



Project Report

**Relationship Education Program Designed to be Delivered
to Year 8 Students and to be Incorporated
into Secondary School Curriculum**

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

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Acknowledgements

The REAL Life program was made possible through grant funding by the Alfred Felton Bequest and Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, with additional funding from Women's Health Goulburn North East.

The program was initiated by Jo Loiterton and developed in stages by Emma Fahey respectively; both workers were employed with Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE).

The two women worked in partnership with many domestic violence workers, community and youth workers, school teachers and nurses. Women's Health Goulburn North East thanks all those workers involved for their valuable contribution and support.

Thanks also to the many students who have participated in the sessions and have given feedback that helped to shape the program content.

REAL Life

Relationship Education and Awareness for Life

Background

Many young people are living in domestic violence situations. Some may experience violence within their own primary relationships. Others will witness it or support friends and family who may be victims of violent relationships.

REAL Life offers secondary school students an opportunity to begin exploring the concept of relationships, the nature of rewarding and unrewarding relationships and the impact of inappropriate use of power in relationships. It endeavours to build on students' skills, to develop healthy relationships and to seek support when relationships become unhealthy. In an ideal world, the program foundations would be built on as young people develop and grow.

The project was initiated and designed by domestic violence and community workers in the Goulburn Valley and north-east Victoria in recognition of the lack of relationship education and violence prevention programs for young people in schools in this region.

The project was developed by Jo Loiterton as previous Hume Region Family Violence Worker and facilitated by Emma Fahey as REAL Life Project Worker. The life of the project has extended over a three-year period from 2001-2003.

The general aim was three-fold:

- to support and encourage local service providers to work collaboratively with secondary schools
- to offer students in Years 8 and 9 the opportunity to increase their awareness of relationship violence and
- to develop links between local services and young people.

After initial discussion and planning meetings with a range of local workers, Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) applied for funding from several trusts to develop and implement the proposed program in partnership with local services and schools.

The Alfred Felton Bequest and Helen Macpherson Smith Trust funded the project for a twelve-month period. The project's length and scope was extended using WHGNE funds.

Program Objectives

The original program objectives for the REAL Life project were:

- To develop a collaborative project between family violence and welfare and youth agencies to provide effective health promotion intervention with adolescents around the issue of relationship violence.
- To provide a pilot program to secondary schools throughout the Goulburn Valley and north-east Victoria through youth-focussed workshops, targeting students between the ages of 13-15 years old.
- To raise awareness of relationship violence among young adolescents, to identify strategies for coping and to create awareness and links to services available for young people.
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Why Offer Relationship Violence Education Programs?

It has been recognised that relationship violence can first manifest itself in adolescence, as young men and women begin to develop and express values, beliefs, expectations and attitudes regarding relationships. (*Working with Adolescents to Prevent Domestic Violence*, 1998).

Young people may experience violence within their own relationships (family or peer); they may witness it; or they may try to assist other young people who are themselves victims of relationship violence.

What happens for the physical and emotional wellbeing of each person within these relationships is crucial to reinforcing the beliefs and attitudes that can either support or undermine the acceptability of relationship violence. (*Working with Adolescents to Prevent Domestic Violence*, 1998).

As workers, we recognise that, while many young people may never experience relationship violence, they are known to use other young people for support and assistance with their problems. If young people are relying on each other for support, it is important for them to be informed about the issues of relationship violence so they are better equipped when supporting each other.

Service providers, teachers and community members also need to be delivering a common message about healthy relationships and the prevention of any use of violence or abuse.

The REAL Life program is built on the premise that young people can benefit from an opportunity to explore and reflect on relationships in a supportive and safe environment. The program provides this opportunity, so young people may understand experiences of relationship violence and develop skills for building healthy relationships.

We acknowledge that school-based approaches ideally need to be highly integrated with other community resources and developments. The REAL Life

program supports and encourages a community development approach where non-violent values and behaviours are part of everyday activities within the school environment.

Linkages are thus made between the community services or are strengthened. In addition, students see a unified body of workers from a broad cross-section of the community all saying 'no' to relationship violence.

