



CaraCare

A safe place for children to grow

**Group work Report
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Two Voices in Harmony (Pilot)
19 April 2016 to 7 June 2016**

TWO VOICES in HARMONY - (Pilot)

TWO VOICES in HARMONY is a new group work programme being offered to children who have been impacted by Domestic Violence. It is a resilience-based group programme, informed by Trauma Theory, which aims to support healing and strengthening connections between the primary carer, (mother), and her children.

Together, the family will make their own “Harmony Tree”. Through the creative process opportunities to reflect on individual and family strengths will be provided. The overarching theme is to foster and enhance positive family connections in a supportive, safe, predictable and fun environment.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The facilitators wish to thank CaraCare for the generous financial contribution, which enabled the family to attend this group work program together.

Thank you to the family who engaged in the process from start to finish. Each brought energy, enthusiasm and excitement each week.

We extend our thanks to Niamh Casey, Caseworker from Bonnies Support Service for referring the family.

Great thanks to our skilled volunteer, Conor McVeigh and finally to CEO, Mary Jo McVeigh for supporting this new group work programme.

SUMMARY

Background

Two Voices in Harmony is a recently developed group work programme designed to create a supportive space for children to heal from the trauma of domestic violence. Further, this group work process specifically aims to allow healing and repair work to occur in the parent, (mother), child relationships and sibling relationships.

This programme was designed by MaryJo McVeigh and is informed by Resilience, Trauma and Attachment Theories. Over the 8 weeks, Two Voices in Harmony provides a safe, nurturing, calm and creative space for family members to delight in each other and be well held and supported by two trained trauma therapists.

Purpose of Report

The aims of this report are,

- To document the progress of the family who engaged in this CaraCare group.
- To document feedback of the group participants
- To provide an evaluation of the Two Voices in Harmony Pilot.
- To make recommendations about the success of the group and any changes that may be needed for future groups.

Method of Data Collection

Demographic data was sourced from the referral information and the children's mother. A Pre and Post group Questionnaire for participants was developed and delivered at the start of the group and then during the last session. The data collected was qualitative. Children's feedback was recorded throughout the 8 week programme and examples included in the evaluation.

Participants

The participants were from one family (mother and her 4 children).

- All participants were victims of domestic violence
- The children were also reported to have experienced emotional abuse
- The children's age range was 8 to 10 years
- The children were 3 boys (two were twins) and 1 girl
- The family use English as their primary language in the home
- DV perpetrators – Birth father and subsequent male partners
- Mother has periods of significant mental illness and struggles to meet her children's emotional needs at these times
- The family had experienced homelessness on at least three occasions, which impacted mothers parenting capacity and the children's safety.

Observations

From the outset, all family members were enthusiastic and excited about making a family Harmony Tree together¹. Each week, mum and the children were given opportunities to reflect on their experiences, support each other and make suggestions about the activities. Facilitators encouraged children's participation throughout.

The feedback given by mum and the children was consistently positive. The family highlighted how much each enjoyed the "family time", being creative together, and coming to Cara House.

Facilitators noticed the impact on all family members of the positive modelling consistently adopted by workers in the group sessions. By using kind words, soft tones, calmly responding to issues and being curious, supported mum and the children to interact more thoughtfully and less impulsively and also to problem solve.

The children and their mother consistently reflected how much they loved hearing the facilitator's reflections at the beginning of each session, "The Noticings". "Noticings" are a core element used throughout all of the groups

¹ To ensure confidentiality, initials will be used when referencing the children (D, A, J, I)

offered by at Cara House and are used to highlight strengths and develop resilience.

The children were invited to be participatory in many of the activities and rituals throughout the sessions. The children were invited to lead opening and closing rituals, notice themselves and others and make suggestions about the processes. An example of this occurred after two of the siblings were squabbling and hitting each other. This opened a door for the children to be supported to talk about “safe” touch and share ideas for being safe together, whether at Cara House or at home.

PARAMETERS OF GROUP

1:0 Logistics

Bonnies Support Service, Canley Vale, referred this family to Cara House. Bonnies provides a range of supports to women and children impacted by domestic violence.

