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Bright Futures Therapeutic Group Work Program

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Introduction

Merri Outreach introduced a group work component to its children's services during the formation of the Bright Futures model, in 2006. Acknowledging the complex support needs of children, the Bright Futures Children's Specialist Support Service now offers Therapeutic Group Work as the third stream of service delivery.

Rationale Behind the Program

Group therapy has been recognised as an effective and cost efficient model when working with children and adolescents (Cohler and Friedman, 2004; Leszcz, Norden and Yalom, 1985; Reid, 1999). Many children benefit greatly from group work due to the very nature of how groups can provide a safe space in which children can feel powerful when working together as a team, as well as being recognised and acknowledged as being a unique individual.

Therapeutic group work with children who have experienced and/or are at risk of homelessness and family violence is a primary recommended service (Delange, Goodson and Layzer, 1986, as cited in Peled and Davis, 1995). Children who have had such experiences of transition and displacement, and exposure to violence often find it difficult to engage and relate to peers. As such, this may "have a detrimental and long-term impact on their experiences of community and education. Group work is [therefore] an effective and resource efficient way to engage a number of children at one time in an environment where they have the opportunity to learn from each other and build a greater sense of connectedness to community" (Bright Futures Demonstration Project, Summary Evaluation, p.13).

In the project evaluation of the Bright Futures model, completed in June 2007, by MOSS and the Centre for Program Evaluation, University of Melbourne, it was identified that the children who participated in the Bright Futures groups presented with the following:

- 100 per cent had experienced homelessness, transition and/or displacement;
- 83 per cent had experienced family violence;
- 79 per cent had experienced grief and loss, and

- 29 per cent of participants had experienced abuse and/or neglect.

The benefits for children involved in group work include "reduced aggression, decreased anxiety and depression and improved social relationships with peers" (Edelson and Graham-Bermann, 2001, as cited in Campbell and McDonald, 2007, p. 25).

The Bright Futures Group Work Model

The Bright Futures group work model comprises of ten sessions, facilitated once a week, during a school term. The group offers a safe space for children to listen, be heard and have their experiences validated. The group program aims to increase positive peer interaction and a sense of self-determination and control within the children by enhancing and building confidence and self-esteem. The group also aims to minimise negative behavioural issues, alleviate anxiety and stress-related tension and reduce isolation. Opportunities are therefore provided for participants to recognise strong emotions, release pent up feelings, develop healthy ways to resolve conflict and learn ways to take responsibility for their behaviour.

Sessions begin with gentle introductions and get-to-know you games and move into a more in-depth exploration of particular themes and issues. While often working with metaphor as a less confronting approach to addressing complex issues, the group allows the exploration of such topics as methods of communicating and engaging with others, identifying and responding to feelings, managing strong emotions, exploring hopes and dreams and valuing strengths.

Activities are structured to allow participants an experiential space within which to explore alternative ways of being, doing and acting, trying out different roles, different outcomes, and different ways of experiencing the world. Age appropriate activities utilise an eclectic mix of music and creative arts therapy, games, interactive role plays and discussions for addressing topics such as witness to violence, challenging behaviours, grief and loss, self-esteem and complex relationship dynamics.

Bright Futures works within a family-centred framework and therefore seeks input and support from the parent/caregiver throughout the program. The first and final group sessions invite parents to attend and participate. Caregivers are also kept informed of the weekly group themes and occasionally given activities to review with

their children in the home environment. By including caregivers in the forming and closing phases of the group they are bearing witness to their children's involvement in Bright Futures, while allowing the intermediate group sessions for children's personal exploration and development with peers. Parental involvement also ensures their understanding and support of the process, and encourages recognition of their children's achievements in attending the group.

During the concluding session of the program participants receive a Bright Futures manual. The manual summarises the sessions, includes songs and plays written by the group and photos of the participants. As the group intervention runs for ten weeks, the manual encourages the likelihood that participants will continue to consider their learning from Bright Futures on an ongoing basis. Qualitative feedback has shown that children refer to their manuals after the conclusion of the program and reflect back on their time with Bright Futures during difficult periods. Children identify the program, and their manual, as a source of support and positive experience.

Groups allow for eight to ten participants, and up to four facilitators. This ensures children are provided with adequate support throughout the program and that there are enough facilitators available to 'hold' the children's needs. As children often present with complex issues, groups allow for a degree of acting out and expression while ensuring participant's safety. Bright Futures is facilitated by a trained and registered music or art therapist and feedback between children, parents, referring agencies, support organisations and facilitators ensures any arising issues or concerns are appropriately addressed.

The Bright Futures model encourages capacity building within the sector. As such, referring agencies play a crucial role in supporting the group work program by co-facilitating the sessions. As a professional development opportunity generalist workers receive training and support by the Bright Futures group work coordinator.

