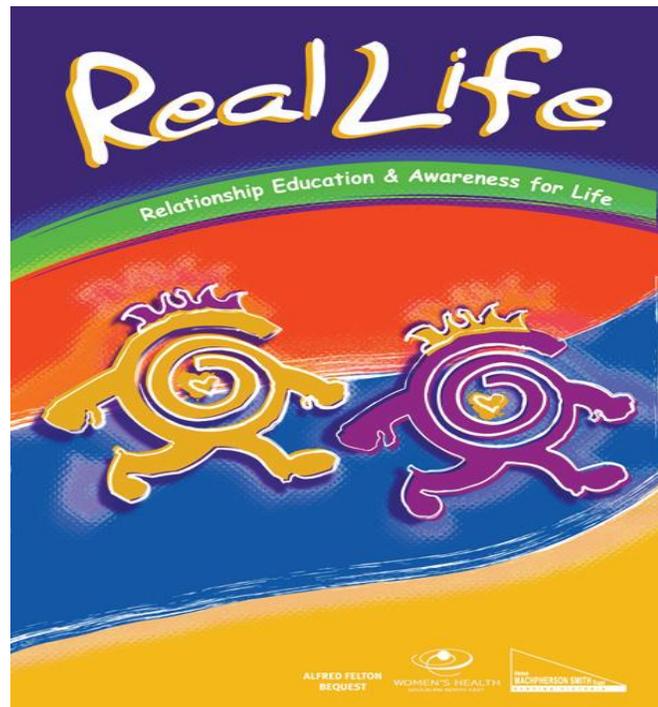


Evaluation of the REAL Life Program Implementation

November 2005



Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000, and is the government-funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and North East Victoria.

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■ BACKGROUND – THE REAL LIFE PROGRAM

The initiative for the REAL Life education program came from local family violence workers in Goulburn Valley and North East Victoria. They expressed an interest in playing a more proactive role in preventing relationship violence and supporting young people to experience positive and rewarding relationships. (REAL Life Manual, WHGNE, 2003, pg. 2)

The program has been piloted in six secondary schools throughout North East Victoria over the last 2 years. The schools were Mitchell Secondary College, Rutherglen Secondary College, Wangaratta High School, Ovens Secondary College, Beechworth Secondary College and Myrtleford Secondary College.

During this time the program content has been refined based upon feedback received from these pilot schools, service providers and young people involved in the facilitation of the program.

The program was designed to be delivered to year 8 students and to be incorporated into existing personal development curriculum. Ideally programs such as this are supported by school culture, policies, and organisational practices which encourage and promote equality, non-violence and pro-social behaviour.

The REAL Life **Program Objectives** are:

- Explore values, beliefs and attitudes about relationships
- Increase knowledge and skills to develop healthy respectful relationships
- Develop an understanding of the gendered nature of relationship violence
- Increase awareness of relationship violence and the inappropriate use of power in relationships
- Develop skills to seek support and link young people with local support services
- Provide the opportunity for the participants to shape the content and give feedback

Fifty workers were trained to become facilitators of the REAL Life program. **Aims** of the training were:

- to develop with teachers and workers an understanding about relationship violence, power in relationships and the gendered nature of violence
- to strengthen links between schools and specialist local services
- to encourage a collaborative approach to supporting students around relationship and violence issues
- to encourage schools and services to become familiar with the program and
- to enable these organizations to facilitate the program locally (WHGNE Inc, REAL Life Project Report, 2003, pg. 10)

■ METHODOLOGY OF THIS EVALUATION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the implementation of the REAL Life program in schools. Women's Health Goulburn North East sought to gain an understanding of trained facilitators' experiences of delivering the program in schools. It was thought that those delivering the program were best placed to identify the program's strengths and weaknesses, and that they may have ideas for future options for the program's implementation.

