

Changing families, challenging futures

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A Whole of Family Response to Family Violence : A new program for family violence: policy change and practice integrated with program research

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SOUTHERN FAMILY LIFE

Introduction.

There are four key themes I wish to illustrate which run through our work with families where there has been, or still is, family violence. I will be sharing some of the information from the practice and research of Southern Family Life to highlight these themes. There is much that I cannot include for today but further information will be available when we have completed the full Family Violence Prevention Program Research Report.

The themes are,

TIME — time for members of families to recover and change, and time to provide the services for family violence treatment and prevention.

COMPLEXITY of the issues surrounding family violence and the range of practice responses required.

FLEXIBILITY in order to respond effectively to the needs of all members of a family as their needs and priorities change over time.

SYSTEMS INTERFACE & CLASH which is illustrated as we move between practice and policy. There are systems interfaces within the family and with various external systems which impact significantly on the process of recovery and change.

I should also admit, up front, to the subtext that runs throughout my presentation. Family violence treatment and prevention needs committed and recurrent government funding to support what is a very complex and highly skilled area of service delivery. Continuity of staff is critical to building effective and cost efficient services. Annual and piecemeal funding does not promote service quality or cost effectiveness.

SOUTHERN FAMILY LIFE FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAM

- Origins of Family Violence Prevention program

The context for Southern Family Life's services is particularly significant. As a small community based agency, all programs are provided within the one setting, to families drawn from a particular geographic area which is the Agency's dedicated community for service. The Family Violence Prevention Program has therefore developed over time in response to the needs of the families drawn from this community. Further, our origins as a family service agency, formed 28 years ago by the community, has influenced our approach to family violence, seeing the needs for all parties involved.

Programmatic responses for family violence began in 1986 when the first men's program was implemented. Women's groups followed and then in more recent times, programs for children and adolescents. This needs based program development has been largely sponsored by the community and philanthropic trusts.

Many practitioners have contributed to the development of our family violence practice for families. However, the work of Diana Anderson warrants particular acknowledgment. Over the past two years, as the Coordinator of the Family Violence Prevention Program, she has directed energy and expertise to integrating the strands of practice to form the comprehensive, whole of family program.

- Research Project - Perpetual Trustees

In 1997, Perpetual Trustees agreed to assist us with our desire to document and evaluate our work. Lesley Hewitt was engaged as the independent researcher bringing her own significant body of knowledge and practice expertise to assist us in critically reviewing our work.

The threefold purpose of the Research project has been to...

- **Document service delivery and practice**
- **Detail theoretical frameworks and knowledge for practice**
- **Conduct an evaluation of program impact and client outcomes**

Staff participation in the evaluation has been critical to ensuring data collection and reflection on the resulting collated information. This has allowed for the translation of findings back into practice, continuing the evolutionary process for program development based on client feedback and program evaluation.

The external policy and funding context provides little assistance for practice and program development where research occurs as a component of service delivery. All service innovation and evaluation has been funded through a patchwork of community and philanthropic trust contributions. Service developments at state and federal level tend to focus on functional areas such as the Family Court or Child Protection, and do not cover the full range of needs of families where there is / has been violence. Governments tend to respond to particular target groups or issues. (eg. child abuse, women's refugees, men's behaviour change groups etc.) rather than the

integrated daily life experience of families which can cover all these areas. This presents challenges to the local service provider seeking to remain focussed on effective strategies for responding to the needs of the family and all its members. These difficulties have been particularly highlighted for client and service provider during the pilot stages of developing our family centred approach for family violence prevention.

Now that the pilot phase is completed and evaluated, a funding base is needed for the whole of family program in order to sustain current service delivery.

KEY FEATURES

- **Whole of Family**

The Southern Family Life program includes services for all members of the family — women, men, children, and adolescents. These will be needed at different times for different families depending on developmental stages and new issues which can arise during the process of recovery and change.