The first session held on Tuesday 19 April 2016, was the initial meeting with the family, and when the pre group questionnaires were completed. The sessions then continued each Tuesday afternoon starting at 4.00 and finishing at 5.30pm. There were 8 sessions in total with the final session held on 7 June 2016. This final session was a celebration of the process with the family, post group evaluations were completed and then the family took home their completed Harmony Tree.

1:1 Group Aims

- To foster and support healing and repair in the parent child relationships.
- To support positive connections between mother and her children and also in sibling relationships.
- To foster cooperation, problem solving, sharing, and creativity in a safe, supportive environment.
- To provide multiple opportunities for family members to experience success and to manage disappointment well.
- To co-create a new story for each of the participants, a story of strengths and success.

1:2 Participants

AGE	GENDER	HOUSEHOLD	ETHNICITY	TRAUMA HISTORY	OFFENDER
Siblings 10 yrs 9 yrs 8 yrs x 2 34 yrs (mum)	Siblings 1 boy (D) 1 girl (A) twin boys (I, J) 1 woman	Mother, 4x siblings,	Mother Maltese, Children Anglo/Maltese	Domestic violence (mum) Exposure to DV (children) Emotional Abuse (children)	Birth Father Mother

Figure One: Group participants

1:3 Facilitators

Two Cara House Clinicians, Liz Morrison and Manny Kassiotis, were the group facilitators. We were delighted to have the expertise of Cara House's very experienced group work volunteer, Conor Mc Veigh, join us as the significant support person in the group.

1:4 Group Process

The group facilitators thoughtfully planned out the details of each session. These planning discussions would occur during facilitator debrief sessions, (post session each week), and also be informed by group members presentations, skills and ideas.

Strengths cards were regularly used with family members during session closure to enable reflection about "self" and "others".

The ritual of "facilitator's Noticings" was a key element each week. These noticing's were recorded after each session and were presented to family members at the next week's session. These were shared observations of interactions, conversations, kindness and struggles that presented during a session. The focus on this sharing process being to highlight strengths,

attempts to tackle new things, managing difficult moments and drawing attention to pro social behaviours and kindness.

The overarching theme for every session was to enable safety in place and safety in connection.

This family had been adversely impacted by the trauma of domestic violence and the children each struggled, at times, with emotional regulation, safe touch and kindness with each other.

1:5 Session Structure

To provide safety, predictability, routine and connection for the family a thoughtful structure was followed for each session

- A group agreement was developed during the first session and themed around what each person thought was important for all to be mindful of to create a safe and fun space. There was additional discussion in a later session about “touch” and family members ideas were gathered and recorded to be mindful of for all the sessions around “safe touch”.
- Each week a light afternoon tea was ready for the family and all would gather around the kitchen table for an informal catch up and sharing how the day has been.
- All would then go to the curragh and the session would start with facilitators Noticings read out from the previous session. As we moved through the weeks, the children would take turns to read out the Noticings enabling participation in the rituals.
- Sessions always had a theme and specific activities.
- The family sourced the “Harmony Tree” shape and branches together. The tree’s terracotta pot was purchased and decorated by the family.



- Weekly, “decorating the tree activities” over the weeks included; planning the tree, (what is the meaning of the Harmony tree for the family?); choosing and using coloured wool and ribbon to Wrap the Branches; Securing the tree in a strong clay base (family worked as a team being led by mum to get this done); decorating the pot with all contributing; making “leaves” to hang on the tree with significant words to reflect safe family values; making crystal decorations (“be- dingle, be- dangles”) for the tree and each making clay mouldings to name self and contributions to the project.
- The family were offered a break for afternoon tea about 45 minutes in to the group. This enabled moments to pause, move and reflect.
- A closing ritual was adhered to each week. This would be inviting family members to name what each enjoyed about the session. Frequently Strengths cards were used and family members would choose a card that reflected their experience of self or another family member in the session. **(The reflections from one session as follows.... D: “I look after things well”; Mum: “I can do things by myself”; J: ‘I don’t waste anything’; I: “I bounce back when I am hurt”; A: “I am good at making things”).**

1:6 Children’s participation

Recognising the importance for children to be the co-creators of their own healing process, Clinicians prioritised children’s participation in the running of the group sessions. The children were encouraged to share their ideas, stories and equipment. They were able to take turns to lead parts of the sessions, read out the Noticings, and help with preparation and tidying up of afternoon tea. Always paced at what each could manage.

