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Facilitating life-skills through group programs;

A community initiative aimed at promoting independence and social integration for children with vision impairments.

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CARLIA:

Good afternoon.

My name is Carla Rix, and I am an Occupational Therapist at Vision Australia Bendigo. Together with my colleague Steve Monigatti (Adaptive Technology Consultant, Trainer and Recreational Development Worker) we welcome you to the presentation of: *Facilitating life-skills through group programs; A community initiative aimed at promoting independence and social integration for children with vision impairments.*

Outline of presentation

- Vision Australia (Bendigo) and Children's services
- History and development
- Current program
- Benefits of group therapy
- Outcomes and findings
- Questions and discussion



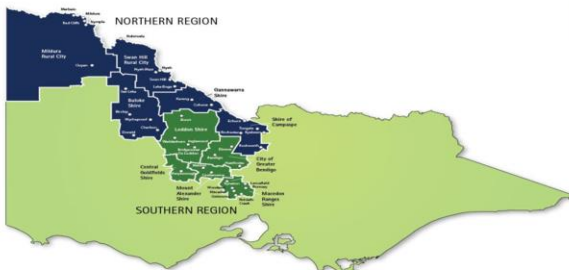
Participants orientating to oven settings

Carlia:

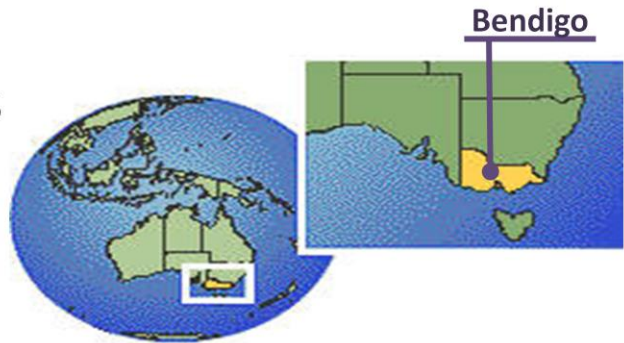
Today we are presenting on one Vision Australia Bendigo's group therapy programs - our School Holiday program. The outline of this presentation will cover information on Vision Australia Bendigo and our Children's services, the history and development of the program; and our current program model and outcomes thus far.

Vision Australia - Bendigo

- Bendigo region
- Client base / demographics
- Children Services



Bendigo region catchment map of Victoria



STEVE:

Our Vision Australia local centre is located in Bendigo - a regional city 150 kms north west of Melbourne in Victoria. We service Bendigo and surrounding rural townships within an approximate 200km radius.

Our total client base is x with x amount being children.

Our children services utilise a Transdisciplinary team approach that promote the key life skill areas of: independent skills, social skills, career education, orientation and mobility, recreation and leisure.

School Holiday program snap shot

- Commenced 2009
- 2 day quarterly program
- Participants aged between 5-18 years
- Parent-to-parent support group
- Structured and semi-structured activities



Participants sharing lunch at the School Holiday program

CARLIA

The School Holiday program caters for both primary and secondary school aged children.

The program runs four times per calendar year for two days each holiday period. We base the program around structured and semi-structured aged appropriate activities, that involves group participation facilitated by therapy staff.

Therapy staff also provide a supportive parent-to-parent group during one day of the program.

This is a photo of our participants eating lunch – on this particular day, the format included the group shopping for ingredients and then cooking a shared lunch.

This task encouraged participants to exercise the skills explored at the holiday program – such as navigating their way through the supermarket, confidence to request help locating products within the supermarket, money management to purchase items, and domestic occupations such as using knives and operating cooking appliances.

History and development of the program

- School-aged clients with similar needs and goals;
- Group therapy developed for clients to work on age appropriate activities collaboratively
- Teach independent life skills and reduce impact of social isolation
- Challenges - Hatlen (1996)



Two girls playing connect-four

Carlia

The initial concept for a children's program was developed in 2009, after our several staff noticed a pattern of addressing similar goals for clients that could be best achieved as part of a group therapy program - where skills could be developed in a collaboratively manner.

Our first program consisted of only four early secondary school participants that was developed to explore age appropriate activities such wardrobe management, food preparation, using cutlery and accessing the internet. During the program we were astonished that some participants were using their hands to eat, had little engagement in basic meal preparation, and a reduced capacity to dress themselves. We also observed that their social interaction skills were underdeveloped.

