

'CONNECTIONS'

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CONNECTIONS

A partnership research project between

LifeCare

Family Intervention Services

An Activity of

Baptist Community Services – NSW & ACT (A.C.N. 000 049 525)

&



Bankstown Community Health, Child Adult & Family Team

Park House for Children & Families

Women's Health

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Chronic domestic violence...acts of extreme aggression upon the mother, whose own history and current trauma have led her into a state of dissociation from aggression, that makes the cycle of fear and victimisation very hard to break... it leaves little room for reflection on her own state of mind, let alone that of her children. Both aspects of dissociation from fear and aggression cause any capacity to protect and think about children to break down in situations of violence.

(Jennifer McIntosh, 2000)

'Connections' is an innovative 8-week group program that exclusively focuses on rebuilding the damaged relationship between mother and child following domestic violence. It addresses the ongoing healing process of mother and child post crisis stage of living directly with domestic violence (although abuse may still be occurring through access visits). Mother and child both participate in the same group, which operates in a safe, supporting yet challenging way. One distinctive feature of the program is the combining of children's and adults' activities so that mother and child hear how the other thinks and feels about the effects of domestic violence on each other's lives.

Participants for the group are assessed on a two-fold basis. Firstly, the children must be between the ages of 6-11 years. Secondly, the mother must have addressed the issues of domestic violence either in an educational/support domestic violence group or through individual counselling. It is also preferable that the children would have also had the opportunity to address these issues either through group or individual processes.

Connections uses various strategies to help rebuild relationships, increase self esteem and improve communication skills between children and their mothers. Some of the issues covered in this process are:

- Recognising strengths
- Rebuilding trust in relationships
- Exploring the impact of anger on relationships
- Examining the impact of Domestic Violence on the mother child relationship
- Dealing with the 'fall out' issues resulting from contact visits

- Redefining appropriate boundaries in relationships
- Discovering how to have quality time that both mother and child can enjoy
- Exploring child protection issues post-domestic violence.

Strategies implemented to address these issues in the group process cover a variety of methods. Art therapy is used extensively as it provides a common ground where mother and child can meet on equal terms. Facilitator lead discussions are conducted with mother and child combined and/or separate dependent upon the topic of discussion. Gestalt exercises are utilised to provide a concrete framework to discuss abstract ideas. Games provide a fun, energy filled way of reinforcing issues discussed. Joint tasks are encouraged to help mother and child explore ways of discovering how to have quality time that both can enjoy. Story telling with the children is an invaluable tool when addressing child protection issues. Forum theatre allows both mother and child to rehearse scenarios as a way of problem solving. Relaxation is used as a technique for mother and child to bond.

Connections was established and continues to function as a partnership project between the Department of Health (South Western Sydney Area Health Service) and LifeCare (Family Intervention Services). This partnership between a government and non-government agency allows for shared resources which enhance service delivery to the community by:

- Collaboration of philosophical approaches:
 - Brings together the strengths of a child protection perspective with a feminist approach which helps protect children while supporting mothers effected by domestic violence.
- Collaboration of interagency knowledge:
 - Draws on the diverse experience of group facilitators to implement a wide range of experiential and interactive exercises both verbal and non-verbally based using a wide range of therapy modes.
- Collaboration of interagency resources:
 - Combines the resources of both agencies e.g. financial, venues, expertise, support, evaluation.

Connections began as a research pilot program funded by Bankstown Community Health seeding project grant in June 2000. Bankstown Community Health Child and Family Team invited LifeCare: Family Intervention Services to collaborate on this program. This initial pilot research program involved a draught of the initial **Connections** program, conducting one eight-week group and evaluating the group. The outcomes of this pilot indicated:

- The need for the program;
- The need to modify the manual as it stood;
- The need to further evaluate the program over a longer period of time; and,
- Successful collaboration between a government and non-government agency.

LifeCare: Family Intervention Services were then successful in gaining funding from Bankstown City Council to conduct and promote **Connections** over the 2000/2001 year while modifying the program. This was successfully achieved. The outcomes for this funding were:

- Further evaluation of the program;
- A modified program ready for printing;
- Printing of brochures and flyers;
- Advertising of the program through avenues such as: newspapers, interagency meetings and domestic violence liaison committees;
- The opportunity to present the program at 'Seeking Solutions' Australia's Inaugural Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Conference in September 2001;
- Requests for the program to be conducted in Campbelltown, Liverpool, Upper North Shore of Sydney, NSW Central Coast and Penrith;
- Opportunity to provide training for future group facilitators;
- Ongoing interagency partnerships;
- Creation of new interagency partnerships; and,
- Continued successful partnership between a government and non-government agency.

Further funding was recently received to produce a printed **Connections** manual. This manual will provide information on resources, literature reviews, philosophical approach and a reference section in addition to the manual itself. Domestic Violence training will be provided in conjunction with training on the use of the program for agencies wishing to implement the program.

Due to the intensive nature of the group, **Connections** requires several resources. Three specialist child/family therapy workers with experience in working with domestic violence are necessary. The venue needs to have 2 group rooms, 1 childcare room for siblings of group participants, kitchen and preferably 1 counselling room. Childcare workers need to have the skills and training to work with the siblings who have also witnessed/experienced domestic violence. Structured group facilitators supervision is also required due to the collaborative nature of the program.

Several forms of evaluation of the program have been conducted. Evaluation tools such as the DASS21 and the Cooper Smith Inventory have been used pre and post group. A weekly process evaluation of participants has been conducted both verbally and written. An impact evaluation was conducted via phone or personal interview 3 months post group. Some feedback gained via this assessment process was:

*"It (**Connections**) is really successful for building relationships. I'm learning to value her (8-year-old daughter) as an individual now. She has really opened up in the five weeks of coming to the group. She said to me in bed the other night 'guess who I love?' and I said 'Your mum, your grandma, your grandad...'. And she said 'I love myself'"*

"I think the group has really helped her a lot. I'm not just looking at her as a little child I have to look after, but more as someone who has thoughts and feelings and opinions. I'm valuing her and what she says and I'm listening to her"

"The whole group has been a new experience. There are things that you don't even know you are missing until it is put before you"

"The course has been a pleasant surprise"

*"It (**Connections**) has had a very strong impact on our relationship"*

“Maybe the fighting wasn’t all mum’s fault – sometimes dad just says things so that mum and me can’t have fun... I miss him but I never want to go back to the fighting... Mum and me have to keep finding things to make it okay to be by ourselves, like some of the things that you have helped make us do” (8 yr old boy)

“I thought that the course would be more technical and harder but because we have children we have to work at a different level. It’s good to relearn stuff with the kids”

“It’s positive. I didn’t realise how much that was on my mind – about disciplining my child without taking away her rights as a participant in this group. In other places that’s the way it is. Now I can be childish. We are the parents and we must tell the kids what to do. I haven’t found a space outside of my home where my child and I are equal... this group has confirmed a lot of stuff for me, We are on the right track now. I’m going to be open about DV from now on”

“It’s helped to bring us back together again. You cross over and find each other again”

“...now I’ve set some limits, made changes, they are different kids”

The financial assessment of the group recognised that, although the group is expensive to conduct (wages, resources, childcare for siblings, afternoon tea etc.), it is financially viable when compared to the cost of individual counselling for the same number of families. The participants also had greater results in a shorter period of time by the group process than would have been achieved in the individual setting.