EVALUATION

Please note that all four children completed the same pre and post group questionnaire. Unfortunately, the mother completed two different forms therefore, it was not possible to measure her results.

2.1 Pre-group questionnaire

Thinking about how it feels to be safe, (in your mind and in your body) can you tell me what some of those feelings are?

A – I feel calm, trust and safe

D – happy, relaxed, peaceful

I – relaxed, happy, calm

J – holding hands with siblings when walking to the school and shops makes me feel safe and comfortable

All of the pre-group questionnaires were completed individually with the each child and with mum present. As observed previously the children would often glance at their mother for reassurance and support. The children were also observed at times to be both nervous and fidgety, common reactions for those affected by trauma. Their mother was encouraged not to actively participate in

the interview process, but would at times provide the reassurance the children were seeking.

What was evident throughout the pre-group interview process was that the children described a very strong attachment and commitment to their mother, and they all had a very strong sense of the roles and responsibilities within the family. As evidenced above, the children were able to articulate very clearly what it means for them to feel safe.

What do you think this group will be like?

A – doing art and listening, feeling good and comfortable

D – better, amazing, awesome

I – fun

J – fun, awesome

The group process had been explained to the children both by their mother and the Case Worker from Bonnie's. The children had previously attended other groups and had some understanding of group processes and structures. Even though the specific program itself was unknown to them, the children exhibited enthusiasm and some excitement during the pre-group interview.

2.2 Post group questionnaire

Thinking about how it feels to be safe, (in your mind and in your body) can you tell me what some of those feelings are?

A – happy feelings, I feel calm and comfortable

D – happy and excited

I – happy calm and safe

J – I am calm, I think I am happy, relaxed

Mum – riding and being on my bike, inner peace, calm and stillness

The post-group interview questions were completed one-on-one with the children, and without their mother present. By the end of the group both the children and their mother were able to enhance and consolidate in words their understanding about what it means to be safe, as well as expressing some of the different things in their life that help them to feel safe, and most importantly, to stay safe.

Now that the group is finished can you tell me any of the things that you liked about the group?

A – doing the tree wrapping, making the decorations, being co-operative with my brothers, facing the challenge of being with J during a particular session

D – how everyone co-operated, how everyone helped, how everyone had to be nice

I – doing art, doing work sheets, decorating the tree

J – we got to play with the sand, doing our "bidingles", sharing is caring

Mum – how the kids were nice to each other and put their creativeness into it

The final reflections were in accordance with the aims of the group. The connection and the attachment the family shares to one another were evident from the beginning of the group.

What became apparent fairly quickly, was that the family needed some support and guidance in communicating more effectively and positively with one another. In particular, the family needed support with problem solving and working together in a calm and harmonious way.

The children and their mother equally were able to reflect that being co-operative, working together, sharing thoughts and ideas and finding constructive and creative ways to express their feelings and emotions was something that they enjoyed doing, and that it was something they were keen to continue beyond the conclusion of the group.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Clinician observations and family feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The family experienced 8 weeks together, in a calm, creative and safe space to create their own Harmony Tree.
- Every item placed on the tree, every colour chosen, the decorations made and chosen symbolized the journey they shared as a family over the 8 weeks. Connection and Repair in relationship occurred.
- Facilitators agreed that the pre and post group measures for children and for their mother were inadequate in this pilot. On reflection, facilitators would recommend tools be refined and be in line with the measures used for the Wrapped in Angels groups. Specific resilience measures could then be provided and analysed.
- Facilitators also wondered about this group work process being utilized as a starting point for more streamlined therapeutic interventions for particular families.