



Early childhood educators as partners in family support

Kaye Colmer

Gowrie
South Australia

Through the Looking Glass –a community project in parenting

...an innovative yet complex and sophisticated approach to building strong and healthy relationships within families and between young children and their parents:



- Multi-strategy
- Integrated
- Contributions from diverse workers
- Each contribution being equally valued, and
- Each being an equally valuable component of intervention.

What do we think families need?

- A one/right door approach
- Staff who are willing to make genuine connections with families
- A non-judgemental approach
- Consistent advice
- Advice & advocacy to locate services
- Services that simultaneously support adult/s & child/ren
- Longer term social connections within a supportive community.

What EC educators/services can provide

- A safe haven for families
- A non-stigmatised service
- Access to early education which supports children's health, wellbeing and learning
- Families have greater access to a PCG educator & relationship can be sustained with more frequency
- PCG is emotionally available
- Ongoing emotional containment for families
- Social connections within a community

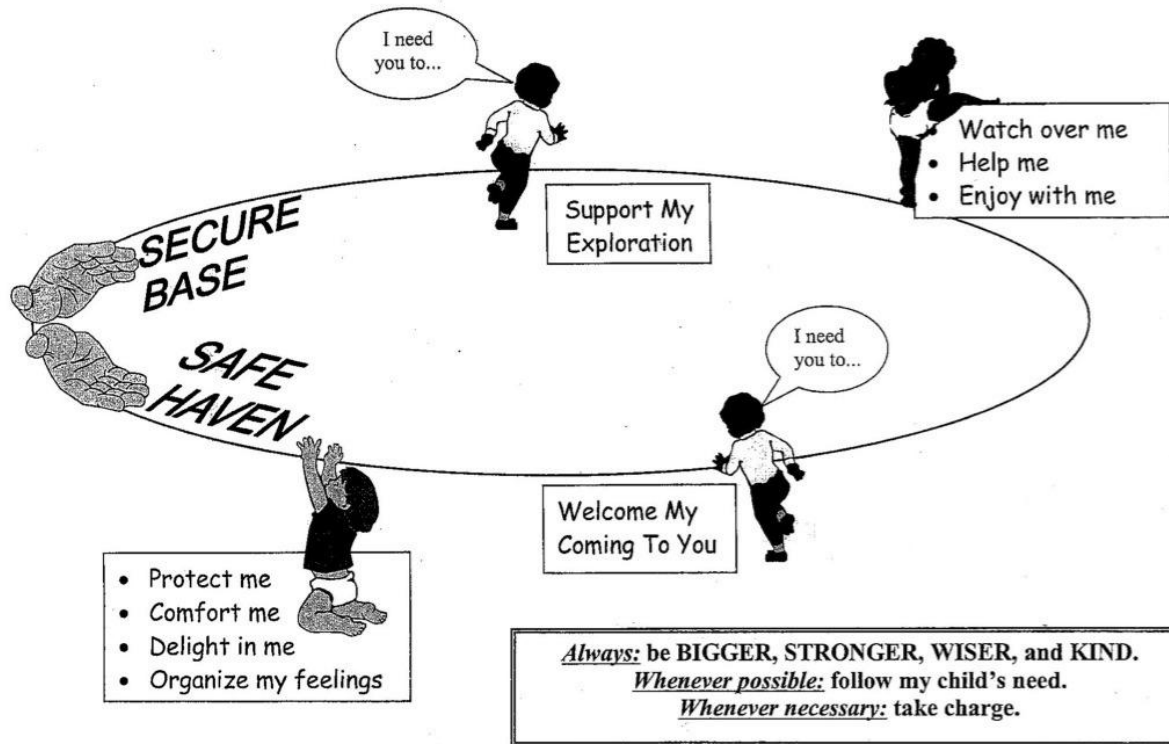
How does the project work?

- Families with relationship stress between parent & child
- Referrals from multiple agencies
- Intensive focus is on mother & child
- Therapeutic group run by 2 facilitators using multi-disciplinary approach offered to mothers (18 weeks)
- Children attend early childhood service 2 days /week
- A PCG educator is allocated to child & family
- Both clinician & PCG support parents & child
- Fathers groups

2000 Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin & Powell

CIRCLE OF SECURITY

PARENT ATTENDING TO THE CHILD'S NEEDS



A case study



- Serious relationship difficulty
- Baby fails to thrive
- PCG works with baby
- Mother participates in group
- Father attends Dad's group
- PCG supports mother to understand baby's feelings
- Mother begins to form relationship with baby
- Baby begins to thrive

"The child care centre has had a pivotal role assisting me to overcome my little family's barriers.

