

## **The School Focused Youth Service – Addressing the Needs of 'At Risk' Young People, Including Those at Risk of Suicide.**

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The School Focused Youth Service is a state-wide service in Victoria, begun in late 1998 as a recommendation from the Suicide Prevention: Victorian Task Force Report (July 1997). Its aim is to develop a more integrated response to the needs of 'at risk' 10-18 year olds, who are displaying behaviours that require support and intervention. Some of these behaviours are known to make these young people more vulnerable to suicide. To effectively support these young people, youth and family services in the schools and in the community need to work more in partnership. The role of the School Focused Youth Service is to strengthen that partnership and to assist in developing strategies for a more collaborative approach to the welfare of young people.

The service is quite unique in that it is jointly sponsored by two Government Departments - Human Services and Education. Each of the 41 coordinators is employed by a local support agency, such as a community health service, municipal council or welfare agency. Their area normally takes in 2-3 municipalities, all the schools in that area, both government and non-government, and the relevant support agencies. So my area covers most of the Municipalities of Melbourne and Moonee Valley and some of Maribyrnong. It includes 56 schools and about 60 relevant agencies. The coordinator's tasks include establishing the needs of young people in their area, mapping services in the community, ensuring that they are well known, and improving the linkages, cohesiveness and integration of service provision for young people. They are guided in their work by a local steering committee representing both schools and community support agencies.

There has been much research done on the causes of youth suicide and the particular groups of young people who are more at risk of self harm. The current aim of welfare support for young people is to strengthen their *resilience*. Andrew Fuller (1998 p75) describes this resilience as 'the happy knack of being able to bungy jump through the pitfalls of life'. Factors, commonly termed 'protective factors' in the individual, their family, and their school and social community can strengthen this resilience and are to be fostered. The *Resiliency Project* (Fuller, McGraw & Goodyear, 1998) conducted in Victoria found that young people identified resilience as coming from a sense of belonging. 'The four main factors which promoted well being in young people, as rated by Australian students, were:

1. peer connectedness,
2. fitting in at school,
3. feeling loved by your family to the extent that they help you understand yourself better, and
4. having an adult outside your family take a positive interest in you.' (Fuller 1998 p77).

The strengthening of these factors is seen as a means of enhancing young people's ability to withstand risk. These factors can be encouraged through supportive

programs in schools, aimed at a broad group of students, which have a prevention focus such as Peer Support programs and programs such as START to aid the process of transition from primary to secondary school. Assisting families with skills in parenting and understanding adolescent behavior is also to be encouraged as a way to build resilience in their children. The School Focused Youth Service coordinators can assist with information about programs and particularly facilitate the development of new programs which partner a school and a local agency to address a specific issue. There are brokerage funds attached to the service which most areas have allocated for this purpose.

On the other side, there need to be ways of reducing the risk factors which place a young person in a situation of harm. The guidelines for the School Focused Youth Service have considered the following categories of young people to be more at risk:

- Young people exhibiting problem behaviours characterised by:
  - Violence
  - Offending
  - Depressed mood and depressive disorders
  - Self harm
  - Substance abuse
  
- Socially and geographically isolated young people including groups of young people for whom high risk may be more likely, including:
  - Homeless
  - Koorie young people
  - Culturally and linguistically diverse young people
  - Rural young people
  
- Young people displaying concerns regarding
  - Sexuality
  - Early school leaving
  - Physical or psychological disabilities

Students at school with these characteristics, who are exhibiting low risk behaviours, are usually able to be managed by the school welfare system with appropriate early intervention strategies. But when at risk behaviours become more frequent and problematic, outside agencies need to be used to provide additional support. The task of the School Focused Youth Service is to assist schools to know of the services of these support agencies, and to make effective connections with them. This may involve the development of guidelines and protocols to allow schools to more easily access the service. Within those guidelines, issues such as confidentiality and levels of responsibility are addressed. When procedures are clearer a better level of trust is established between the school, family and support agency and they work together for the greater benefit of the young person.

The range of activities of the School Focused Youth Service varies according to the issues facing young people in their particular area. In some areas school non-attendance has been a main focus. Some coordinators have developed action research around this issue, with one in the Western suburbs developing a local guidebook of services to support schools and families in dealing with this. In the Melbourne/Moonie Valley area the following were the issues identified by schools:

### Secondary Schools (top5):

- Social and Behavioural Issues
- Family Issues
- Drug Issues
- Disaffected/disengaged from School
- Achievement Issues

### Primary Schools (top4):

- Family Issues
- Transition from Primary to Secondary School
- Student Behaviour Issues
- Living in a Drug Environment

One of the first programs initiated for primary schools was to provide youth worker support for young people whom grade 6 teachers identified as likely to find the process of transition difficult. The inner city areas of Moonee Valley and Melbourne have a high concentration of young people from newly arrived migrant and refugee groups. Here the identified issues centered on language acquisition, adjusting to differences in culture as well as sometimes dealing with the effects of past trauma. Financially supporting local community centres to provide out of school assistance with homework programs has been a strong focus in my area. Other programs based on a common interest in a sport like soccer, or circus activities, have been developed to teach social and interactive skills that are needed for Australian classrooms. Using outdoor adventure programs to build a sense of achievement and connectedness for at risk young people has been a common strategy in different areas.

But how does all of this relate to harm minimisation? Does the range of approaches for tackling youth suicide fit the strategies of the harm minimisation approach as it has applied to the issue of drugs in our society? There seem to be some limitations in some of the components of harm minimisation.

Supply control – the aspect of having laws and regulations in place to reduce a behaviour by reducing the means to do it. It is hard to immediately see how this could be applicable to most of the cases of youth suicide, given that the most common means is now hanging. For particularly vulnerable situations, such as youths in custody, regulations have developed for room design in relation to hanging points and the frequency of checks for safety. Availability of firearms to young people is also regulated and controlling the supply of some dangerous substances. But the incidence of suicide is unlikely to greatly altered by increased regulations.

Demand reduction seems to fit more clearly into the preventative approaches that have been discussed above. If young people are provided with more activities to enable them to have a more fulfilled life then surely the rates would decrease. Yet there is so much to counteract this in a society where the high rate of youth unemployment does not offer great hope for the future, there is high competition for tertiary places, and human relationships are breaking down around them. There is debate too on whether there can be education campaigns around the issue of youth suicide or if these are intrinsically problematic. Better strategies focus more on health promotion and education campaigns around mental health in general. So demand reduction is also not a clear strategy.

Reducing harm as it applies to the person concerned appears initially to have little merit. You can hardly consider less harmful ways of committing suicide. Yet, ensuring a person suffering from depression has a network of support, and strategies to put in place if they are feeling vulnerable, are means of reducing chances of the ultimate harm. Educating young people in ways to support friends through tough times, what to look for as signs of someone considering suicide and when to seek help are also valuable strategies. Ensuring that thorough strategies are in place to support those suffering grief and loss, particularly over the suicide of a known person again are important harm reduction strategies.

Yet despite these ways of fitting strategies of youth suicide prevention into the harm minimisation model, it is preferable to focus on prevention and early intervention as appropriate strategies. The causes of youth suicide are complex and multifactorial, strongly associated with psychological distress and disorders (Moon et al 1999, p94). So, education and health promotion around the development of good mental health are vital. Even the terminology 'mental health promotion' sounds a more positive note than harm minimisation. In the reduction of youth suicide all who are working with, and relating to young people should strive to enhance those positive, protective factors which will work towards their resilience.

### **References:**

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