

Project Case Study
Aisling Discoveries, Child and Family Centre
Kid Builders Project
Toronto, Ontario

1. Introduction

This case study of the Aisling Discoveries, Child and Family Centre, Kid Builders project is one of a series of case studies of projects funded at least in part through the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The case study first describes the project including: conditions prior to implementation, what the project involves and its objectives. It then describes project implementation to date. Finally, it notes outcomes to date, including comments from clients where available.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing these case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working in individual communities at the project level, to gauge the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative, and to determine what can be learned from the experiences of particular projects that may be applicable to others participating in the Initiative.

The case study is based on a review of the initial proposal for the project and other available documents describing the project and its objectives and how it fits into the community's plans to address homelessness, and on a series of interviews with people representing the following groups:

- managers and staff of the project
- community organizations working in areas related to this project that might share clientele with the project or whose service to people who are homeless might be influenced by this project

2. Description of the Project

Conditions prior to project implementation

Aisling Discoveries Child and Family Centre is a multi-service agency with eight years of experience working with homeless families in temporary shelters in Scarborough. Through their work and in talking with staff of shelters, children and their families the Centre determined that a project focusing specifically on the children was needed. Due to the often chaotic and stressful period parents experience while living in a shelter, usually only the emergency needs of their children are tended to. It was felt that a project focused on building strengths and coping strategies that the children could draw on during this period of transition and instability would be helpful to them both in the short- and long-term.

What the project involves

The Kid Builders project focuses on the development and delivery of mental health services to homeless children, 12 years of age and under, living in two shelters in the Scarborough area of Toronto. Funding from SCPI was received for one year from August 1, 2001 to July 31, 2002.

The project involves hiring a qualified person to work three days a week conducting and publishing research, developing a group intervention model and coordinating and implementing it in two local family shelters. In addition, the project supports a coordinated approach for all organizations offering mental health services to children who are homeless in Scarborough.

Objectives of the project

The objectives of the Kid Builders project are:

- review and compile information from literature and other sources regarding successful models of mental health intervention and support for homeless children;
- pilot and develop a model of group intervention and other supports focusing on the development of social skills and resilience in homeless children; and
- develop a coordinated approach from the various organizations offering mental health services to homeless children in the Scarborough community.

3. Implementation to Date

A qualified individual was hired to focus on the Kid Builders project. One of the first tasks was to gather information by conducting a literature review and speaking with service providers about best practices and models of mental health intervention and support for homeless children under the age of 12. “Kid Builders Project, Models of Mental Health Intervention and Support for Homeless Children and Their Families: Approaches to Fostering Resiliency and Coping Strategies,” was published in October 2001. One of the major findings was that having hope was a key aspect of resiliency in young children who are experiencing a stressful living environment. It was decided to call the group intervention the Hope Group, with a focus to foster hope in children and promote the development of social skills and competence.

The Kid Builders project ran two pilot Hope Groups, in the Family Residence and the Birkdale shelter. These shelters were chosen because they are the largest in Scarborough, which is in the catchment area of Aisling Discoveries, and the shelters are highly under-served. Aisling Discoveries also has a long history of working with these shelters.

A total of 14 children, aged 6 to 8, attended the Hope Group for a four-week period in November and December 2001. From January to June, 2002, nine Hope Groups were held for children 6 to 12 years of age, for a seven or eight-week period. Each group session was a 90-minute period with 8-10 participants.

Parents learned about the Hope Group primarily through shelter staff. Interested parents were asked to sign forms permitting their children to take part. Approximately 100 children attended a Hope Group. On average, families stay in a shelter for three to six months, so the majority of the children completed the Hope Group activities. The groups had on average an equal number of boys and girls. The children came from a variety of cultures, with the majority of their mothers being immigrants. A couple of children attended two groups.

Both shelters provided one staff member and space, either in the shelter or in a church basement. The staff member was usually the child advocate worker, whose job was to focus on organizing after-school activities for the children. Shelters also contributed to the snack for the groups.

The children decided the rules for each group. These followed a general theme: talk nicely, no put-downs of others, listen, keep hands and feet to yourself and keep toys at home. The Hope Group focused on exploring the following questions:

- What do you think hope means?
- What does hope mean to you?

