KIDS - V.I.P.
(Violence, Intervention and Prevention for young women and their pre-school children)

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**KIDS V.I.P. Summary of project:**

Until August 1999, Anglicare Choices provided a specialised support service for homeless young women who were experiencing significant parenting problems with their children. The service included a residential family service offering support of up to 20 hours per week to young single mothers in relation to parenting, independent living and personal skills as well as transitional accommodation. In addition sexual assault counselling, child care and and weekly group programs which included literacy classes, parenting groups and playgroups were offered. In August 1999 the residential family service was closed and the service re-located to Fitzroy. The other components of the service remained.

In 1996 Choices staff became aware of a gap in services in relation to the children of young women who were clients of the program. These young women and their children were often homeless as a result of family violence. A review of case files involving children from infancy to pre-school who had witnessed or experienced family violence showed evidence of developmental delay (particularly in relation to language skills and social and emotional development), aggressive behaviour and behavioural patterns associated with anxiety. It was difficult to determine to what degree the impact of witnessing or experiencing violence had contributed to the development of these characteristics as distinct from the lack of stable accommodation, poverty, substance abuse etc. that characterised the lives of the young women and their children. The literature suggests however that these factors are associated with an increased level of risk of violence to the young women and their children. In addition to this there has been increasing community awareness of the impact on children of witnessing or experiencing family violence. This awareness has led to the development of intervention programs for children. Groupwork with children who have witnessed violence has developed as the primary intervention method. However a review of the literature and networking with some service providers in Victoria indicated that most programs that are run for children in relation to family violence are usually run for primary school aged children or adolescents. Little if any attention had been given to the needs of pre-schoolers and so staff at Choices with the assistance of staff from the Monash University Department of Social work developed Kids -V.I.P. Kids V.I.P is a groupwork program for pre-schoolers who have witnessed or experienced family violence and their mothers. It is an 8 week program conducted by four facilitators two in the children’s group and two in the young women’s group. Children and their mothers attend concurrent sessions. The children’s component was developed using knowledge of the developmental needs of this age group. Knowledge of the impact of family violence was also used to develop individual session themes.
The aims of the children’s component are for children:

- To have fun (the clinical and research literature suggests that children who have witnessed or experienced violence have fewer opportunities for play and hence the developmental opportunities that accompanies play)

- To learn to recognise and deal with feelings (the available clinical and research literature suggests that this group of children have a restricted range of emotional responses to events in their lives)

- To develop self-protective strategies to deal with violence. This includes identifying people whom they can talk to, strategies for absenting themselves if family violence occurs and the development of problem solving strategies that will assist them to work out safe, socially acceptable methods of dealing with conflict (the research literature suggests that this group of children have poorer problem solving skills than children who have not witnessed or experienced violence and that problem-solving techniques can be taught to pre-schoolers)

- To develop social skills including listening and co-operative play.

Specific aims were developed for each individual session and these were achieved through different activities that involved informal and structured play. Themes for each session were linked to the young women’s sessions. Topic covered included “Sometimes Families Fight”, “Protecting Ourselves” “Feelings” “I am Special” and “Families”.

The concurrent young women’s group aimed to:

- encourage young women to think about the violent nature of their relationships and how this might impact on their children.

- inform and educate the young women about the long term impact of exposing children/self to violence

- develop empathy with children

- explore some of their own family of origin issues, messages they received about themselves as children, impact on self-esteem, expectations of intimate relationships, families, their own experience of being parented.
**KIDS V.I.P. - Outcomes:**

- On completion of the program young women were able to recognise the effect of being exposed to family violence on their children.

- Over the course of the program improvement was noted in children’s socialisation, play and language skills.

- Both groups received 100% attendance from all participants except when one young woman gave birth during the course of the program and she and her child missed that session. This in itself was unanticipated given that attendance by this group of young women at other groupwork programs was inconsistent given the ongoing crises and issues that impact repeatedly on their lives.

- The issue of young women’s own use of violence was raised by the women and explored. This was an unintended outcome.

- In all the group programs to date, there have been disclosures of child sexual abuse experienced by a small number of children that had not previously been known. This was unanticipated and led to the development of strategies and protocols to deal with these issues when they arose.