Fifteen trained facilitators were interviewed. (The interview schedule can be found in Appendix 1.) Names were randomly selected from previous training lists held at WHGNE. Facilitators were approached initially by telephone and were invited to participate in the evaluation through a telephone interview at their convenience. A date and time was then arranged. During this time verbal consent was obtained and the facilitators were informed that the interviews were completely voluntary and assured of confidentiality of their information. Of the fifteen facilitators interviewed, seven had a teaching background and eight were from various backgrounds including a psychologist, a community nurse, a minister, school nurses, and workers from the family violence sector.

The telephone interviews were conducted at Women's Health Goulburn North East. This was chosen as the preferred method of obtaining information as it was convenient for both researcher and participants involved in the study.

■ FINDINGS

Of the fifteen facilitators interviewed, four facilitators stated that they had implemented the program either on their own or with the project worker and a further three had partially implemented the program. Eight stated that they had not yet implemented the program.

Key themes identified by facilitators about the REAL Life program were:

- The strengths of the REAL Life program, principally the Manual; the program's essential message of preventing family violence; and the life experiences and enthusiasm offered by the facilitators themselves
- The difficulties in implementing the program, particularly the challenges in raising family violence as a topic; the inflexibility and full curriculum facing most schools; and the constraints on teachers' roles and time
- The need for support from a range of different sources including the whole school environment and community and health sector workers, especially family violence workers; and the great value in co-facilitating with another person
- The question of where to pitch the program – which year level is most appropriate.

■ STRENGTHS OF THE REAL LIFE PROGRAM

The REAL Life Manual – an Effective Resource

The REAL Life manual was identified by facilitators to be a considerable strength in the implementation of the program. The key feature was that it is easy to understand because of its simple format. Each session has clearly defined steps, which means less time is required to be spent on planning and organizing the session.

'The REAL Life manual is a useful tool.'

Many of the facilitators commented on activities within the manual.

'I liked the process of looking at power... It was a gradual process and this enabled the children to not feel intimidated about the power roles within their own family.'

'[In] the activity that has a list of potential helpers including school counsellor, nurse, teachers, relatives, friends, [the students] placed these cards out on the floor and read out scenarios such as, If a boy started rubbing up against you who would you tell first? And of course 90% of them told friends first. To me that was incredibly powerful. It shows kids how important it is for them to be a friend to their mate. What a responsibility they actually have - to pass information on or encourage their friend to get some proper help as they can't expect to have all the answers for their friend.'

Another feature of the REAL Life manual appreciated by facilitators was its flexibility in using a variety of techniques to assist in the implementation of activities into classroom sessions. The mixture of whole class and group work, role plays and other interactive activities allowed the sessions to flow. Group work in particular assisted facilitators in engaging students.

'Combination of group work and whole class keeps the sessions moving.'

'I am a big fan of experiential learning, learning by having fun. The children being able to get up and move around, not just sit and listen enables them to be more involved. This is one of the Real Life program's big strengths.'

It is interesting to note here that one facilitator found the program to be quite prescriptive in nature and thought the program could have adopted a more flexible approach to enable teachers to choose the elements they felt appropriate to deliver the program. The facilitator felt that it lacked activities relating to different learning needs including activities based on the multiple intelligences.

The Message Of Preventing Family Violence

Facilitators identified another strength of the program which relates to the message it delivers to young people, about the issue of family violence.

'Very valuable program. Fills the gap in health education. The need to learn about relationships is becoming more evident through research and media.'

'Its strength [lies in] the issues that it raises.'

The REAL Life Program acknowledges that young people are living in family violence situations. Some may experience violence within their own relationships, others will witness it and some may provide support for their friends or family (Women's Health Goulburn North East, Project Report, 2004). There continues to be an increasing concern within Australia about the degree of violence in our society (Gulbin, 2003, revised edition).

'I think that's part of why I was so taken by it. [I've] experienced enough and seen my friends going through enough to realize that it is an illness that pervades all parts of society. It certainly had a huge part to play in why I was so keen to implement it.'

Facilitators supported the importance of delivering this message in schools. One facilitator commented that it was important for schools to take on life skills training.

'I see school as being about more than just teaching curriculum.'

Another facilitator acknowledged the need for programs such as this within the community.

'The program is very much needed in our community culture.'

