

10. CHILD SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Refuges continue to develop innovative programs both within the refuge and in the community to meet the specific needs of children who have experienced Domestic Violence. Children's programs may vary from refuge to refuge however they are based on the philosophy of working with children as clients in their own right. Children have also experienced the violence and have specific and individual needs which we attempt to address through programs/activities that:

- acknowledge their experiences and feelings
- acknowledge their grief and confusion
- give them an opportunity to express themselves in a safe environment
- enable them to have fun and to be a child
- assist them to develop thinking, problem-solving and protective behaviour skills
- build self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of self-worth
- enhance their relationship with their mother and siblings
- enable them to express anger, hurt and resentment in a healthy way
- help them to develop relationships with children who have had similar experiences
- give them new experiences through activities and excursions
- identify specialised support required.

Individual needs may be met through one-to-one or group activities. The word 'program' can refer to anything from simple activities and group projects through to structured programs that have timelines and specific identified outcomes. When providing support programs to children it is essential that all workers have a clear understanding of Domestic Violence, the effects of Domestic Violence on children, Child Protection legislation and how to respond to disclosures of abuse.

The Protective Behaviours Program

In many refuges the Protective Behaviours Program has been incorporated into child support sessions and activities to assist children in being safe. Protective Behaviours is an adaptable living skills and safety program which enables people of all ages to develop strategies to help them deal with difficult situations such as Domestic Violence. The Protective Behaviours Program assists children to get in touch with their feelings, recognise safe and unsafe feelings, develop protective behaviours and develop safety networks. Each theme can be incorporated into fun and age-appropriate activities.

Training for workers is available through the Protective Behaviours Consultancy Group who also has a variety of written materials and resources available for working with all age groups, from preschoolers through to adolescents and adults.

Play groups

Play groups with mothers, babies and toddlers can be a positive way of enhancing the child/mother relationship as well as identifying child and mother support needs in a relaxed and fun environment. Age-appropriate activities such as painting, play dough, stamps, sand/water play, outdoor blocks and climbing tunnels etc. can be used to enhance interaction, communication and reinforce the importance of play in child development as well as child/parent relationships.

Pre-school and After-school Programs

Child support sessions that include age-appropriate activities such as crafts, painting, board games, dance/music, sports, excursions etc. help to build positive relationships between children and their

Child Support Workers. Children are given the opportunity to express their feelings, thoughts and concerns in a safe, supportive and fun environment.

Through spending time with the children in child support, the refuge and through discussions with their mothers, Child Support Workers can become increasingly aware of the needs of the child. These can then be addressed through specific child support activities or through referral to specialised services such as counselling, health or support agencies etc.

Holiday Programs

Many refuges provide holiday programs in the school holidays. This may vary from a structured timetable for each day, with activities taking place within the refuge as well as activities and excursions outside of the refuge, to activities carried out a couple of times a week. Some refuges may include ex-resident children and activities that also involve mothers and other siblings.

Many children's entertainment organisations are willing to giving free passes and/or discounts when approached by refuges. When taking children on excursions it is important that there are safety policies and procedures in place. This may include permission and information forms signed by the mother/guardian as well as emergency/medical treatment forms.

Programs Developed by Refuges

A number of excellent programs have been developed by refuges. Two of these are the '4 to 6 Club', developed by Tanderra Refuge and the 'Shazzam' program, devised by Bringa Refuge. Both of these programs are structured to address the specific needs of children who have experienced Domestic Violence. These programs have timelines and each weekly session is aimed at addressing a particular issue through play and fun activities. The programs involve assessment processes, parent involvement, handling difficult situations and behaviours, as well as closure and follow-up.

Evaluation of Programs

As in all aspects of service delivery it is important that the services and programs provided are regularly evaluated to ensure that we are meeting the needs of child clients. This can be done formally or informally.

Informal evaluation may occur through discussion with staff and clients, asking questions such as:

- Are we meeting the needs of all children in our service?
- Where are the gaps in service delivery to children?
- What's working well?
- What's not working and why?
- What can we do better and how?
- How can we provide a more child-orientated and friendly environment?
- How can we get feedback from the children themselves? Appropriate questionnaires?
Children's meetings?
- What do mothers/children think of our child support policies and procedures?
- Are there gaps in our child support policies and procedures?
- Do our current policies and procedures/case management practices etc. need updating?
- Are all staff aware of children's issues and needs?
- What skills/training do we need?

Formal evaluation can be carried out by an independent external body which may evaluate the whole service including child support. This type of evaluation often involves feedback from associated

services, staff and ex-clients. It is important that children are included in the ex-client feedback, if they are happy to participate.

New information, legislation and ways of working with children are continually being developed. It is our responsibility as Child Support Workers to be aware of these as well as to update our skills and be advocates for children within the refuge and the community.

A sample evaluation questionnaire is included at the end of this section.