$20,000. Consequently, the program was initially run in only two schools. A third school decided to participate in the project and sought funding from a Department of Human Services Grant. There are currently 40 schools participating in the project.

Activities

In years 5–8 all students participate in *Solving the Jigsaw* through classroom activities. Some of the topics covered include feelings and emotions, power balance in relationships, bullying, getting to know yourself and depression and support systems. An example of an activity used under the theme of ‘feeling and emotions’ is the animal activity outlined in *Supporting Children and Young People Affected by Family Violence* (Silver 1999).

Five sheets of butchers paper are pinned around the classroom headed with the names of five animals: lion, owl, turtle, shark and teddy bear. The facilitator suggests some qualities for each animal, for example, lions are associated with strength and protection of family while owls are associated with wisdom and negotiation. After this introduction, students are asked to go to the animal they feel typifies their personality and, when they are positioned, each group is asked to write down as many qualities as possible about their chosen animal. The groups have their own discussion about these qualities and then report back to the whole group.

Once this activity is completed, the facilitator reads or acts out some scenarios. For example: (Silver 1999)

Dad comes home from work in a bad mood, it’s been a hard day at work. Dad becomes unhappy about not being able to find a bottle opener. He rants and raves then upends the contents of a kitchen drawer.

The students are asked to go to the animal that best describes their likely reactions to the situation and have a short group discussion. After this, they go to the animal that best describes the dad’s behaviour. This is repeated with another three scenarios. Students are then given an individual work sheet containing blank spaces for two lists: one for their feelings and behaviours that they like; and one for the feeling and behaviours they feel they currently have. They are asked to fill out a section which requires associating family members, famous people and others with the five animals. Finally they are asked to list one positive feeling or behaviour to practice in the coming week.

Secondary school students

In 2002 some school clusters began working together to provide the *Solving the Jigsaw* program to all their students at years 5–7. Each student participates in 60 weeks of the program over three years. Students participate in a 20-week program in each of years 5, 6 and 7.

The cluster model means that:

- *Solving the Jigsaw* is a constant support to students and teachers through the transition years from primary to secondary school.

- The primary and secondary schools in a cluster share a common focus and understanding of building resilience and the *Solving the Jigsaw* ‘ways of working’.

Solving the Jigsaw also provides smaller groups for older students (years 8–10). These operate as single-sex groups targeted to those students ‘at risk’, with each school deciding which students to invite to the sessions. It was found that the ‘at risk’ students and parents were more likely to participate in the program if they were contacted directly by the school rather than by the external project facilitators.

Parent support sessions

Alongside student groups, the project runs parent support sessions which cover many of the activities and issues raised in the student sessions. In this way, parents gain insights into the young people’s program and have an opportunity to discuss the program activities with their children. Other topics covered in the parent support sessions include: understanding adolescence; different styles of parenting; conflict resolution; building confidence in parenting; personal development; and self-esteem.

Professional development

The long-term aim of the project is to create opportunity for all schools to have a program like *Solving the Jigsaw*. Consequently, the need to train facilitators both within the region as well as in other regions has become a project focus. Funding from the William Buckland Foundation and the R.E. Ross Trust in 2001 has enabled the development of a competency-based training package aimed at professionals. The 12-month training program involves weekly participation in two one-hour classroom sessions in schools, and a weekly 3.5-hour experiential training session, which focuses on the program’s activities and the *Solving the Jigsaw* ‘ways of working’ with children and young people.



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Project effectiveness

Information about the project has been documented in the Partnerships Against Domestic Violence document, *Supporting Children and Young People Affected by Family Violence* (Silver 1999). This report contains information about an evaluation which analysed student, parent, teacher and facilitator responses to the program through questionnaires.

Positive outcomes for students were recorded in areas such as recognising and naming behaviours, increased self-knowledge and optimism, skills in mediation and conflict resolution,

assertive communication, anger management and understanding, and taking constructive action over issues relating to violence. Links were also made between parents and schools, and parent behaviours were reported to be positively changed.