- How can you show hope?

The facilitators used discussion, books, drawings and disposable cameras to help the children explore those questions. Most often hope was defined as a wish that was related to happiness, friendship and united families. Common symbols of hope in the children's drawings were things related to nature such as trees, flowers, rainbows and sunshine. Children were asked to photograph people and things most special to them and to rank their pictures in order from most to least special. The older children usually took pictures of friends as being most special and the younger children ranked their mothers highest. Other most frequently occurring subjects were siblings, themselves, teachers and school friends, shelter staff, babies, even where not related, favourite old toys, plants and their beds. Many photographed trees and sunsets. Several children took photos of food, microwave ovens, and the refrigerator.

Generally, it was found that children do have hope despite difficult circumstances, and do learn new coping strategies. Younger children were more focused on the present and older children thought more about the future. The children became increasingly anxious concerning what the future might hold and are less inclined to remain convinced that they will have a new family home. This is reflected in their drawings. They either stop drawing houses and/or exclude themselves from their pictures.

In some groups, where participants had a chance to sit and have a snack together, it was found that the shared food and the companionship facilitated discussion. In groups where there was no opportunity for everyone to sit and eat together, food did not play such a dominant part in the conversation.

4. Outcomes to Date

The children were asked to do a simple pre- and post-Hope Group evaluation. Some quotes from the evaluations are:

“Hope is about believing in the future.”

“Hope is more possible than wishes. Wishes don't always come true.”

“Hope means to care and nothing we say about hope is wrong.”

“I hope to be successful and smart at school and finish my homework.”

“I hope to live in a castle with my whole family.”

“I hope to have a hamster when I move into my new home.”

Parents were asked to fill out a form that helped to describe their child's behaviour pre- and post-attendance, to help the Kid Builders staff get parental input into identifying any changes in the children's behaviour. Often parents would fill out the pre- and post-form the same way, indicating there was no change in the child's behaviour. There may be

numerous reasons for this reaction, but the staff interpreted it as an indication that more time is needed in supporting parents through the evaluation process.

Some changes in the implementation of the project occurred, for example, when children returned from school sorting them by age took too much time and energy. To change this, two workshops were held for all ages and this went more smoothly. The research suggested that having siblings in the same group also worked to most children's advantage, especially when families were fragmented and the children were required to a certain extent to depend upon one another.

Quarterly inter-agency community meetings were held to organize and evaluate the work of the Hope Groups. Questions such as: How do we (Aisling Discoveries) enhance and foster hope in children who are homeless, continued to be discussed.

Inspiring Hope Together, a presentation of Scarborough Program and Partnerships of eight agencies servicing the homeless, was held in May 2002. This meeting helped the 90 people who attended to share information and build or strengthen relationships and networks.

Preliminary observations

While it is premature to make any assessment of the impacts of the Kid Builders project on the lives of its many clients in the longer term, it is possible to make the following preliminary observations:

- The reality that children under the age of 12, who are living in Canada, are homeless is difficult for many to accept. In their advocacy work, Aisling Discoveries spends a lot of time helping people understand what homelessness means for children. For example, Kid Builders staff made a presentation in January 2002 to the Metro Hall, Alternative Housing and Services Committee, which formed the main focus of the discussion period.
- A great deal of effort is needed when working with front-line staff at the shelters. Shelter staff acknowledges that there is a need for the program, yet they are already overworked in stressful jobs. To add another task, such as helping to organize children for the groups or support parents and children with any particular aspect of the Hope Group project, has proven to require a lot of ongoing time and effort developing and maintaining relationships with staff.
- In half of the evaluations, the children made mention of the snacks. The facilitators interpreted this to mean that the children were also emotionally hungry

and the group snacks provided not only nutrition but an ‘emotional feed’ while sitting and talking together.

- The Hope Group has reaffirmed through its work that each child has unique needs. The facilitators thus need to have a broad-based understanding of the variety of potential needs of the children they serve.
- The Hope Group is working to assist the children in reflecting on the concept of hope and on developing new hope-engendering strategies.

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