

Good practice: a statewide snapshot 2015

Nurturing families using creative approaches

Author: Anne Riggs, Project Artist

Organisation: South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault

Program: TOTEM

South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA) run a creative project called TOTEM with families who have been affected by sexual assault. By doing fun and creative projects together TOTEM helps families build and develop strengths in working together, expressing their feelings through having fun together. Family members learn how to tackle some challenging creative tasks by breaking them into smaller steps and persevering with them until they are complete. They learn to ask for help and to describe their responses to various projects using words.

In our 2015 TOTEM project we included food into the creative mix. Enjoying a meal with someone else helps our mental wellbeing, and when that meal is healthy our physical wellbeing is nurtured too. This year, as well as making the bowls and mosaic placemats for a beautiful table setting, we made and shared healthy snacks and light meals.

Five families joined our first TOTEM project. As children and parents prepared a range of foods together, all learned new techniques; some children learnt to use a sharp knife safely and parents developed confidence in their child's abilities. Children especially loved cutting up the ingredients and although some were reluctant to try new foods, their co-operation with food preparation was a useful step in strengthening family relationships. We all enjoyed sitting around the table together sharing the food.

For our final week we set up a complex still life that included jugs, coffee pot, fabric, a lotus-like candleholder and bread, cheese, avocado, fruit and tomatoes – a feast that we would eat at the end of the session. We looked at still life paintings by Paul Cezanne, Vincent Van Gogh and Paula Mendelsohn Becker – noticing the reflections, shadows, limited palettes and different styles of applying paint.

We broke the group into two, each painting a different perspective of the still life. Working onto black paper we used a limited range of warm colours then added a burst of blue at the end.

Parents and children were amazed at how quickly time passed and were delighted by how well they had captured various elements in the still life. All too soon, the bread, avocado, cheese, tomato and fruit were eaten and this TOTEM project was over.

Changing it up

Author: Carolyn Worth, Manager, SECASA

Organisation: South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA)

Program: High Risk Adolescents

High Risk Adolescents is a program for high-risk teenagers who are willing to meet with a counsellor from SECASA.

This story is about young men and women who are highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation for many reasons, and our attempts to provide them with an opportunity to talk about their life in general while we provide a positive, stable relationship and model what is possible in a caring situation.

Providing a service to disengaged young people who have been sexually assaulted has always been a challenge. SECASA has tried a number of approaches including a significant presence on social media. We know that these young people are not generally comfortable attending regular counselling appointments. The challenge was how to devise a service that was sustainable within current resources that would meet the needs of young clients who did not necessarily see what had happened to them as sexual assault and did not want counselling.

It was decided to broaden SECASA's service provision for this group of clients using dedicated workers who could collaborate with Victoria Police's Sex Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams and child protection. It was agreed that providing 'sexual assault counselling' for this client group was too confronting and unlikely to be successful. What is offered is the opportunity to talk to an interested person about how life is going generally. The aim is to engage the adolescent and stay involved with them for a significant period of time.

The SECASA workers will meet with an adolescent in their unit, at school, at an office or anywhere they feel comfortable to talk about their safety, how they are getting on with their boyfriend or girlfriend, friends, family and carers and how they feel at the moment about life generally.

The work has included mentoring, crisis management, education about healthy relationships and mental health, social media safety, general safety, holistic youth work and establishing and maintaining a relationship with high-risk adolescents. The outcome has been the establishment of relationships with some of these young people that are ongoing in a format that is different from SECASA's normal way of operating. The SECASA workers will maintain these young people as clients as long as the worker is employed and the young person wishes to have contact with the worker.

It has been an interesting journey for SECASA and the workers involved with this client group. There have been some surprises including the amount of texting involved in maintaining contact. The information the young people disclose when some trust has been established and how these young people are searching for some stability in their lives has also been a surprise. We will keep modifying this program to keep engaged with this client group and think of creative ways to continue contact.

A reflection from Emilie

Our young people react to intense situations so I knew that by hearing other children's and teenagers' stories and seeing images representing their reality, our young people would feel concerned. I am also very aware that they feel like they have not much control of their own lives, so I used this opportunity to instil power in them through engaging them in how they could change someone else's life. I used examples that would make an impact on our young people to help them realise the difference between them and those children living abroad. I asked them to come up with examples to make them realise the difference between their realities (for example, the price they paid for their shoes would be enough to send a child to school for a month with three meals a day).



new carers was challenging. When his carers called I would listen and gently encourage them to 'try this...' and 'wait it out a little longer'. During our last sessions, we read a novel together. This book was my parting gift to him. I realised that Julian had become one of my greatest teachers.

Fast-forward eight months and Julian is going well. A colleague recently remarked that he was going to school full time, had joined a local swimming squad and is happy within his new foster family. I am inspired by Julian's resilience and very proud of my team and the good work we achieved together.

In residential care we are the 'stone clearers'. Every day young people come to our programs that may not have 'reached the bottom' yet. We have a rare opportunity to do great work while they are in our care – to foster their hidden talents, to feed their passions, to create a supportive school community around them, and to nurture their new carers once they leave. If we put in this work, we may never get to till the field, or plant the seed, yet you cannot bring in the harvest if you haven't first cleared the stones.



Ben has now been reunified with his father, stepmother and sister. Ben and his family no longer require behaviour support from Specialist Services as they are successfully implementing all the strategies together. Ben is better able to manage his emotions and behaviour to the point of creating social relationships with peers and family members and is currently re-engaging in the education system.

Frequent reviews were conducted throughout the service provision, allowing changes to be implemented to address concerns raised and strategies to be redeveloped when required. The review process allowed practitioners to reflect and recognise achievement and consider where to focus interventions into the future.

A number of factors contributed to Ben's success. These included a trauma-informed practice model that considered not only Ben's experiences of trauma but also those of relevant others in his life. The service provision was intensive and strengths-based. The approach considered the need to engage Ben as well as his support team of family and professionals in order to gain positive outcomes.