Moreover, domestic violence workers in the region recognised that their services are stretched. To them, preventative work is one of the key elements in addressing the incidence of family and sexual violence in the longer term.

Other direct service workers also verbalised their concerns about the unmet need to work within a preventative context in schools. Their desire to be proactive led to this project as a constructive attempt to deliver a relationship education and violence prevention program and to do so at the onset of young people's development of both their relationship patterns and their understanding of personal responsibilities, choices and responses.

The REAL Life program has a training component. This training section will potentially grow a larger number of workers from a range of workplaces, further skilled people who may be available for this shared role of violence prevention and relationship education.

Program Development and Implementation

The program content was developed by researching a range of programs and strategies and selecting those deemed suitable for the school populations and age groups of Goulburn Valley and north-east Victoria.

Workers were encouraged to attend training workshops and to facilitate sessions. Twenty-five health and welfare workers, school teachers and others attended training for two days in Wodonga and Wangaratta.

One five-hour workshop for Year 8 and Year 9 students was led in two schools in Wangaratta and Wodonga in late 2001. This one-day approach recognised the time constraints facing many workers.

The evaluation from the first two pilot schools indicated that facilitators, teachers and students alike found the five-hour program too long. Evaluation also indicated that the program content needed to be modified for the target audience.

Refining the Program and Further Trials in Schools

In response to the evaluation, the program was re-designed. The main focus area of content was retained. The revised program was shaped to run over four or more classroom sessions as either single or double sessions. It also had the potential to be implemented into the existing health curriculum.

The sessions explore the concept of relationships in stages: first, by defining relationships. In the second session, a video focuses on 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' relationships. A third session considers the impact of inappropriate use and balance of power in relationships; the fourth uses activities to gain personal skills, those needed to develop positive relationships and to seek support when relationships become unhealthy or abusive.

The revised program was trialled in four more schools and at two locations within a general certificate of education TAFE course (Technical and Adult Further Education) – all within the Wangaratta region and with a range of year levels 8, 9 and 10. Feedback indicated that the most appropriate year level for the program implementation was year 8, with some flexibility to offer the program to years 9 and 10 students. Many teachers commented that there are few human relations education opportunities at the Year 8 level.

Over the development period, the program was therefore piloted with approximately 600 students in six secondary schools and one TAFE program throughout north-east Victoria over a two-year period. These schools were:

- Mitchell Secondary College - Wodonga
- Rutherglen High School
- Wangaratta High School
- Ovens Secondary College – Wangaratta
- Beechworth Secondary College
- Myrtleford Secondary College
- Goulburn Ovens TAFE.

The facilitators included domestic violence workers, school nurses, teachers, school chaplains, youth workers, social workers, CASA (Centre Against Sexual Assault) counsellors and community health nurses. The project worker from WHGNE co-facilitated all sessions and coordinated planning, evaluation and partnership development.

Some of the key changes to the REAL Life program content during this refinement period include:

- a greater focus on all relationships, rather than just intimate relationships. Not all young people have experienced an intimate relationship but abuse can present itself in all personal relationships.
- the use of a question box during each session. This provides the opportunity for anonymous questions and feedback and encourages the learning to be driven by students.

A reflective evaluation model was also adopted. This ensured continuous review and modification in partnership with the schools and workers. Each student fills out a 'low literacy' evaluation form at the end of the day, to consider the process and outcomes of the workshop. This collected information informed the project evaluation in 2002 and submissions for further funding in 2003.

Manual

The REAL Life manual was written and published by WGNE. The manual was created to be informative and user friendly. The manual also provides suggestions for facilitators to establish a safe and supportive environment.

In addition, the manual provides background reading for each session and strongly encourages facilitation or co-facilitation by workers with a comprehensive understanding of relationship violence. It encourages facilitators to allocate time after each session for any student who may require additional support. It also requires firm boundaries to the program and the provision of a safe and comfortable environment.

The promotion of the manual was accompanied by training workshops offered to teachers and community workers throughout the Hume Region.