- **Systemic**

Services are concerned with the systems in, between and external to families. Partner, parent, sibling and separated relationships are acknowledged as well as re-forming and blended families. In addition, changes in external systems are monitored as they impact on the priority of needs for families and often lead to service renegotiations.

- **Integration with youth and family counselling and support services.**

Family violence group services are integrated with a range of counselling and support services. This allows for the service response to change according to the needs of the family and individual family members.

An example to illustrate. A child has contact with a separated parent who has perpetrated family violence and caused harm to the child. The mother as the care-giving parent can find herself subject to a child protection notification due to her "failure to protect the child from risk of significant harm". The safety of the child is paramount. However the nature of legislation in Victoria results in the responsibility of the perpetrator becoming refocussed on the protective ability of the mother as the custodial parent. The priority of needs change away from a focus on her personal survival issues and recovery to deal with child protection's parenting concerns to enable the child to remain safely in her care. Within the integrated service system of SFL, a referral is made to the In home support service and perhaps the Men's Outreach Service to address the child safety issues. Whilst there is a service renegotiation, continuity is still provided for the family and knowledge is carried forward into the next phase of service delivery to promote change and the well being of all family members.

- **Team approach**

Teams are based around service interventions rather than dedicated to a particular program. Hence staff are able to work with a range of different colleagues and be matched to client needs. This requires an expert, multi skilled staff, well supervised and resourced.

- **Needs based service contracting**

A centralised duty intake system for all programs encourages staff to hear and clarify the actual request and open up options for the client in the assessment and contracting process. Needs assessment and case planning are regarded as an ongoing process to ensure attention to needs which emerge or change over time. Cross program referrals are also made through the weekly intake meetings to ensure a co-ordinated team response.

INTERVENTIONS

A range of interventions is available within the Agency. These are selected and packaged according to the request and assessed needs of the individual or family.

- **Assessment - couples, individuals, family**

The Agency counselling program provides the assessment resource for the Family Violence Prevention Program group services. This is conducted according to the nature of the referral and the membership of the particular family for service.

- **Group services complemented by individual, couple, family counselling**

Counselling services may be offered pre, post or concurrently with group services.

- **Relationship re-negotiation (partnering or separation), parenting (re-parenting)**

Within the systemic framework, attention is given to the changing nature of the family relationships with attention to past, current and future relationships between adults, parent to children and between siblings. A service may be contracted around these specific relationships.

- **Youth Parent Mediation**

A significant number of referrals to the Family Violence Prevention Program have been generated through the Youth Parent Mediation program, established to prevent youth homelessness. A separate evaluation of that program has supported practice experience about the integration of mediation and counselling services, particularly for dual parent families. Conflict with an adolescent can bring a family into service. Mediating the presenting conflict can uncover underlying relationship issues in the family including violent parental relationships. Cross referral to the counselling and

family violence programs has therefore been offered to address issues for parents, and young people can be offered the appropriate youth service.

The experience with this program has further contributed to the Agency needs based, family centred approach, offering a range of service interventions with flexibility to respond to the changing, complex needs of families and their individual members.

RESPONDING TO FAMILY VIOLENCE — THE FAMILY JOURNEY

See attached [service map](#) (not available on this download)

The journey metaphor is used purposefully. The process of change and recovery where there has been, or is, family violence is not a short trip. It is a meandering, stop start process which takes place over a significant period of time. Issues need to be addressed according to a hierarchy of needs, and people travel at different paces. People also experience different diversions and side tracks, particular as a result of the demands or difficulties of external systems. For example, an extended Family Court action can heighten conflict and distress for children and intervention moves into a support and containment rather than therapeutic mode.

The [service map](#) graphically represents the range of counselling and support services offered by Southern Family Life, including family violence services, with the referral, assessment and planning as the core coordinating case management processes. Information about the specific group services for women, men, children and adolescents will be included in the Family Violence Research Project Report available early 1999. Survivors groups are also provided for men, women and partners who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. Family of origin issues emerge as a strong theme as part of family violence recovery and change.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

For the purposes of this paper a few findings have been selected from the twelve month program study and evaluation, with a particular focus on children and adolescents. From this study new issues have emerged and influenced subsequent practice and program development. The need for further study including longitudinal follow up is strongly acknowledged, and the resources for it are actively sought.