These basic activities became the foundation of our program to teach, motivate and encourage participants to attain independent life skills.

Over the years, the program has also explored other age appropriate activities such as personal grooming, shopping, money management – including using ATM's, and simple social interactions like having a photo taken.

Hatlen's 1996 study of the Core Curriculum for blind and visually impaired students, correlates that young people challenged by vision loss are less willing to participate in school or social activities and have behavioral and emotional problems that can further hinder their efforts at learning, socialising and interacting. Our school holiday program aims to teach basic life skills in a relaxed and trusted environment where children can develop skills to become more confident to reduce of impact of social isolation.

This photo shows two girls playing connect-four.

How each program is developed

- Review of each child's goals as per Individual Service Plans at Vision Australia.
- Feedback forms
- Informal conversations
- No set type of activity



Participant at SEDA

Steve

The activities of the school holiday program are developed using several inputs

- Each client's ISP is reviewed
- Feedback forms completed by both the kids and their parents
- Informal conversations

Activities in general cover recreation, Social skills, life skills, cooking, dressing, shopping, careers, financial planning, holiday and trip planning.

Pathways to the SHP

- Visiting teacher referral or school.
- Referral after other Vision Australia services e.g. low vision clinic
- Word of mouth
- Guide Dogs Victoria 'Spy Kids'
- Referral from other VA services



Steve

The children who have attended the Bendigo School Holiday program have found their way to the program via a number of sources including referral from the Visiting Teacher Service, referral from within Vision Australia such as attending low vision clinic and from other Vision Australia's services. Word of mouth has also been significant when parents have shared their knowledge – thanks to the Dot power program!

Benefits of group therapy

- *Group therapy*
 - Shared experience
 - Roles of therapists facilitating
 - Safe learning environment and sense of belonging
- *Peer-support*
 - Role in transitioning
 - In addition to peers at school
 - Developing sense of identity



Participants dressing manikins

Steve:

The benefits of group programs have been widely researched and are a great way to practice skills in a fun and social setting. The atmosphere of a group setting allows children to:

- connect with their peers to gain support and reduce the sense of isolation.
- increase self esteem, self confidence and self efficacy through the sense of belonging and by having successful experiences as an individual and as a participant in a team.

This photo shows two participants dressing a manikin in this suit and tie ready for work.

Benefits of group therapy

- *Promoting and enabling skills for independence*
 - Breaking away from the family
 - Developing self-confidence
 - Sacks & Wolffe (2006),
 - Bowen, (2010), Roe, (2008)