- Program was appropriate for children aged 2.5-5 years with some activities needing to be modified for the developmental range within that aged group.

- Facilitators with no experience of the model were able to appropriately conduct the program in conjunction with experienced facilitators.
KIDS V.I.P Target group:

Young women and their pre-school children (aged 2.5 -5 years) who have witnessed or experienced family violence and who are at risk of homelessness as a result of that violence.

The Choices program provided services to approximately 120 young women and their children per year. The service is located in the Western region of Melbourne but accepts clients from across Victoria. In addition to the young women who attend Choices the Kids -V.I.P program accepts community referrals from any young woman with pre-school aged children who has experienced family violence.

All of the young women who attend Choices have either experienced family violence directly or have witnessed this as children. In addition they are referred to Choices because they are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. For many this homelessness is a direct consequence of violence in their intimate relationships. Their children have also witnessed or experienced family violence (with all of the young women whose children have attended the Kids-V.I.P program reporting that their children from as young as fifteen months of age have directly intervened to try and stop the violence that they have witnessed between their mothers and her intimate partner (usually their fathers)). These children show evidence of considerable developmental delay in their language, social, emotional and cognitive development. They also display problematic behaviours including aggression, night traumas, anxiety and fear.

During the program young women learn to be protective of their children and to deal with their own violence. The children learn self protective strategies and to deal with their emotions. These changes potentially lead to a reduction in the risk factors associated with victim behaviour.
Project evaluation:

Evaluation is a key component of the program. Evaluation processes include:
- pre and post group interviews with mothers
- written observations by the facilitators following each group session
- verbal feedback from support workers, group facilitators and child care workers
- ongoing feedback from participating mothers (many of whom have low literacy levels so feedback occurs through informal discussion rather than using a written feedback form or questionnaire).

Upon completing Kids-V.I.P, young women report that their children have a reduction in the frequency of the problem behaviours that had led them to commence the group. Program staff and other workers who are involved in these children’s lives report that children’s social and language skills improve and that children’s behaviour changes. Children are reported to be engaging in more play and to have extended their range of play, to have increased social skills such as sharing, co-operative play and use of problem solving methods to resolve conflict (at an age-appropriate level), to have increased self-esteem and behavioural changes. These behavioural changes include reduced aggression, improved concentration, and reduced symptoms associated with fear and anxiety. These changes are reported to occur in all situations (for example in the family and in childcare).

Outcomes for mothers include increased understanding of the impact of violence on their children and an increased understanding of their children’s behaviour. This results in changed parenting practices, for example discipline practices that do not use physical punishment.

Formal interviews are held with the young women before and after the Kids -V.I.P program. Information is collected on their experience of violence, their current situation, their concerns for their children and their expectations for the group. In addition after each session young women are encouraged to meet with the workers from the children’s group to discuss the issues that arise with respect to their children. Participation in the group can cause some emotional distress for the young women as they explore the impact of violence on themselves and their children. Young women all have access to a worker who can provide them with counselling and/or support at this time. Children too can start to act out angry behaviour as they begin to feel safe and begin to talk about the violence they have experienced. Observation sheets are completed for the children after each group. All of this information is used to develop program content and to monitor the responses of the young women and their children and offer support and assistance where necessary.
Capacity for adoption elsewhere:

Kids-V.1.P has the capacity to be adopted for use in other settings. To date the program has primarily been run with young women and their children who are clients at Choices. However, on one occasion Kids-V.1.P was also run in conjunction with staff from a Community Centre in the western suburbs of Melbourne. The young women and their children who attended this particular program were not clients of Choices and were living in the community. Evaluation measures indicated that outcomes for these young women and their children were similar to other groups.

Choices is currently exploring options to have the program written up in a manual that can be utilised by appropriately skilled workers in other agencies.
Enduring Outcomes:

Given the degree of disadvantage that these young women and their children experience and given the absence of a long-term evaluative study to date it is difficult to state what the enduring outcomes might be. However the evidence to date suggest that children language and social skills improve. It is anticipated that this will assist the children to make the transition to pre-school and/or primary school with a reduced risk of behavioural problems, peer relationship problems and learning problems than they might have been anticipated to have had.