Overall, we can generalise that across the different groups, the evaluation identified significant changes for participants in —

- Self esteem
- Relationship improvement
- Self care
- Understanding of violence
- Health
- Life goals

The evaluation tells us that recovery and change related to family violence does occur, and usually the overall quality of life for participants improves.

However, we were particularly interested when significant change was not reported. Through the collated evaluation questionnaires, it was identified that variations in degrees of change occurred for —

- Women still in abusive relationships
- Children still experiencing violence at contact and/or hand over
- Women and children experiencing violence perpetrated by adolescent family member
- Men in relationships — partner support increased motivation, attitude and behaviour change.

These variations became a particular interest for practice and program improvement. Once re-assured about the overall effectiveness of the family centred program, we became more focussed on variations and differences in findings, highlighting new issues and practice and policy challenges.

NEW ISSUES identified include...

- **No gender differences for aggressive and withdrawn behaviour in children**

Girls in the children's and young women's groups were reported to be experiencing similar difficulties with anger and aggression as has been usually associated with boys.

- **Women's identification of violence in parenting**

Once they have worked through personal issues in the therapeutic program, women in the support groups are more able to focus on problems for their children and with their own parenting. They were able to acknowledge and be open to changing abusive parenting practices and support their children through the STAR children's program.

- **Men's responsibility for addressing role modelling for children**

The children and adolescents highlighted the impact of a violent / abusive parent. The notion of witnessing has been replaced with experiencing to convey the active impact of violence on children, even when they are not the target. The parent who has perpetrated the violence, and their behaviour, remains a powerful presence in the child's life. Usually this is the father or adult male. Men's behaviour change groups therefore need to strengthen a focus on men's responsibility as role models for children, and link to services which will provide opportunities to re-dress negative impacts and learn new parenting and communication skills. Such services at SFL now include outreach to separated parents where they have ongoing contact with children. The therapeutic group opportunity is most effective as a trauma recovery intervention for the child or adolescent no longer experiencing violence in their lives.

- **Impact of continuing violence on capacity for recovery**

Children who continued to experience abuse or violence between their parents, even if only at visitation hand over, did not achieve the same degree of progress as children where there was no longer any violence in their lives. This variation was also true for women still in abusive relationships.

STAR is offered as a treatment and prevention program. The overall goal is to prevent the transmission of transgenerational patterns of family violence. Adults acknowledge the impact of violence from their own childhood on their behaviour as adults. It is therefore the responsibility of adults to remove violence from the lives of children or they (boys and girls) are at risk of following a similar violent pattern as they grow to adulthood.

Where parents cannot negotiate for violence free interactions, the responsibility must return to service providers and the Family Court to secure the best interests of the child.

- **Impact of organisational context**

Southern Family Life was formed by the community to be a family service agency and this clearly influences our response to community needs. Hence in responding to violence in families, we have developed services for all members of families and brought them together into an integrated family centred service model. To run such a model requires a facility which can safely accommodate the range of services, program planning to separate services such as men's and women's services operating on different days, and management support for team interaction, program planning and evaluation. Within the current context, this also requires management support with fund raising for resources to pilot and develop the service. Staff provide very complex and highly skilled services for which they receive relatively poor remuneration. Hence it also a challenge for management to convey to staff that their work and expertise is valued.

The integrated family model may not therefore be appropriate for all service organisations and settings.

- **Suicide prevention for young women**

The young women's group, RAVE, provided some outstanding results related to the development of life goals, hope and optimism for the future. Hence in addition to trauma recovery, a prevention outcome was also achieved with promotion of factors associated with resiliency and youth suicide prevention. Consistent with the children's group, this gives family violence group programs for young people a dual purpose around treatment and prevention. A long term view can therefore see this work as a highly cost effective combination and approach to intervention in family violence.