There were times when I felt that I hit a proverbial brick wall, and needed ideas and various other supports. [EC staff] were all available... when I needed that "bigger stronger wiser and kind" person to check back in with.

These people supported me in gaining confidence in my abilities as a mother and as a woman, in stabilising my family, sharing in my joy when things started to change noticeably, and building up my parenting esteem. This combination of knowledge, strategies and a genuine concern for families was vital to reunifying my family and strengthening our bonds."



*My child's
primary
caregiver is my
secure base*

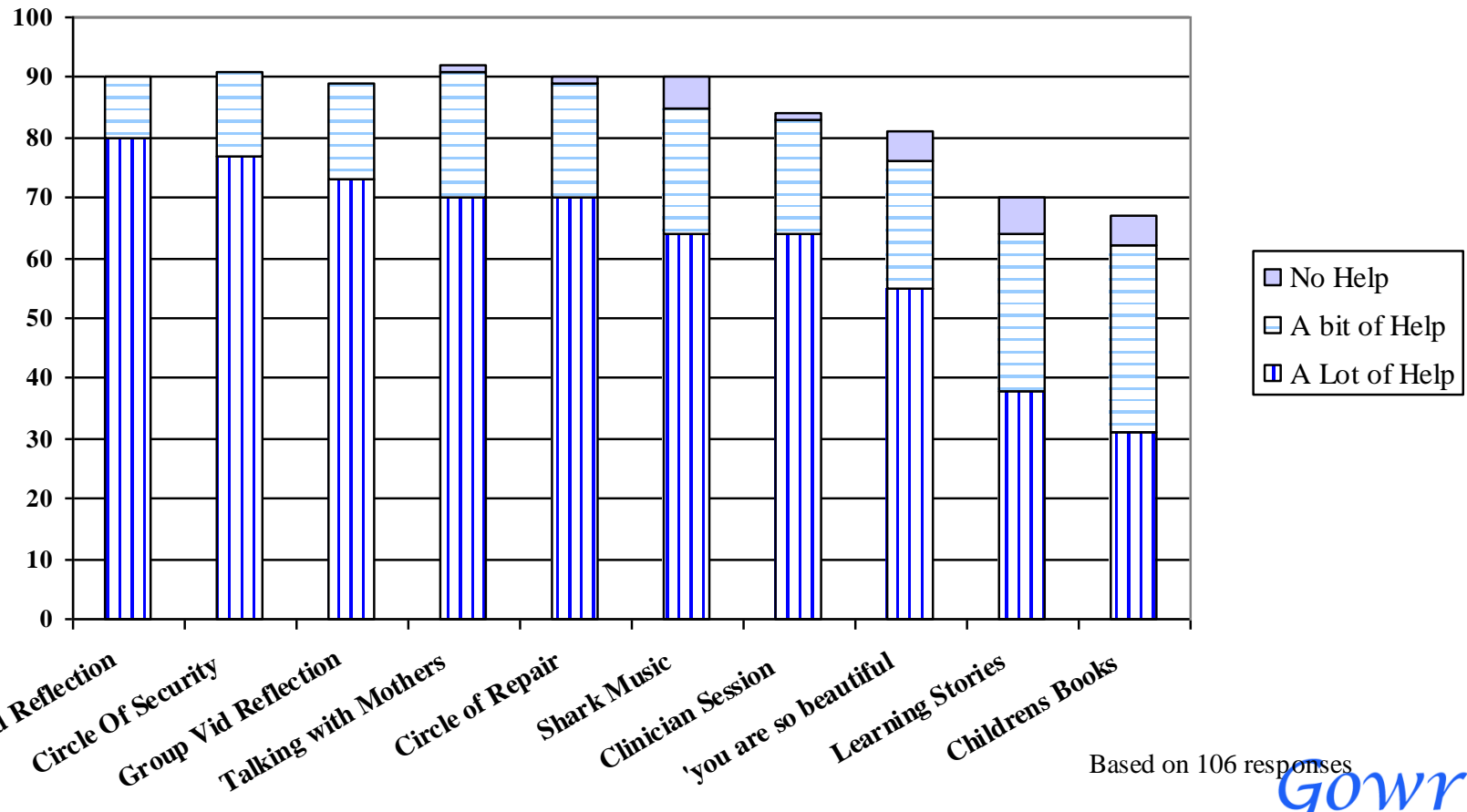
Gowrie
South Australia

Project outcomes

- In 3 years 106 mothers completed out of 118 enrolled.
- More than 8 in 10 mothers indicated that 80% of the project strategies helped them with regard to understanding their children's attachment needs.
- 3 months after project completion, 72% of mothers indicated they were highly satisfied with the way the project helped them feel closer to their child.