Facilitators

Facilitators identified themselves as a great strength to the program and were aware of what they had to offer in terms of their experiences and life skills, and being able to share these at appropriate times during the sessions. Facilitators in both teaching and non-teaching sectors recognized their ability to work with young people. Most of the facilitators felt they were aware of the issues surrounding confidentiality issues.

'I think we have a lot offer, experience, life skills.'

'...my understanding of connections with young people. I personally would bring a lot to this material.'

'I have kids of my own and you have your own values. I think they are sometimes different from the kids' but it is good for them to have a different point of view especially as we teach kids who have different values and lifestyles. What happens in their household is completely different from what happens in mine.'

Facilitators were aware of their own values and conveyed that they have a great impact on the teaching of issues such as family violence. They defined certain characteristics that were important to have as a facilitator of a program dealing with these issues. It was important that the facilitator keep an open mind, and not impose their values onto the students. Facilitators were conscious though of the need to challenge students' ideas through education and asking questions. Secondly it was important for the facilitator to approach the task with enthusiasm. This was seen to be important in engaging the students and allowing the enthusiasm to be transferred within the setting.

'It is important not to impose your values onto the kids. They might say something you totally disagree with, and you can't say, 'that is wrong'. You just might challenge why they think that way.'

'These (personal values) have an impact on your enthusiasm, which is often a really critical part of how much kids will take on about what you teach. If you feel excited about it and you see it as a priority and you come in fired up and wired up and ready to go it can be infectious.'

There is enormous value in having two facilitators. This was a strong theme in responses. Facilitators need support to keep the session running smoothly when 'it was difficult'. Ideally the co-facilitator with a teacher would be a worker from the health, community or family violence sector, and one suggested it may be good to have a male and a female presenting. (See also 'Professional and School Support'.)

■ DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING REAL LIFE

The Challenge Of 'Family Violence' as a Topic

Although the message related to family violence was seen to be a 'strength' for the REAL Life program, it was equally recognized as a barrier. The issue itself created a number of real concerns for facilitators implementing the program. One facilitator acknowledged feeling uncomfortable about approaching the subject.

'You need to be willing to talk about the topic. I personally am a little uncomfortable going into this area...'

Another facilitator agreed and recognized there could be difficulties experienced by a facilitator if they did not believe in the message they were delivering to others.

Other concerns recognized by facilitators included unforeseen pressure on teaching staff members to deal with student disclosures after sessions and the assumption that facilitators delivering the program were experts in the field of family violence. During a REAL Life pilot program a worker spent a large amount of time debriefing other workers who had been implementing the program.

'The difficulty of the program is what to do when a disclosure is made, it puts a lot of pressure on the staff member. It hasn't happened to me yet but I can see it could happen in the future... that particular issue always worries me.'

'If it important that it is not assumed the worker implementing the program has a background in the area of domestic violence.'

...It proved relatively difficult as the trained workers didn't have a relationship with the kids. I spent a lot of time debriefing.'

These concerns lead to comments being made requiring support in the area of family violence. Seeking more information about the background of the REAL Life program and learning about the issues involved in family violence.

Crowded Curriculum - Where Does it Fit?

Many teachers and non teachers identified the major constraint of attempting to implement yet another program into an already crowded curriculum. Concerns centered on the difficulties of establishing *where* the program would fit in the existing curriculum or into existing programs and the logistics of timetabling.

'Schools have a set curriculum, difficult to work out where this particular program might fit and the level of importance about getting it into the curriculum. The tough thing is making sure you are getting the appropriate ones in.' [Staff member]

Comments were made regarding resistance of some staff members within schools to taking the program on board.

'It would be great for schools to be more receptive. The comment received from teachers is, "Not another thing that is going to interrupt the curriculum". I don't know how to get them to change their thinking.'

'Logistical difficulties of getting the staff to take it on, other parts of the curriculum have to give in order to run the program.'

Job and Time Constraints

A number of facilitators acknowledge both job and time constraints as major barriers in implementing the program into schools. Problematic areas included the overstretched nature of teachers' roles; not being funded to run extra school programs; and being involved with a number of different schools.