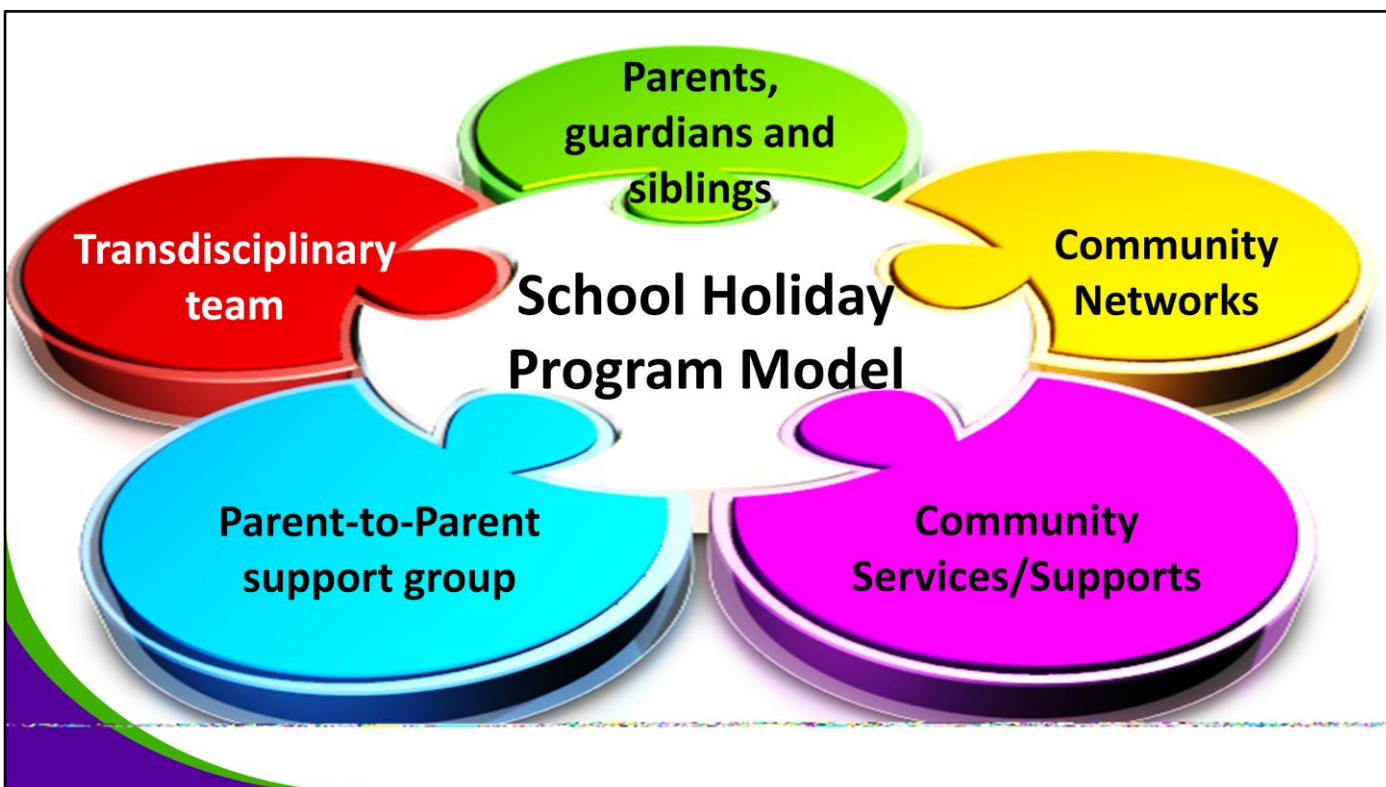


Photo booth activity

Steve:

Feedback from our clients parents demonstrates that participants have become more confident in performing activities explored in the group therapy program than they were previous to attending. Eg: using cutlery.

The photo included shows some participants in dress ups as part of introducing the concept of the photo booth. The idea of this activity was when one participate came up to us asking what was a photo booth and provided the example when he was getting shoved around and into and out of a box without any idea what was going on.



Steve

Presented on the screen is a relationship matrix of our program model.

The overall goal of our program is to empower children with the skills and confidence that will enable them to lead socially successful, productive and independence lives.

To do this, the program is developed within the existing community environments of the child, and utilising existing services and networks within their community.

For example:

- The yellow ring refers to community networks such as the local YMCA. Vision Australia has worked extensively to provide swimming instructors with the training to support our clients. VA Bendigo also has a strong link with the Visiting teacher service.
- The pink ring includes community services and supports such as Guide Dogs Victoria who have provided some Orientation and Mobility instruction within the program.
- In the blue ring is the 'Spin off' parent to parent group which provides opportunity for parents to meet for social connection, support and exchange shared experiences.
- The green ring represents the parents, guardians and siblings which are actively included within this group to enhance family inclusion and acceptance.
- * The red ring signifies VA's Transdisciplinary team approach which includes Adaptive Technology, Occupational Therapy, Orientation and Mobility, Orthoptics, Case Management, Recreational Development and paediatric specialists from Melbourne including: Physiotherapy, Speech Therapy, early education and counselling.

CARLIA

This program model is also supported by the theoretical framework of the 'Person Environment Occupational Performance (the PEOP)' as discussed by Baum & Christiansen 2005.

This model acknowledges the personal influences and environmental factors that impact on a persons overall occupational performance and participation in life. Our role is to take into account the person and environment considerations then tailor the occupation (which is the activity) and performance needs to suit in order to achieve success.

Outcomes

- Key emerging themes:
 - Increased motivation
 - Friendships development
 - Improved social skills
 - Increased hope for future goals
- Client feedback



Participate in a sail boat

Carlia:

After each program the children and their families are invited to take home and complete a written evaluation of the two-day program. Outcome measures focus on the perceived benefits of participation, including socialization, skill development, efficacy and meaningfulness.