Mothers' assessment of helpfulness of Project elements to understanding their child's attachment needs



Based on 106 responses

Impacts on staff

- Sites reported that PCG practices were highly valued and irreplaceable.
- EC Staff viewed their work as becoming easier because of PCG practices.
- PCG actively supports the parent attachment goals.
- PCG works with the clinician and the parent to develop the parents underutilized capacity.
- By working in a multidisciplinary approach all staff were able to develop a shared appreciation of their roles and access a range of expertise to inform their practice.

- How does this approach compare with ways you have worked with families & children?
- How could a collaborative approach involving early childhood educators and community health workers enhance the outcomes for families and children in your service?

By working in an inter-disciplinary approach within an early education context, staff from multiple disciplines were able to develop a shared appreciation of their roles and access a range of expertise to inform their practice.



Complexity

...but TTLG challenges many of the conventional ways of providing support services to families.

“It therefore needs to be strong and its strength will come primarily from the quality of relationships amongst all of the participating workers who together are pioneering new approaches to working with young children and their parents.” Prof Frank Tesoriero

Relationships

“Relationship building and engendering trust are key to fostering participation by service users- including participation and decision making.”

“Nurturing and sustaining close relationships is vitally important, but intensifies the work demands on professionals in integrated services.”

Aylward & O'Neil 2009

Challenges for staff delivering the program

- Perceptions about status
- Hierarchies
- Tensions between strength-based & deficit based approaches
- Tensions about who the 'client' is
- Professional silos
- Competition
- Different organisational cultures

Tensions

- Preference to consult with colleagues from same discipline
- Privileging sharing of information within same discipline
- Discipline language & jargon
- Professional & intellectual competitiveness
- Failing to share client information on basis of confidentiality
- Desire for specific professional development for professional groups
- Assumptions & understandings that one part of the intervention was more significant than another

- How do you feel about this list of tensions experienced among project staff?
- Have you experienced any of these difficulties?
- How could they be resolved?

Supporting effective relationships

Tensions

- Preference to consult with colleagues from same discipline
- Privileging sharing of information within same discipline
- Discipline language & jargon
- Professional & intellectual competitiveness
- Failing to share client information on basis of confidentiality
- Desire for specific professional development for professional groups
- Understandings that one part of the intervention was more significant than another

Strategies

- Designing systems to bring staff from different disciplines together
- Measures to share new information & resources
- Joint professional development
- Joint professional group supervision
- Addressing confidentiality issues in Manual & ongoing dialogue
- Identifying key professional learning opportunities that could meet everyone's needs
- Promoting the unique nature of the project success as due to education & health working together

Beyond multi-disciplinary approaches

- Recognising the professional contribution of different disciplines
- Adopting a shared problem-solving approach drawing on evidence gathered by a range of professionals
- Sharing decision making across disciplines
- Work in ways that enable skills and knowledge to be transferred across traditional disciplinary boundaries, and encourage the generation of new trans disciplinary skills and knowledge

Measures to address tensions

- Induction
- Engagement - opportunities for staff to contribute & have a voice
- Clarification of roles and responsibilities
- Vision and Mission needs to be articulated, understood and formally agreed to by all parties
- Attention to structures and processes

Project solutions



- Flatten management structure
- Deliberately & constantly promoting respect for diversity
- Collaborative and shared professional learning
- Nurturing feelings of connectedness
- Building culture of cooperation and a sense of community
- Mutual respect for different professional knowledge bases
- Effective ways to work across disciplines
- Acknowledging each others' strengths & knowledge
- Opportunities for inquiry and critical reflection
- Dialogue about the challenges
- Mechanisms to explore tensions

Integrated 'whole of organisation' response is arrived at through:

- Participatory discussion with communities
- Careful consideration
- Strong theoretical base
- Grounded in an in-depth knowledge of the organisation, its aspirations, strengths and limitations

Press, Sumsion, Wong (2010)

Project design

- Structure
- Systems
- Processes
- Culture
- Critical reflection
- Leadership
- Professional support
- Professional development & learning

References

- Aylward, P. & O'Neil, M. (2009). *Through the looking glass: A community partnership in parenting*. Invest to Grow Final Evaluation report.
- Aylward, P., Murphy, P., Colmer, K. & O'Neil, M. (2010). *Findings from an evaluation of an intervention targeting Australian parents of young children with attachment issues: The 'Through the looking glass' project*. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 35, No. 3.
- Press, F., Sumsion, J. & Wong, S. (2010). *Integrated early years provision in Australia*. Charles Sturt University. A national research project commissioned by the National Professional Support coordinators.

kayec@gowriesa.org.au

Funding for this work from FAHCSIA