

Information about working effectively with vulnerable service users in group work

Andrew King
Groupwork Solutions
info@groupworksolutions.com.au

The table below outlines key characteristics experienced by vulnerable service users and how they can be responded to in parenting education group work:

Lack of basic trust:

- parents who experienced abuse as children...isolate.
 - changing the attitude... “that no one can be trusted” and “I won’t be missed, if I don’t go... attitude”
- Recruit possible group members using a personal approach rather than scatter advertising approach. This involves asking other professionals to strongly recommend your group and use introductory phone calls as much as possible
 - Work in partnership with a variety of agencies - all you need for those services to supply is a list of people who have expressed some interest and the service users approval for you to contact them
 - Work closely with Family Support Agencies and Statutory Child Protection Agencies
 - Contact or visit participants before group begins
 - Integrate the parenting groups with the home visits and case work the families receive (may need to occur outside of the group setting)
 - When the group commences, establish ground rules and avoid name tags – use the name exercise
 - Follow-up people who miss a session

Negative experiences in traditional learning situations:

- have had negative experiences often in school/ family setting
 - low literacy level
 - creates barriers to learning
- Avoid references to courses or teaching
 - Simple instructions and limited written information
 - Value the full variety of learning styles that people have i.e. Thinking - Feeling - Doing and Watching
 - Value the development of new learning experiences that involve open discussion and be less task driven
 - Make learning easier and more fun – identify what barriers programs create
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Cognitively some parents have difficulty conceptualising:

- *difficulty conceptualising and comprehending cause and effect*
- *problem with many packaged parenting courses*
- *see parts rather than the whole - often react to immediate situations or conflict*

- Maximum use of active exercises and visuals
- Use cartooning on handouts
- Develop and work with participants' choices and options for dealing with situations

Deprived Childhood experiences:

- *limited experience of un-conditional love*
- *generally, no clear notion of nurturing, generation of love and happiness*
- *limited control over life's consequences - simply react*
- *over use of the hurting child role – reacts to others when they are hurt or upset*

- *need to accept and move beyond the past*
- *focus on letting go - moving on...discuss safe and appropriate personal life experiences early in group life*
- *Use therapeutic-educational group work techniques that combine open discussion formats and*
- *Develop and focus on emerging strengths in each participant*
- *Allow participants to develop new images of themselves and their children*

Low self esteem

- *experienced many put-downs*
- *often assumed responsibility for own childhood problems*
- *message they received emphasised that they were no good*

- *Stand in opposition to poor self-esteem messages - welcome service users by name, use and value people's names (even if we make mistakes)*
- *Avoid use of name labels, use the name game to maximise fun and learn names and allow people to make safe mistakes*
- *Always value difference in the group*
- *Use exercises that build participants' self esteem*
- *When focusing on building self esteem in children - parents need to build it in themselves first*

Powerlessness:

- *believe themselves to be powerless over situations, feelings*
- *children often blame themselves for situations*

- *Focus on the development of our real 'power' as parents - not smacking or yelling*
- *Develop new messages about possibilities, confidence and choices*
- *Allow participants as much power in running session as possible without changing the overall focus and purpose of the group*

Pessimism:

- focus on negative, 'it won't work'
 - reiterate that nothing else can be done – 'have tried everything'
 - Encourage at all times
 - Offer small challenges and provide feedback
 - Reinforce and celebrate progress
 - Emphasise the alternate story - a time it did work
 - Acknowledge and work with differences in the group
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Isolation:

- families often have little support or networks
 - no-one to turn to when problems are experienced
 - Create sense of belonging – appreciation between group members
 - Develop in the group formal and informal buddy system of supports - follow-up
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Crisis - ridden lifestyles:

- Live life at the mercy of crises - no control
 - few routines, traditions etc
 - experience high levels of confusion, fear, anxiety, dependency, mood swings
 - Use a regular structure in the group
 1. warm-up exercise
 2. review of last week
 3. main theme
 4. closure
 - Slow down people's story - work with body language and provide new insights that emphasise self control
 - Provide between group sessions support and individual follow-up
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Lack of experience in group situations:

- little experience in groups
 - often make inappropriate comments and disclosures
 - scare off other members who are less chaotic
 - Follow tangents rather than stating a clear point
 - Build on strengths
 - Focus group when necessary
 - Stick with ground rules
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Difficulty in implementing techniques describe:

- child development issues overshadowed by major issues facing family
 - Need to balance of focus on family issues and child development needs
 - Organise content around family realities needs to be qualified to emphasise the necessity of a clear balance of parenting and child issues
 - Practice new skills in group, partner situations
 - Work with parents and children together
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