The final objectives of the program curriculum are encapsulated in this manual. They are to:

- 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 provide feedback.

The manual is now available from the regional office of WHGNE in Wangaratta.

Worker Training Sessions and Relationship Building

The aim of professional training for teachers, local domestic violence and community sector workers is three-fold:

- 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 and 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 organisations to facilitate the program locally.

REAL Life Training Workshops use these materials to run successfully:

- Background information about the REAL Life program
- Activities from the REAL Life manual
- Information on relationship violence and exploration of values
- Statistics specifically relating to young people
- Facilitators' experiences of the REAL Life program
- Local perspective on domestic violence and local information about services
- Evaluation

The training sessions were promoted through two avenues: the local office of the state Department of Education and Training and local youth and welfare networks. They were held either at a secondary school or at facilities provided by the Dept. of Education. The training was held over three hours and co-facilitated by the WHGNE project worker and other workers who had facilitated the program in the trial period. The project also involved local domestic violence workers who offer a local perspective on domestic violence.

In all, fifty workers attended the training sessions. Each person received a copy of the program manual, additional information on domestic violence and young people and access to further reading material. WHGNE continues to provide follow-up support for workers in the implementation of REAL Life programs in schools.

Issues, Limitations and Constraints

The primary constraint to the smooth development of the project has been the uncertainty about on-going funding.

Limited Funding

The initial funding came from trusts: the Alfred Felton Bequest and the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust; these monies were expended by December 2002 and the project was further extended to September 2003 with funding from WHGNE.

WHGNE found short time-frames and two funding extension periods made the task of effective planning and program evaluation quite challenging for the project worker.

Level of Demands on Workers and Agencies

A key constraint to active participation from a range of services is the huge demands placed on workers and agencies to meet the needs of many people affected by domestic violence in the community. These demands include time and resources. Therefore, prevention work takes second place.

Resistance to the issue of relationship violence

On reflection during the project, it became apparent that there can be considerable resistance to the issue of relationship violence, whether active or unconscious. It posed a challenge throughout the life of the project. For example, because the issue is confronting, approaching schools for their endorsement of the REAL Life program and its active inclusion in the school curriculum has required sensitivity and skilled communication.

Reasons for resistance may include these factors:

1. Adults often underestimate the seriousness of young people's relationships.
2. Many people (workers and students alike) underestimate the occurrence of relationships violence and its ramifications.
3. Teachers and other facilitators can minimise the importance of some of the key messages and values by screening them through their own unconscious filters.
4. Values and experiences can be called into question by what emerges in classroom situations. For example, for many, understanding and acknowledging the gendered nature of violence can be challenging.

Evaluation

A final evaluation was generated at the end of the three-year program. The results are evident in the recommendations on page 15.

In the process of evaluation, three groups were involved:

1. Evaluation by Students

Written evaluations were received from students at the completion of each session.

The evaluation sheets indicated that there was a 77% increase in the student's knowledge and awareness of relationship violence.

The following are samples of the most common comments from students:

We learnt about different situations and what is a healthy and unhealthy relationship.

Understanding where to go for help. Learning about local services.

Learning about relationships and how people want to be treated.

The use of the question box also provided valuable insight into the student's opinions and concerns. Some samples of their question box questions and comments are included:

How do you know when to end a relationship?

If there is no communication in a relationship is it worth it?

What is a bad relationship?

How do you know when it's a good relationship?

Is it a good relationship if you fight?

Why do people expect so many things from a relationship?

Is part of a healthy relationship to always be wondering where your boyfriend/girlfriend is or what might have happened if they're not at school?

Who has the power in a relationship between two people?

What do you do if you are being abused?

Are there any help services for people who have been abused?

Monash University, through its research project, also sampled a number of student responses prior to involvement with the program and on completion of the program. This research found that the REAL Life program was effective in changing short-term attitudes justifying aggression (Gillespie, 2002).

2. Evaluation by Facilitators

Feedback from facilitators was sought after each session. Informal feedback was received as the relationship with facilitators developed and the facilitators themselves gained more confidence and experience with the program.

