

“This is Not a 7th Grade Math Class”:

Insights into the Facilitator Training of the Child Witness
Program

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***“This is Not a 7th Grade Math Class”*: Insights into the Facilitator Training of the Child Witness Program**

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 *“This is Not a 7th Grade Math Class”*: Insights into the Facilitator Training of the Child Witness Program, is a continuation of this work and focuses on the documentation of experiences of facilitators of the child witness program in aims to continue to develop and education

tool for incoming facilitators. The following report centers on the process and findings of the interviews conducted with current facilitators of various Child Witness Programs across Central West Region. In addition to this document a power point training tool has been developed. This document is to further explain the findings on the power point training tool and provide contextual information as needed.

Methodology

Seven interviews were conducted in total from across the Central West Region of Ontario. Interviewee's had between 2 and 10 years experience facilitating the program with the average of seven years experience. In addition interviewee's had a range of experience with facilitating the different age groups in the program as well as the mother's group. Interviews were primarily completed over the phone and individually with one facilitator. There was one instance where two facilitators were interviewed at the same time. Research participants were responsive to the interviews and expressed that more training tools were needed. All participants that responded were willing to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted in an open-script format, with targeted questions being asked but also allowing for the conversation to carry into other areas. Due to this format, we received feedback related specifically to this training tool, but also to the development of curriculum training in general, and other elements to consider when looking at the Child Witness Program.

Findings

The main findings of the interviews were categorized into the following themes: program strengths, facilitation, activities, skills and traits, challenges, self-care, co-facilitation, group diversity, understanding one's limits and curriculum.

- **Program Strengths:** Research participants shared that the strongest benefit of the program and was that the mothers and children are able to be part of the program, learning the same things

at the same time as each other. They also felt that this made it easier to get a complete picture of a family and to cater the program more to the needs of the families involved.

- **Facilitation:** Interviewees reflected that it is sometimes hard to hold the attention of the kids, and the need to be flexible in one's approach and methods of teaching is important.

Additionally, facilitators need to sometimes step beyond the role of just a facilitator. Particularly when one is trying to extract information or trying to provide crisis support.

- **Activities:** Overall, almost every interviewee shared comments around techniques or activities utilized that were not mentioned in the manual. There is a wealth of knowledge as to how to engage kids at all age levels. It was recommended that there be more opportunities for facilitators to share their activities with each other and strengthen the program overall.

- **Skills and Traits:** Interviewees had a multitude of examples of skills/traits that they feel makes them successful in their job, ranging from soft skills (like being able to listen well) to hard skills (such as knowledge around developmental theory). It was emphasized that curriculum training needs to talk about developmental levels and what children can or cannot understand.

- **Struggles:** Struggles were broken down into behaviours, attendance, disclosures and fit. Several facilitators at various agencies stated that there needs to be a better way to screen families for fit, whether it is having two people do the screening, or developing a more conclusive list of what to look for. It was expressed that a child, or family, that is not a good fit was a difficult reality to manage and compromised the experience of the group or the individuals themselves.

- **Self-Care:** One interviewee mentioned that people who are coming into a facilitation role need to look at the manual and identify things that might be triggers prior to coming into the group. They need to have a plan of action for managing their triggers which they called a "safety plan." This was suggested as something to include in further training.

- **Co-facilitation:** Interviewees mentioned that having a co-facilitator was critical to the success of the group and no one should ever be facilitating on their own.
- **Group Diversity:** Several interviewees warned that training needed to reflect the fact that no two groups are ever the same and that a cookie cutter approach would not be successful. As such, future training could not follow a cookie cutter model either.
- **Understanding Your Limits:** Many of the facilitators wanted to be able to help the child when they disclosed things like bullying but they were not able to do so. It was hard for them to sit with the reality that they work within the walls of the group and to trust that someone else would pick up the advocacy work for the child outside the group.

Interviewees also talked about what they do currently to train new facilitators, what they think needs to be in the curriculum, , bringing the region together more often, needing to fill gaps in knowledge and the need to somehow engage more boys. This information was not presented in the power point training tool.

- **Current Training:** No interviewees reported any formal procedures for training new facilitators. One respondent stated, *“It is more debriefing after and following up with a call the next day, or preparing how we address something next time.”* Other interviewees mentioned that their training was meeting before hand to go over what was going to be talked about. Another facilitator expressed that often they facilitate the first group and the new facilitator can chime in as they feel comfortable. All interviewees mentioned that a training tool on top of what they currently do would be beneficial.
- **Curriculum:** Interviewees mentioned that sometimes there is a need to update or modify the curriculum to meet the needs of an audience. For example a workshop might be a bit young or simplified depending on the group, or vice versa. Topics they felt should be included were

disclosures, self harm, addictions, eating-disorders, avoiding re-traumatisation, child development and grief and loss. Another interviewee mentioned that the standardized book needs updating and that there should be a book developed that reflects all of their expertise and builds from their strengths. Lastly, it was also mentioned that most facilitators have experience with domestic violence but it is the content itself that needs to be addressed. During a workshop, where other group facilitators of the program were present, they noticed how things were interpreted differently from person to person. Facilitators felt it would be best to clearly explain the expectations of the manual and to make sure everyone was on the same page.

- **Bringing the Region Together:** Related to the comment above, several respondents mentioned that they felt it would be beneficial to bring the Region together more often to share ideas and strengthen the curriculum. This was mirrored in the interview process as many of the interviewees asked questions about what the other groups that I was interviewing were doing, how they responded to something, how they format the group, etc.
- **Filling Gaps in Knowledge:** There was an emphasis placed on having to find one's own resources and answers. Engaging in training or workshops was mentioned as viable but often was not an option given that the type of work executed by facilitators was part-time and as such, facilitators felt they could not get away to go and do training. More ways to build their knowledge was an area of focus. They also emphasized the need, not just for curriculum training, but ongoing training. One interviewee reflected on their experience at a recent training in Oakville and how doing an annual training like that would be beneficial across the Region. They also emphasized the power of peer education in ongoing learning.
- **Engaging Boys:** Lastly, one interviewee mentioned that, particularly in the teen group, they regularly have many females in the group and few males. They wondered if this was a reality

Future steps within the focus of the Child Witness Program should include a curriculum that includes the needed base knowledge to facilitate the group as well as the goals of each chapter. Another consideration would be the involvement of current facilitators in the updating of the curriculum and when offering training around the curriculum, as there appeared to be great interest in being part of this project as it would give facilitators an opportunity to meet and to exchange ideas.