

‘Connections’

A partnership project between

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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)

There is a wide body of knowledge around the impact of domestic violence on women. More recently, research has shown the devastating and long term effects of domestic violence on children (Moffit & Caspi, 1998, Cummings and Davies, 1994, Hartman, 1993 in McIntosh, 2000) Children, following violence, may be aggressive, may take on the role of the perpetrator or alternatively, may be very parentified and take on the role of looking after the family. They may be traumatised and may dissociate. It is very difficult for a mother, who is likely to be traumatised and depressed to provide a stable environment for very difficult children.

However, the impact of violence on women and the impact of violence on children have tended to be viewed as discrete. For women, domestic violence has meant recourse to the legal system. For children, it has been viewed as a child protection issue, with an understanding that it is the woman’s responsibility to ensure the safety of her children.

Until recently, nothing has addressed the breakdown of the relationship between mother and child caused by domestic violence. “Domestic violence combines the impacts of inescapable shock together with an acute or chronic deprivation of sensitive care giving. The latter, as much as the former, is the catalyst for psychological and developmental damage”. (Perry, 2000 in McIntosh, 2000)

One-way of understanding the impact of domestic violence on the mother / child relationship is through a systemic and feminist analysis. “A classical family systems paradigm views not only the individuals who comprise the family but their ways of relating to each other and the system as a whole, as a valuable source of information, resource and intervention. Therefore, a systems perspective encourages working with more than one family member wherever possible. When a feminist-informed lens is overlaid on the family systems perspective, mother assault is seen as a multi-dimensional phenomenon where issues of family structure and power differentials between family members are played out”. (Rabenstein & Lehmann, 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 following the crisis stage of living directly with Domestic Violence (although abuse may still be occurring through contact visits). Mother and child both participate in the same group (as well as having their own "space" in separate activities for mothers and children), which operates in a safe, supporting yet challenging way. One distinctive feature of the program is the combining of children’s and adult’s 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
- Problem solving techniques for children and mothers
- Exploring coping / defence mechanisms
- 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 as it provides a common ground where mother and child can meet on equal terms. Facilitator led discussions are conducted with mother and child combined or separate dependent upon the topic of discussion. Gestalt exercises are used 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 the:

- Collaboration of philosophical approaches:
Brings together the strengths of a child protection perspective with a feminist approach that helps protect children while supporting mothers affected 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 and extends the resources of both agencies. Eg. Financial, venues, expertise, support, evaluation.

‘Connections’ began as a research pilot program funded by Bankstown Community Health in June 2000. Bankstown Community Health Child and Family Team invited LifeCare: Family Intervention Services to collaborate on this program. This pilot research program involved using a focus group to assess the need for the group and the most helpful group intervention strategies, drafting 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 program as it stood
- The need to further evaluate the program over a longer period of time
- Successful collaboration between a government and non-government agency
- Self reports of behaviour changes by group participants

LifeCare: Family Intervention Services were subsequently successful in gaining funding from Bankstown City Council to conduct and promote ‘Connections’ over the 2000/2001-year. 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, Central Coast and Penrith
- Opportunity to provide training for future group facilitators
- Ongoing interagency partnerships
- Creation of new interagency partnerships
- Continued successful partnership between a government and non-government agency

LifeCare recently received further funding from Bankstown Community Council 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 program outline. 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 are not participating in the program, but have also witnessed/experienced Domestic Violence and who may well present with significant behavioural and/or

emotional problems. 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 in writing. 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 (8yr 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.

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