Children also display evidence of increased problem solving strategies and increased self-protective behaviour (for example not to try to intervene in violence). It is anticipated that these problem-solving strategies and self-protective behaviours may assist them if they are confronted with violence again.

Children also show evidence of the capacity to express a wider range of emotions. This means that they have an increased likelihood of being able to express their wishes. Certainly their mothers report this and comment that this increases the young women’s confidence in their own parenting capacity.

The young women report greater understanding of and empathy with their children. These changes are likely to enhance family functioning and increase the likelihood that these children will experience their family life as loving and supportive, with advantages that this brings.
Innovation:

The Kids - V.I.P program is considered to be innovative for five key reasons. These are:

- Kids - V.I.P targets young women and their pre-school children. Most of the groupwork programs developed to deal with the impact of violence on children targets primary school aged children and adolescents. The Kids - V.I.P program has been carefully designed to reflect the particular developmental needs of toddlers and pre-schoolers. The program has incorporated up to date research on children’s development and had drawn on the professional expertise of a range of professionals. This multi-disciplinary approach has been a feature of the program.

- The young women who attend the program are at risk of or have been homeless as a result of violence. In addition to violence they have experienced a number of other problems including poverty, substance abuse, poor literacy, limited parenting skills, poor living skills (such as budgeting, cooking, self-care etc.), substance abuse issues, family history of abuse, homelessness and transience. All of these factors are associated with an increased risk of abuse and violence. These factors also make them a client group that are difficult to link in with welfare services. Kids-V.1.P has been successful in engaging and working with a group of young women whose histories mean that they are often resistant to and fearful of welfare services.

- Kids-V.1.P is based on sound early intervention programs that emphasis the importance of working with both parents and children to effect long lasting change. The concurrent nature of the children and young women’s group is an important feature of the program.

- Kids - V.I.P is located in a within a broader program that provides a range of services to young women and their children. Recovery from violence is seen as a process for the young women and their children. In addition the reasons for the young women’s victimisation are complex. The location of the program within a wider service provides an opportunity to utilise a range of services to assist these multiply disadvantaged young women to reduce the risk factors associated with their victimisation.

- Although the development of Kids - V.I.P predated the release of the report of National Crime Prevention Pathways to prevention: developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia, March 1999, the program reflects the philosophy of this report and includes many of the recommendations included in the report.
Further Information:

The Kids-V.I.P program has also been documented in two reports as an example of best practice in this area. The reports are:

1. Kambouridis Helen and Morwood Susan (1998) *I was there too: Children and Adolescents in the Northern and Western Regions of Melbourne Who are Secondary Victims of Crime*, Gatehouse Centre, Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne.

2. Eslick, S & Gevers, L (1998) *Kids and DV Project: Best Practice in Working with Young People and Children who have lived with Domestic Violence*, Department of Families, Youth and Community Care, Queensland.

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This book is available from:

Child and Family Consultants,
46 Browne Ave.
Dalkeith, W.A, 6017

The development of the program was done by Lesley Hewitt, Kylie Nagle, Cathi Flynn and Kate Cannon and assisted by Debbie Keating, Bronia Rak, Mark Rak, Tara Jarvis, Marita Lowry.

Joy Karton and Rachel Beckwith assisted in the development of this poster.
REFERENCES

These are just a few references that we found were useful in the development of the groupwork program for preschool children who had witnessed and experienced violence.


   This book is available from: Child and Family Consultants,
   43 Browne Ave.
   Dalkeith,
   Western Australia, 6017 with the children’s story book, as a package kit for $30.00.


   A copy of this paper is available on tape from Auckland Recording Services Limited, PO Box 8292, Auckland, 1035, New Zealand. ph. 64 9 6255554


   Sandra Hewitt has a book, due for publication in October, titled *Small Voices: Assessing Allegations of Sexual Abuse with Preschool Children,* Sage, Newbury. While this book looks specifically at sexual abuse, it covers issues of working with this particular age-group.


A copy of this paper is available on tape from Auckland Recording Service. Address is recorded above.


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