Key themes emerging from the evaluation feedback indicates children have developed and maintained therapeutic skills through 'real life situations' and enjoyed the opportunity to participate in a range of new activities. Over the four years of this program, staff have observed:

- Increased motivation and ambition to participate in activities and improve skills development
- Friendships and relationship development, including a sense of belonging. Friendships have continued externally to the program, including friendships between parents and carers.
- Ongoing attendance
- Improved social skills and appropriate body language, self-confidence and self-efficacy
- Increased independent skills such as food preparation, personal grooming, etc.
- Increased hope and belief for future goals such as education, career, social.
- Awareness of VA services and confidence to self-advocate for these services

Professional outcomes of this program have included increased opportunities for linking clients within Vision Australia's individual therapy and key services, and external referrals for example Guide Dogs Victoria and visiting teachers services.

Take a look at the short clip from a participant two parents providing feedback:

The slide shows a photo of a participant on the water during the Sailability day.

Program strengths and challenges

- Community integration
- Community partnerships
- Motivated staff and participants
- Client goal achievement
- Funding and financial considerations
- Obtaining feedback for program evaluation/development
- Sports focus video



Presenting on VA radio



Preparing vegetables for lunch

Steve:

The key areas that has strengthened the program of what it is today – is the community partnerships and opportunities for community integration. Establishing links within sporting agencies and local facilities has increased the programs recognition and has raised community awareness of blindness and low vision. It is also provided community connectedness and transitioning into local community services fro our clients to engage within.

One of the other strengths is the highly motivated staff and volunteers within the team to make this program relevant and fun. Our enthusiasm and commitment to this program is motivated by the children's ongoing participation and achievements.

On the other side, some of the challenges for this program have been the funding and financial considerations. This group is self-funded - Vision Australia contribute to the wages of therapy staff. We rely on community grants and donations to hire local facilities or pay for the cost of external agencies to provide services. So far we have been successful in obtaining up to \$xxxx over the past 4 years in donations and grants.

One of the other challenges is obtaining feedback from the families regarding goal achievement and ideas for future activities. To make this program relevant and meaningful we rely on identifying the individual goals and needs.

The slide has two photos, the top photo of two participants presenting a show on Vision Australia's radio, and the bottom photo illustrates two of our now expert chefs preparing lunch!

Vision for the future

- “Graduates” to commence youth program in 2015
- Is this program always going to be relevant?
- Find and support existing groups to be more inclusive
- Securing funding for sustaining/bettering programs
- Staff commitment and reducing work pressures

Alex

To address future considerations:

We have been working with our (now) older participants to transfer them to a ‘Youth Group’. One of the group members has been undertaking a work experience program with the focus to discuss with the participants their thoughts about what a future program looks like. Our thoughts are to support the group through 2015 but gradually provide less support as the year goes on. They have named their group ‘The Blind Sight’ and will have their first activity in January 2015. The first meeting includes a group session with Ross Anderson, a Monash University Phd candidate researching the experiences of young people with a vision impairment, with the group then heading off to the pool for a swim.

For the primary aged students, will this type of program and format be relevant for their needs and goals. ?

Another reconsideration to ask, if we should be finding existing

groups within the community and support them to be more inclusive for our cliental, rather than establishing new groups. We would hope that this program has equipped the participants to be resilient within their local communities, rather then being reliant on our services and support.

With special thanks to

- Alex Lonsdale VA OT
- Blind Sports Victoria
- YMCA
- Crusoe College
- LaTrobe university
- SEDA
- Guide Dogs Victoria
- Sports Focus
- Paralympics
- Blind tennis
- McKerns foundation
- Sports Education and Development Australia
- Victorian Blind Cricket Association
- Commonwealth bank
- Bendigo Motorcycle Club
- St Monica's Primary school
- VA volunteers
- Enable (Emily White)
- Interchange
- City of Greater Bendigo
- Sailability



We will like to thank and acknowledge the following local services and agencies whom have and continue to impart into this program.

Links and references

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- Wolffe, K.E. (1999). *Skills for success: A career education handbook for children and adolescents with visual impairments*. 1st ed New York, NY; AFB Press.

We have also provided you with a list of links and references

Questions and discussion

- For further information, please email:
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If you would like further information or have any other questions please contact one of the team by email.