PRACTICE & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. **Recovery from violence is a long term process**

Services need to be accessible to families over a significant period if recovery and change is to occur. Men's and women's groups are very much a beginning in the process of change. Children's issues can only be addressed when the adults have dealt with their relationship issues and are able to focus on parental responsibilities. Parents need to facilitate the recovery and prevention process for children and adolescents.

2. **Co-occurring child abuse, family violence, youth parent conflict, separation and divorce**

Abuse, violence and conflict are not separate issues in the life of an individual or family. A man who is violent to his partner also has responsibilities to children who experience that violence. Parents in conflict with adolescents may also have partner relationship difficulties. A violent partner may also be abusing children. An adult victim of violence may be violent in their parenting. A perpetrator of violence may have unresolved childhood issues of violence and abuse. Violence between partners can continue beyond separation and divorce. These problems do not occur in isolation.

It is argued here that it is more cost efficient, in the short and long term, to engage a family around the violence as it occurs in the range of relationships in the family in order to facilitate change and recovery, prevent transgenerational patterns, and reduce costs associated with multiple service agencies.

However, these co-occurring issues cross the functional responsibilities of many government departments and levels of government. Coordinated planning for these systems interfaces is not apparent.

3. **Services need to be accessible and flexible over time**

Recovery and change is not a straightforward short term process. Particularly from a child focussed treatment and prevention perspective, service responses need to look beyond the presenting problem and respond systemically to the co-occurring issues, as they are identified and change over time. Ongoing access to one agency is preferable for families seeking continuity and co-ordination of service in response to changing needs.

4. **Interventions need to mirror change process**

The change process is not lateral and consistent. A range of interventions from treatment and support to practical assistance will be needed to reflect the intensity and nature of service needs.

5. Integrated range of interventions - e.g. mediation and counselling

Timely and accessible cross referral between program areas and intervention models can assist families to move on with problem resolution and behaviour change. Referral out to other agencies should be used when appropriate, but generally families prefer to contain the number of agencies involved when another practitioner or service is needed.

Mediation is also identified as an important access pathway to counselling and support services to address family violence and relationship difficulties.

6. Transgenerational impact

A number of findings considered together illustrate the transgenerational linkages in family violence.

- The presence of an adolescent perpetrator in a family, continuing the violence of the separated parent, was identified as inhibiting change for younger siblings.
- Adults in recovery and behaviour change programs are able to identify the impact of violence in their own childhood.
- Significant changes are identified in the behaviour of children completing the STAR program who are now living in violence free circumstances.

The links between life stages and generations are identified in multiple ways. There is therefore clear potential for breaking transgenerational cycles of violence and abuse by working with the whole family and attending to the needs of children and adolescents who have experienced family violence.

7. Exploring socialisation and family influences - complementary services

Behaviour change programs for men who have been violent often unmask the men's own hurts and traumas which are in need of healing. This is also a strong pathway to encouraging men to acknowledge role modeling responsibility with their children with new ways of thinking and behaving and resolving conflict. Women are also identifying the need to learn new non-violent ways of parenting and helping their children to deal differently with frustrations and problems.

Understanding socialisation and how power and influence has been used within their family of origin, and is now being used in their current family, is an integral part of behaviour change and growing from victim to survivor. This does not ignore broader social and structural contributions to socialisation and the use and abuse of power in society, but it does encourage change within the various individuals sphere of influence, particularly within their family and for their children.

8. Attention to the recovery needs and current context of children and adolescents

The term witness to family violence acknowledges the presence of children but not the traumatic impact of the violence. The children of parents where there has been or is violence have experienced the violence and need to be considered in the recovery and change process. The adults need to reach the point where they can focus on their responsibility for facilitating recovery and change for children and adolescents. And service providers responding to adults involved in violent relationships must always be aware of the ongoing well being of the children.

