



Solving the Jigsaw

A Clinical Review of Group Process and Content

Executive Summary

By Lisa Milne, D.Psych

Consultant: Jenn McIntosh, PhD

March, 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Solving the Jigsaw is a school-based program in the Loddon Campaspe region of Victoria that seeks to change the ‘culture of violence’ and build a ‘culture of well-being’. It promotes constructive thought and action for children on issues of pro and anti-social conduct, increasing self-knowledge, resilience and reducing the effects of trauma on those who have lived with violence.

This paper summarises the findings of an in-depth internal review of the current clinical material in the *Solving the Jigsaw* program, conducted by Family Transitions in 2005, and commissioned by EASE. The review was based on careful analysis of the written materials that support the program, including the training manuals, and on a complete set of videotaped sessions that cover each session in one program. The material was sourced from one particular 40-week program run with a class of Grade Five and Six children. The review aimed to inform and refine the group approach, and to suggest directions for revision where required.

Family Transitions

Family Transitions is a child and family psychology clinic in Melbourne, with a high national profile in research and program development. It specialises in the treatment of family based trauma, and the study of processes that help to ameliorate poor outcomes for children. The principal author of this report, Dr. Lisa Milne, is a highly experienced child psychologist and researcher, whose combined clinical and research skills have been brought to bear on this current review, enabling a finely tuned evaluation of program content and assistance for the *Jigsaw* team with their next phase of professional development. The Director of Family Transitions, Dr. Jenn McIntosh, was a consultant to this review. She has been an active writer and presenter in the Domestic Violence field for many years, contributing to national programs such as the “*Point of Contact*” prevention project for children, auspiced by the Federal Office for the Status of Women.

Program rationale and structure

The need for the *Jigsaw* program is founded in current Australian research statistics. A survey published by the Australian Institute of Criminology, *Young Australians and Domestic Violence*, found that up to 25 percent of young people aged between 12 and 20 all over Australia had witnessed parental violence against their mother or step-mother. Australian rural communities had greater rates of domestic violence than large cities. The economic, social and health costs of domestic violence are far reaching. Domestic violence has been shown to have an affect on: children's emotional and behavioural development; self-esteem; cognitive functioning; personality style; initiative and impulse control problems; and is associated with child psychiatric problems (McIntosh, 2002¹, 2003²). The cycle of violence is evidenced by research suggesting that between 60 - 75 percent of families with domestic violence have children who are also battered³.

Solving the Jigsaw is organized as either a twenty or forty week class-based program, run for one hour a week for the duration of the program. The program is run by trained facilitators, external to the school, who have undergone a twelve month training program and who received on-going supervision. The entire class participate, including the class teacher. There is time allocated outside of the program for individual consultation with children and teachers, as required. There are parenting programs linked to the classroom program. but these are not mandatory.

The program follows a predictable structure. Each session commences with a 'catch-up' where children have the chance to reflect upon their week using metaphors such as flowers, weather, animals etc. Then content-based modules are run, with each module lasting for one or more sessions. Central to the program is the understanding of the role of power and control over others to the culture of violence. Children are taught to identify types of power, abuse and violence and the processes and culture

¹ McIntosh, J. (2002) Thought in the face of violence: a child's need. *Child Abuse and Neglect: The International Journal*, 26, 229-241.

² McIntosh, J. (2003) Entrenched conflict in parental separation: Pathways of impact on child development. *Journal of Family Studies*, 9(1), 63-80.

³ Stover, C.S. (2005). Domestic violence research: What have we learned and where do we go from here? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 20, 448-454.

that develop around power, that keep violence a secret. The facilitators work to validate the lives and experiences of the children; to help the children feel at ease; to develop trust, group bonds and caring within groups; to facilitate genuine engagement and the constructive resolution of conflict.

Findings of the Clinical Review

This review provided input to the *Jigsaw* team on their overall program content, the broad approach to group process in the classroom, and the clinical micro-skills of assisting children to gain the most from the curriculum. Whilst not a therapy group, *Jigsaw* is an educational program with invaluable therapeutic potential, and the group process needs to be well managed by leaders to maximise and safeguard the emotional outcomes for children.

Overall, the review found the program to be a highly valuable and innovative approach to violence prevention in the school system. The content is extremely well thought through, based on solid empirical evidence, and presented in a forum that actively engages and sustains children in increasingly higher levels of reflection on the nature of violence, and their role in prevention. The group process is overall well handled. Some areas of micro skill development were identified, to further enhance what is a unique program. Specific program strengths are highlighted below.

Strengths of *Jigsaw*

- The process of highlighting and challenging society's ideology e.g. gender issues, self-regard, culture of violence
- Presentation of material that was confronting and highly relevant to the experiences of the children – as it evolved directly from their own experience
- Facilitator's ability to create a warm and genuine environment to assist the children work through complex and emotional issues
- The provision of a protective environment by involving the class teacher who could then offer on-going support as needed
- The use of a vibrant of range of activities

- Use of catch-phrases such as “*silence causes it to continue*” to provide a means of retaining important information,
- Repetition and layering of material which helped the children to see patterns of behaviour
- Provision of concrete strategies for breaking the cycle of unwanted behaviours such as violence.