Co-facilitators are provided with a detailed and comprehensive manual that discusses the ideas behind the group, tips for positive facilitation, the importance of the use of creative arts when working with children, as well as a detailed session outline covering themes, activities, aims behind sessions and 'how to go about it'. Facilitators meet prior to each group and after each group to discuss the session outline as well as have the opportunity to debrief and discuss any difficulties. Co-



facilitation therefore enables expertise to be shared across agencies and the building of strong networks. As Bright Futures works across the North-West region of Melbourne groups are facilitated at different venues depending on the identified need and the partnering agencies.

The Use of Creative Arts Within Group Work

Utilising a creative arts approach when working therapeutically with children, offers limitless potential to explore issues that may be too hard to express with words. Creative activities may help reduce information from the children's external world into smaller and more manageable parts, thus creating distance from difficult experiences so that they may be more tolerable (Kaduson and Schaefer, 1997).

Working creatively with children also allows the child to share perceptions and feelings at a pace which is comfortable and safe for them. As most children enjoy creative activities, they may find this method of interaction less threatening than talking about an upsetting experience or loss, which is likely experienced as overwhelming and confusing.

Imaginative play, storytelling or puppetry can also enable children to experience feeling powerful through the physical expression of emotion and allow them to gain mastery over past and present issues and events. It can provide an opportunity for children to take risks in developing new behaviours and to practice these behaviours in preparation for particular life events. Imaginative play most importantly can provide the group with the opportunity to build self-concept and self-esteem and aid in improving their communication.

Evaluation of the Model

Evaluations of the Bright Futures group work model indicate that the groups make a positive impact on the lives of participants and their families. At the end of each group program participants, parents/caregivers, and referring agencies are asked to complete a questionnaire. This provides opportunities to gain insight into the effectiveness of the model and to continually re-assess the group to determine its value and benefits.

Pivotal to the program is establishing children's sense of safety within the space. If children are not enjoying the activities there is less likelihood that they will be able to relate to other group members and feel confident and positive about themselves and their participation. Evaluation of the groups therefore also includes facilitator observations, such as changes in the children's behaviour, participant's level of engagement in joining in activities and interactions with others in the group.

In the project evaluation of the Bright Futures model, completed in June 2007, by MOSS and the Centre for Program Evaluation, University of Melbourne, the children are asked to note down what aspect of the group helped them if at all. Parents were asked to think about what it was about the group that they felt has helped their child.

Bright Futures emphasises the importance of creating a strong connection between the parent, the child and the referring agency. By requesting parent responses to the evaluation questions Bright Futures has insight into the priorities of parents, in comparison to the children, when addressing needs within the group.

Responses from participants included having the opportunity to:

- Have some time out: 75 per cent (children), 62.5 per cent (parents)
- Learn something about yourself: 75 per cent (children), 87.5 per cent (parents)
- Have fun: 100 per cent (children), 87.5 per cent (parents)
- Feel good about yourself: 87.5 per cent (children), 87.5 per cent (parents)
- Feel more confident about yourself: 87.5 per cent (children), 100 per cent (parents)
- Express yourself creatively in a fun and stimulating environment: 87.5 per cent (children), 75 per cent (parents)
- Have the opportunity to talk about feelings and experiences: 87.5 per cent (children), 75 per cent (parents)
- Understand that other people may have experienced similar situations: 100 per cent (children), 75 per cent (parents)
- Release emotions and pent-up feelings in a safe and supportive environment: 87.5 per cent (children), 75 per cent (parents)
- Learn more about safe and creative ways of using creative arts to deal with difficult experiences and situations: 100 per cent (children), 75 per cent (parents)
- Develop healthy ways to resolve conflict: 62.5 per cent (children), 62.5 per cent (parents)
- Learn ways to take responsibility for your behaviour: 87.5 per cent (children), 75 per cent (parents)

Responses to the program reflect a positive experience of the group. This may be an

indication of participants beginning to internalise an increased sense of resilience and self-esteem throughout the sessions. Considering group members are referred due to on-going experiences of homelessness and family violence and are potentially 'at risk' of early school leaving, depressive mood states and being socially isolated the results align with the Bright Futures objectives of engaging young people in a positive and supportive environment.

100 per cent of the children recognised that one of the ways in which the group helped them was by learning more about safe and creative ways of using music and the arts to deal with difficult experiences and situations; 87.5 per cent indicated that being able to release emotions and pent-up feelings in a safe and supportive environment was helpful and 75 per cent noted that having some 'time out' from stressful situations was helpful. These results show that anxiety and stress related tension may have been decreased throughout the program, as children began to consider adjusting behavioural patterns and utilising alternate, safe methods for coping with challenging situations.