'I have ten contact schools and I am not fully involved with any of the schools because of sheer numbers and time constraints.'

'I only have five periods a week to do welfare and I teach as well.'

One facilitator mentioned the level of disruption to students' classes should be considered in the decision making process of implementation of programs into schools. This raises the subjective nature of what should be considered a priority in education.

'[One of the difficulties of implementing the program] is time out of student's classes. Disruption to normal curriculum. There are many other disruptions already, sport, etc. Need to think carefully about implementing programs.'

A small number of facilitators commented on the difficulties associated with running the sessions in a single period. It was found that the fifty minute sessions were not adequate for covering all the material in a session including the recap of the former session and time for writing questions to put into the questions box at the end of the session.

'There is so much information that it is difficult to fit into the four sessions. At school needed to fit the program into a 50 minute block. This was very difficult, especially if you attempted all the warm up exercises and answered questions from the question box. Worked much better if two double periods were used rather than 4 single classes.'

Another facilitator found that the program could use extra sessions to help the students consolidate the issues.

'Could use one or two more sessions to pull together the material and help students translate the learning's into their current relationships eg further use of scenarios with small groups discussing scenarios and coming up with advice.'

Professional and School Support

Informants spoke about the need for support from the whole school, including School Council, parents and other staff. This was clearly important in the school initially accepting the program.

'Powers at the top of the school may not be interested in the program. They have a huge bearing on what you can and can't do.'

'In the beginning you need to work on your networks within the schools ... it's really getting the ground work in first.'

'You want the key players involved in a discussion about how they are going to implement the program.'

They identified benefits in working in collaboration with the family violence sector and community sectors – recognising that they sometimes felt out of their depth, and needed professional back up in dealing with the issues of violence.

'A lot of health teachers would feel out of their depth.'

'It would be good to have a facilitator who can help talk through the program whom you can ask questions. If the children ask you

questions you can't answer, you can discuss this with your facilitator.'

'I would like support from Women's Health so that I could talk to you when I needed to.'

Some thought it valuable to have the involvement of school nurses or community health nurses known to the students, so a natural link is made with ongoing services, and this would increase the chance of individual students accessing local services. Facilitators or speakers brought into the school are perhaps perceived by students as more credible, and reflective of the 'real world' as opposed to teachers they know well.

'Great for local workers to be involved ... leads to children using the service.'

'Kids sometimes pigeon hole teachers so having someone else is very important. They receive information and translate it in a way that makes it more relevant to them. Students can sometimes see schools as separate from the "real world".'

Optimum Year Level

The difficulties surrounding the issue of family violence within the REAL Life program led to a debate regarding the appropriate year level in which the program should be introduced in schools. Currently the program is aimed at year eight. This decision was based on outcomes of four trials which were conducted in schools that found the most appropriate level to be year eight, '...with flexibility to offer the program to years 9 and 10' (Women's Health Goulburn North East Inc, 2004, pg. 8). Many of the teachers in the trial commented that there were too few human relation education opportunities in year eight (Women's Health Goulburn North East Inc, 2004, pg. 8).

Comments made by facilitators were similar to those above, however most felt that the program should be taught towards the end of year 8 and some felt that perhaps year nine was more appropriate. This was based around the maturity level of the students at this age and curriculum flexibility.

'We have integrated the program into the year 9 health education curriculum.'

'It is appealing to teach year eights at the end of the school year as the children are a bit older.'

'...possibly be better to teach the program at the end of year eight....maybe even better for year nine's. I found through the evaluations that the comments were unrelated to the program and perhaps showed that year eights were still a little immature.'

One facilitator believed that specifically aiming the program at one year level was limiting. However it was observed by one facilitator that you would be pushed for time to place this program into a year 11 and 12 curriculum.

In an ideal environment, young people would have access to the REAL Life program, or particular aspects of it, in each year of their secondary schooling.