The evaluation highlighted a number of positive aspects of the project including the importance of using a collaborative approach between the domestic violence organisation and school communities. EASE was aware that in order for the project to be effective, it could not be imposed on school communities. It was also important that the expertise of school staff be utilised in determining the program content. This collaboration was seen as a real strength of the project as it resulted in the schools involved being linked to outside agencies and receiving access to the specialist knowledge of staff working in the family violence sector.

Another positive aspect of the project is its long-term nature. This was considered essential to establishing a trusting relationship between the facilitator and the students, and enabled the creation of an intimate and secure environment where sensitive and personal issues could be discussed. The involvement of parents in the project both formally, in conjunction with targeted programs for the 'at risk' students, or informally, through involvement with student homework tasks or through the regular newsletter, was also seen as a positive element of the project.

The project found the use of co-facilitation extremely beneficial. Project workers took a central role in the development of resources and operational aspects, but classroom teachers were invited to participate as well. Teachers began by playing a fairly minimal role, but within a few weeks became more involved and provided assistance during the group work sessions, in particular.



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Solving the Jigsaw has been embraced by school communities in the Loddon Mallee Region. Due to its perceived success, an increasing number of schools in the area have asked EASE to run *Solving the Jigsaw* in their schools. Commitment of schools to the project is evidenced by the fact that the schools themselves contribute significantly (60%) to program funding, and the Loddon Mallee Department of Education and Training further provided support to teachers to undertake the *Solving the Jigsaw* facilitator training course. The project also receives funding support from the Victorian Department of Human Services, R.E. Ross Trust and The William Buckland Foundation.

The *Solving the Jigsaw* program has been acknowledged for good practice through many awards including the Australian Violence Prevention Award, The National Australian Drug Foundation Award, Victorian Community Safety and Crime Prevention Award, National Association for Loss and Grief Award and the Victorian Public Health Award.

For more information about this project, a copy of the report Supporting Children and Young People Affected by Family Violence can be downloaded from www.padv.dpmc.gov.au/publications/publicat.htm

Children Front and Centre

An Interview with Dr Tess Ridge



DR TESS RIDGE, Lecturer in Social and Policy Science, University of Bath, United Kingdom is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Her research focuses on child poverty and social exclusion. Dr Janet Stanley, Senior Research Officer at the National Child Protection Clearinghouse takes the opportunity to ask her some questions about her work.

Can you tell me the purpose of your visit?

I'm here to conduct some comparative research between the UK and Australia. I am chiefly interested in how the state in each country has supported children and their families through the tax and benefit system, and through measures such as the Child Support Scheme.

I try to look at issues that relate to children from what is called a child-centred perspective. This means that I try to put the interests and concerns of the child central to any research and analysis I might undertake. I am particularly interested in children's experiences of poverty and social exclusion in childhood. Using child-centred methods means talking to low-income and disadvantaged children and listening to their experiences and the issues that matter to them. This provides an opportunity to explore some of the social processes and the relational dynamics that lie behind statistical data. In the past adults have often been used as proxies for children, to speak about the children's lives and experiences. However, children's perceptions can differ from adults. Adults views of children and children's views of themselves can differ greatly. For example, issues perceived by adults as relevant to children might not be those identified by the children themselves. Using child-centred research and inquiry means that we gain a richer and more informed understanding of children and their lives.

How is your work relevant to the child welfare, and particularly the child protection, fields?

I do not work directly in a child protection field, but my research does have some important relevance to the broader field of child protection work. My most recent study involved in-depth interviews with 40 children who were living in families that were poor. The study focused very much on children's everyday lives and experiences and was, above all, open to incorporating issues that children identified as important. The interviews explored children's experiences at school, at home and with their families, and it focused on their economic and material environment, their social relationships and their own understandings of