Participants also noted that understanding that other people may have experienced similar situations to themselves helped them 100 per cent. This is a positive indication of addressing the aim of reducing isolation.

Further responses from the children in regard to outcomes from the group include: 'I don't feel worried. I don't have nightmares anymore because I have learnt to focus on good feelings', 'understanding emotions can help you', 'it improved my confidence!', 'it helped with everything — I felt good about myself' and 'sometimes I talk to my friends about my feelings and emotions and about my situation'.

Participant Learning from the Group

During each group session themes were addressed to meet the specific aims and objectives of the program. In order to determine if these were being met, the children were asked if they felt like they had learned anything 'new' from the group. Most significant to these results was that all children (100 per cent) felt they learnt more about the importance of nurturing. 87.5 per cent realised that they had many strengths and abilities and that it is good to talk about feelings. 75 per cent noted that having strong emotions is ok and that they had learnt safe ways of coping with strong emotions.

Children reflected that 'I learnt to always try again', 'It is good to talk, especially when you're stressed out — and there are lots of people to talk to', 'I realised that everyone has strong emotions', 'It's really fun and helped feeling less stressed cos of all the stuff going on like moving around' and 'I learnt about values and what they meant and I learnt that these things matter!'

Parents were asked to comment on what they thought their child had learnt. Their responses included 'how to be more

confident and comfortable in their skin', 'that they are not alone — other kids have gone through similar situations', that 'they learnt more about their own personal situation', and 'it reinforced my boundaries for my daughter and so she learnt that others also require boundaries'.

The comments from the parents and children indicate that they felt like they had learnt more about their own personal strengths and values, and the good things about themselves.

The parents were also asked if they felt the information provided to their children was relevant to them at which there was 62.5 per cent yes and 37.5 per cent completely, indicating the parents showed 100 per cent awareness of their child benefiting from the group work model.

Behavioural Changes

Children and parents were asked if they felt like they had practiced using some of the new things they had learnt in Bright Futures at school or at home. This question aimed to gain an indication as to whether the outcomes of the group are influencing other areas in the children's lives. 62.5 per cent of participants noted that they had practiced using what they had learnt, whereas 87.5 per cent of the parents noted that their child had been practicing what they had learnt in the group either at home or at school.

Parents were asked what they had noticed of any changes in their child/ren's behaviour since their attendance at Bright Futures. Reflections included 'more happy and confident', 'quieter, listens better, and cooperates more easily', 'she has opened up more', 'she responds more towards people', 'things have changed a lot — my son's maturity and friendships with others in the group has strengthened', 'my son has settled down at home and school' and 'still the same — happy go lucky kid'.

When understanding the parents' perspective on the benefits of the group parents responded that they want their child to feel good about themselves, to learn something positive about themselves, to feel confident about themselves and to feel connected to others so that they don't feel alone. Their favourite thing about their child being in the group included:

- 'Interact with other children in similar situations and not feel that they are alone';
- 'For them to have some of their own special time';
- 'To feel good about themselves is so important';
- 'Being able to participate and learn coping strategies. The book at the end was fantastic, and a great tool of some knowledge of what they had learnt and done — this can be very useful for them and for us too!';
- 'That it was a new experience for them and they both loved it and have made good friendships', and
- 'The group re-enforced what is talked about at home'.

Parent Learning from the Group

87.5 per cent of parents responded that they had learnt something new for themselves from the group. These results may be an indication of how the group is not only directly benefiting the children involved but others in their lives. This broader impact may increase ongoing support to group work participants by encouraging positive changes within a holistic environment.

In terms of whether the parents thought the goals of the therapeutic group had been met, the parents noted that for increasing positive peer interaction, reducing isolation, enhancing and building confidence and self-esteem, and alleviating anxiety and stress related tension, the group work goals had been met 100 per cent for their children. 87.5 per cent of them felt like the group had minimised negative behavioural issues.

Conclusion

Overall 37.5 per cent of group work participants rated the group 9 out of 10 and 62.5 per cent rated it 10 out of 10. All parents gave the group 10 out of 10, indicating 100 per cent satisfaction with the outcomes of the Bright Futures group.

The Bright Futures group work program evolves in its response to identified needs and themes emerging for children affected by homelessness. Throughout 2011 Bright Futures groups are being facilitated within key homelessness and family violence support agencies throughout the North West region. MOSS is always open to new partnerships and encourages contact from those interested. ■

'It was really good and I would suggest it to others cos it's a life changing opportunity'

Group work participant

For further information and queries please contact Bright Futures at Merri Outreach Support Service Inc. 9359 5493

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