■ FUTURE

Further attention could be given to the implications of teaching about family violence and how facilitators can find their own philosophical approach to this critical issue. Facilitators seemed to struggle with ethical dilemmas in relation to teaching students about family violence if, for example, they were in homes where this was reality rather than a hypothetical situation. Some spoke of being acutely aware that a number of students are returning to families where family violence exists and the disjuncture created for those students in what is being taught (respectful relationships) and what actually happens within their family.

There were contrasting views with some believing it is a waste of time educating students about healthy relationships when they are surrounded in their homes by abusive behaviours, while others thought it important that students be explicitly told that violence is unacceptable.

'I don't see any point in educating the children if they go home and see what they have just learnt not to do happening there.'

'Needs to be information in the manual for parents and children to understand that just because Mum and Dad behave a certain way at home doesn't mean that it is appropriate.'

Facilitators had additional ideas for the future direction of the program. One asked whether the program was developed in collaboration with indigenous services, and suggested we could ensure the program is culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of particular groups, perhaps including indigenous story-telling. Another suggestion was to have resources and help lines listed in the manual. This would involve updating on an annual basis, and distributing the updated list to schools. Although extra work for WHGNE, this would offer the chance of ongoing communication with schools implementing REAL Life.

■ CONCLUSION

The facilitators who took part in this evaluation informed us that **key strengths** of the program are the Manual and the facilitators themselves. They emphasised the great value in co-facilitating with another person. **Barriers** to its implementation are the inflexibility and full curriculum facing most schools and the constraints on teachers' roles and time. **To make it work**, REAL Life needs support from the whole school environment, and support from community and health sector workers especially family violence workers.

A continuing **dilemma** is where to pitch the program – which year level is most appropriate. **Family violence as an issue** was a strong theme in both the strengths and the challenges of the REAL Life program.

Healthy relationships are the foundation of health and wellbeing for individuals, and underpin a sound community. The cost to us singly and as a society have been well documented, and that cost is far too high. REAL Life tackles this critical issue and has the potential to change attitudes and behaviours before they are established. The difficulty of the subject and the risks in addressing it with young people should not silence us.

■ APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Name:

Date:

Position:

Question 1:

Are you currently implementing or have previously implemented the Real Life Program in your local school/s? YES/NO

If previously when?

Regardless of the fact that you haven't had the opportunity to implement the program your feedback is valuable. We have adapted some of the questions for workers who have attended the training but no implemented the program.

PROMPT – why did you attend the training?

If didn't intend to implement it, what was the intended purpose?

What got you interested in attending the training?

This question is directed at those who have implemented the program. However, I will read it out, incase you would like to comment.

Question 2:

Can you tell me about your experience of implementing the Real Life Program in your local school?

PROMPT- You have indicated that you have had an opportunity to implement the program

Question 3:

What's been helpful to you in implementing the Real Life Program?

*PROMPT - You haven't implemented as yet the program however what might be...
If you were going to implement the program is there anything that you might find helpful?(not implementing program)*

Question 4:

4. What made it difficult for you? Were you able to overcome these? (how?)

What could make it difficult for you? (not implementing the program)

Question 5:

What do you believe are the strengths and weaknesses of the Real Life Program?

Question 6:

What would you change if anything to the content or the implementation of the program?

**CONTENT
IMPLEMENTATION**

Question 7:

Reflecting back on when you implemented the program what support did you received whilst implementing the Real Life Program? Was it helpful?

'If you were implementing the real life program what support do you think you would need?'(not implementing program)

This next question is directed at those who have implemented the program. However, I will read it out incase you would like to comment.

Question 8:

Thinking about the future what would assist you to successfully implement the Real Life program?

Question 9:

In your opinion, what role do you think your own personal experiences, attitudes and values play in the implementation of the Real Life Program?

PROMPT – what do you bring to the program.

Question 10:

Would you like to make any other general comments?

Thank you that is the end of the formal questions is there anything else you would like to add?

(As I mentioned in our last conversation) I would like to get this information back to you, so you can quickly scan and verify the content. What is the best way to do this?

Fax:

Email:

Post:

I would appreciate your comments back within 7 days.

Once the data has been collated a report will be written.

Thank you