9. Assertive outreach to separated partners

Research about men's wellbeing and attitudes to counselling and support services (eg. Keys Young project for LAFS 1998), together with our practice experience, tells us that it is not easy for men to engage with traditional services. Whilst social change about the roles of men has influenced this phenomena to some extent, as is noted in the increase number of service referrals received from men, we also know that we need to be a little more creative about how we offer services to men.

Driven by the findings from the childrens' program evaluation, SFL determined to provide an assertive outreach program for male partners where ongoing violence was impacting on the well being of children. This pilot project has been funded through Perpetual Trustees for 12 months. Of primary importance is confirmation of our responsibility to do something with what we know. Starting from the assumption that all parents want what is best for their children, we assume that men are not aware of the impact of their behaviour on their children, and therefore we have a professional responsibility to reach out and offer information in a format which is acceptable to "hard to reach" fathers. Six months into the pilot we still have much to learn about ways of contacting men and need funding for follow up research to clarify outcomes. This is again about needing time to explore flexible, systemic responses to complex situations which cut across various government policies and funding responsibilities.

10. Beliefs about gender roles and responsibility, and program funding

Services have tended to be funded for male perpetrators or for female victims. The whole of family approach challenges this categorical separation. By remaining open to the possibility that individual men and women can be both victims and perpetrators of violence, as partners and as parents, our service delivery allows for a range of needs for individuals irrespective of gender or relationship. Stepping outside traditional stereo types in response to identified need is regarded as central to operation a needs based service delivery system,

and an advocacy opportunity for challenging traditional determinants of patriarchy and male privilege.

11. Funding cycles

If recovery and change in relation to family violence is a long term erratic process then 12 month funding cycles do little to enable continuity and stability of service delivery and quality client outcomes. Funding contracts are needed which incorporate time to plan, implement and evaluate services and demonstrate quality outcomes for individuals and families.

12. Family Court & Children's Court - Federal & State funding

Family violence experienced by children is child abuse. The separation between state and federal functions therefore creates many obstacles to achieving timely and therapeutic outcomes for children. Definitions and practices between the two government levels vary widely and, despite the best intentions, have difficulty achieving the best interests of the child. Instead practitioners and families are left seeking the least harmful or distressing and most achievable outcome. It is difficult to see how current Federal and State decision making addresses the needs of families and realities of service delivery for families moving between the different jurisdictions.

13. Gap between new knowledge and policy development.

The pathway for translating knowledge from practice and research into policy development seems haphazard and variable. We need to move beyond service tendering and purchasing of specific services to consider service systems which work for individuals and families and can demonstrate quality outcomes, both for the long and the short term.

14. Consultation and collaboration

Competition and tendering have undermined service provider networks, knowledge sharing and collaborative practice. Consultation is needed between service providers, organisations and levels of government to achieve good practice and a quality service system.

We are left wondering,

- Where is the broad system planning responsibility?
- How is the voice of the community and service users heard?
- When will funding include documentation and shared learning from practice as an integral part of service delivery?

SUMMARY COMMENTS

At the beginning of this presentation, the intention was to illustrate from practice and program evaluation the need for time, the complexity of family violence, the need for flexibility in service responses, and the impact of systems in, between and external to families. Southern Family Life has been most fortunate to secure funding groups willing to invest in our hunches and our work. The pilot program development has been rich in learning from successes and mistakes.

Overall we have learnt that a commitment to the best interests of children demands a concern for the well being of men and women. A partnership with parents as the most effective agents for nurturing the growth and development of children requires that we are open to hearing and responding to their needs as individuals, as partners and as parents. Further, our research project has confirmed that the needs of families are best identified from a "bottom up" analysis which recognises the unique opportunities and characteristics of individuals and families. Responding to these needs transcends the current separation of government and departmental roles and responsibilities.

Fortunately families live in communities, and our community has been interested and able to partner us in this Family Violence Prevention Program development and research project. We welcome opportunities for sharing our learning with other service providers and all levels of government.

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