Program Content

In general, the content of each of the modules was excellent. It was appropriately pitched for the age and needs of this population and presented in an engaging way. The provision of handouts was a good idea, and these were done well, with creative animations making them attractive to this age group. The program used a range of experiential activities to enliven the issues for the children. The activities that worked particularly well included: catch-ups; role play; interviewing; brainstorming; relaxation and reflection; and body stencils. The review challenged *Jigsaw* staff to continue to think about presenting complex, abstract concepts in a way that can be easily grasped by children of varying ages and developmental levels.

Group Process

Solving the Jigsaw was evaluated in terms of its psychological safety, soundness of group practice and potential to effect change. The evaluation found that *Jigsaw* met most of the key-criteria for successful group work, as specified by Meyers and Jones (1993)⁴, who describe the criteria for successful group work as including: Allowing a sense of interdependence among group members; encouraging individuals’ accountability to the group; provision of frequent face-to-face interaction for promotion of group goals; and allowing for the development of social skills.

The program has been successful in creating a consistent environment, time and place for the children, thereby creating predictability and trust, an essential component in facilitating internal change. The program offers the children a valuable

⁴ Meyers, C., & Jones, T.B. (1993). *Case studies promoting active learning – Strategies for the college classroom*, 103-119. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

opportunity to experience supportive on-going relationships with adults who care about their personal well-being, and promotes the development of that capacity between the children.

The program was considered to be psychologically safe. The children help establish the group rules, which then form the foundation of a safe and secure environment in which they can express thoughts and relate experiences knowing they will be heard, supported and helped if necessary. No topic was banned – children were encouraged to discuss openly anything they wanted or needed to. Nobody is blamed or admonished for their thoughts or opinions, but they are challenged to think of their behaviour and the behaviour of others differently.

The material covered in each session is presented in a ‘layered’ way. That is, the key concepts are presented in multiple ways, such as in the class activity, in the individual follow-ups and conversations with the children. The layering was an effective way of integrating new ways of thinking.

The aim of the group is to bring about a change from a culture of violence to a culture of well-being, and this will occur through change in the way the children represent relationships. It is not enough to simply teach children how to relate. Internal change requires *process* in addition to connecting experience to its meanings. While *Jigsaw* is not a therapeutic group *per se*, the process is therapeutic in that it brings about internal change. The current review emphasised the importance of allowing processing time within each session, by supporting children to be able to work through a variety of issues within the group context.

Counselling Micro-skills

Jigsaw's strength is its potential to use the *process*, by emphasising communication, collaboration and participation and support and encouragement of group members, as a means of conflict resolution. Through this process, learning is achieved, but more importantly a capacity is developed to facilitate reflection upon one's own experiences. Students are prepared for the process with knowledge and skills, accompanied by continuous support.

Some issues around group facilitation micro-skills were raised by this review and discussed through an internal professional development process. In particular, an overuse of a “question-answer” approach was discussed with the *Jigsaw* team, and alternatives to sustaining engagement of children were discussed. All issues were suitably addressed and associated adjustments to practice will be incorporated in subsequent *Jigsaw* programs. While *Jigsaw* is not a counselling session, the importance of communication skills to the group process means that *counselling microskills*⁵ should be used as the basic method of communicating with the children. They require attention to the verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication. There are a range of microskills, but the basic, most useful, microskills include⁶: active/intentional listening; empathy; unconditional positive regard; paraphrasing/reflection of content; reflection of feeling; and asking minimal questions. In general, the program achieved consistent use of: active listening; empathy; and unconditional positive regard. The program staff were supported in their continued use of a microskills approach to working with children.

Team work and back-up

The review provided guidelines for *Jigsaw* staff to help classroom staff to embrace the philosophy of the program. It is important that classroom staff have an understanding of the rationale for the process and activities to enable them to best support the facilitators in achieving the program goals. In a program such as this, it is essential that there is professional back-up to support those children in need. The individual consultations enabled a more detailed exploration of the problem than could be done in the class. This person must have specific training in counselling children (or adolescence, depending on the age of the young person) and it would be preferable that that person was a member of the school staff (e.g., a school counsellor), although it is understood that this is not always possible. This is an

⁵ There are numerous references for counselling microskills. They should be taught and practiced, as part of the facilitator training, particularly if the facilitator does not have formal training in counselling skills.

⁶ Geldard, D. *Basic personal counselling: A training manual for counselors* (3rd Ed.) Sydney: Prentice Hall.

opportunity to engage with an individual child on a deep level and effect internal change.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, this review concluded that *Solving the Jigsaw* is a valuable and worthwhile program for the students involved. While rigorous and continual internal review is necessary in any program, the current group as it stands, is child focussed and committed to making the lives of each child better. Having laid a 'psychological foundation' in the primary school years, consideration should be given to an extended version of the program through the middle school years, with all the challenges of managing adolescence conflict that brings. Clearly, this is an innovative and worthwhile approach to breaking the culture of violence and promoting a culture of wellbeing amongst children in an at-risk population.

It is recommended that:

- The internal review process continues
- Ways of developing the parenting program, linked to *Jigsaw* are investigated
- The long-term training course and professional supervision that is currently provided is protected – this cannot be compromised
- A controlled research design to measure the program's effectiveness is implemented to determine long-term outcomes.

Dr. Lisa Milne (Principal Researcher)

Clinical Psychologist

Family Transitions

Dr. Jenn McIntosh (Consultant)

Director

Family Transitions