

Child Witness Program Evaluation

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**This project was done in partnership with Suzanne Muscat at*

Family Counselling

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In 2009, the VAW Forum completed a strategic plan that identifies critical issues, service trends, priorities, and strategic directions of the VAW service system in Central West Region. The plan's strategic directions focus on enhancing the VAW service system capacity, fostering collaboration and accountability, and promoting excellence through effective practices and outcome-based evaluation. As a result the VAW Service System Service Excellence Implementation Team was established by the VAW Forum and was charged with the task of identifying strategies to achieve the strategic goal of promoting excellence in the VAW service system. The team's initial objective was to identify effective practices in the field of VAW services and develop a resource document(s). The Child Witness Program, which provides early intervention to children who have been exposed to woman abuse, has been their main focus.

The group has been working in partnership with the Social Innovation Research Group (SIRG) and to date several joint projects that will assist to move the agenda forward have been carried out. They include two research projects, Enhancing VAW Service System Delivery in Central West Region, Child Witness Program Effective Practices Project: Central West Region, a literature review regarding the merits of models of psycho-social supports versus recreational supports for children in shelter services, and a symposium entitled Celebrating Innovations in VAW Work: Challenges and Perspectives, which featured panel discussions regarding underserved communities and innovations in VAW work.

This particular project, entitled Child Witness Program Evaluation focused on enhancing a standardized tool for evaluating child witness programs across Central West Region. While working to enhance the evaluation tool, which is used to assess the working conceptualizations of abuse and violence as well as the emotional and behavioural responses to injustices as described by mothers and

their children, we engaged our enhancements within an analytic research process in order to gain an enhanced awareness of current realities.

Methodology

We made contact with several agencies in Ontario (fifteen different agencies were contacted but either did not engage in an evaluation tool or did not wish to be engaged) within the service sector that focus on issues pertaining to women and children who have experienced domestic violence. We also did a search of domestic violence oriented websites and women's crisis services websites as well as scholarly research pertaining to domestic violence. The enhancements to the evaluation tool are based upon this process and are representative of the findings within the literature which is referenced below.

In analyzing the literature we collected concerning an evaluation tool and in referencing the existing tool provided to us we decided that enhancing the existing tool would be of the best interest to the VAW Forum of Central West Region. As such we expanded the version of the evaluation tool, making several additions and amendments based on the literature we had collected, including making the document inclusive to sexual minorities, being mindful of language, the need for interviews in some cases, operationally defining jargon terms, and assessing the group experience in addition to content learned. As such it is important to acknowledge that this evaluation tool was developed in partnership with Suzanne Muscat at Family Counselling.

Findings

While engaging with the evaluation tool we came across some issues and ideas to consider. VAW stakeholders may want to consider the heterosexual nature of the documents and make room for the heterogeneous nature of families which include lesbian partnerships as well as multiple partner families. You may also want to consider the inaccessibility of a written assessment for some clientele including those who experience some degree of illiteracy as well as children of a certain age.

We acknowledge that in some cases an interview would better suit some clientele than manually completing the pre test and post test survey. We would also suggest creating operational definitions from which to work because the documents ask participants to assess their abilities in coping in a 'healthy' manner for example, but do not take into account the divergent definitions which will arise when discussing and interpreting the concept of 'healthy' behaviours. In addition questions related to experience, more so than content, were added to the post-test surveys to recognize the importance of documenting both the learning of content but also the group experience.

Lastly, in the future, if finding concrete qualitative results of the child witness program presents itself as a priority, we would encourage insight into some method of standardized testing. As it stands this evaluation tool does not account for differences that may emerge between pre and post test scores that may not be linked to the program itself. A contrast to this would be to provide more qualitative anecdotes as to the experiences of women and children to validate the efforts of the child witness program.

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