Formal evaluation was sought at the completion of the sessions. The following are sample evaluation comments from service providers and secondary school representatives:

Excellent sequencing of concepts with attention to engaging young people in learning.

Liked the focus on group work, sharing interaction with a range of tasks and activities.

We will integrate into year 8 health curriculum.

Video was particularly powerful in illustrating abusive relationships amongst young people.

Delivery of the program stimulated thinking and co-operation and sharing of knowledge.

The REAL Life program is a valuable resource.

There is an identified need by schools and agencies to offer more support to students experiencing or witnessing violence in their home and personal lives. This is beyond the scope of the project but we are hopeful that by strengthening relationships between school communities and local services, this may begin to be addressed. Currently, however, services have insufficient funding and few resources to offer the level of support required by schools, young people and their families.

Formal and informal feedback suggests that the collaboration between schools and their local services is a strength of the program and one which will also increase the likelihood of sustainability. In addition, local networks and partnerships have assisted and supported the implementation of the REAL Life program into the health curriculum. The regional office of the Department of Education and Training has taken a proactive role in supporting the REAL Life program.

3. Evaluation by Training Workshop Participants

Formal evaluation was also sought from participants at the completion of the training workshops. The following are sample comments:

Informative and helpful in reminding what can be done in the classroom.

Recommend the REAL Life program be implemented into year 8 health program.

A little brief for someone without a basic understanding of relationship violence.

Fantastic program; has lots to offer schools, particularly young people.

Good to tap into year 8.

We need to implement this program at our school.

Participated in the workshop 18 months ago; thought today's was more balanced.

The feedback from the training workshops indicated that there is a need for teachers, in particular, to have a greater understanding of relationship violence. This was an area identified for future education.

The majority of workshop participants indicated that they would prefer the training to be extended beyond three-hour sessions to explore the issues further.

As a result of the evaluation, WHGNE plans to follow up with schools and workers in 2004 to offer further support and encouragement to implement REAL

Life. WHGNE also plans to offer further training around domestic and relationship violence to teachers and generalist workers in 2004-2005.

A total of 60 service providers and secondary school representatives have attended training and have indicated that they are committed to implementing the REAL Life program

Recommendations

1. That the state Department of Education and Training in the Goulburn Valley and north-east Victoria continue to encourage and support the integration of the REAL Life program into the year 8 health curriculum.
2. That local welfare and health related professionals continue their involvement in co-facilitating the program. If this is not possible, schools should invite their local domestic violence service to provide local information.
3. That further training be available for health and welfare teachers to increase their understanding and awareness of relationship violence.
4. That the workshop training period be extended beyond three-hour sessions to explore the issues further.
5. That secondary schools maintain links and build partnerships with local domestic violence services providers to co-facilitate the REAL Life program.
6. That two facilitators be used per school program, one male facilitator and one female facilitator, to provide the young people with choice and gendered voices in this relationship education. [Ideally, the facilitators would be a school person and a service provider.]
7. That, if the program is to be offered to an alternative education environment, that the program be extended beyond the four sessions. [When the program was piloted in an alternative education environment, the design of the four sessions was only enough to build rapport with the young people.]

Future

WHGNE is confident that the REAL Life program will be able to sustain itself within the Hume Region beyond the initial project period.

Two strategies have been identified as effective and sustainable ways to continue achieving the aims of this project:

1. The secondary schools in north-east Victoria where the REAL Life program has been implemented are encouraged to adopt the program into their health curriculum. Already, the manual has been distributed throughout north-east Victoria and the program will continue to survive beyond the drive of any project worker.
2. The development of various partnerships and the creation of positive links with both schools and service providers are in place in those areas where the program has been implemented. WHGNE encourages local welfare and health-related professionals to continue their involvement in co-facilitating the program.

WHGNE is committed to the REAL Life program and its longer-term benefits in the prevention of family violence and the simultaneous strengthening of healthy relationships through appropriate personal skills and education. It continues to work cooperatively with the Department of Education and Training to reduce relationship violence through appropriate education of young people. It also seeks to strengthen primary relationships within the community through interagency support.

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