Bending like a river

The Parenting between Cultures program

Carole Kayrooz and Cathy Blunt

While there are many parent education programs in Australia, there have been few developed to cater specifically to the needs of migrant groups. Attempting to fill this gap, a parenting program was developed and trialed for three ethnic communities. The program addressed key parenting issues found to be of relevance to members of culturally and linguistically diverse groups, including: intergenerational conflict arising from different acculturation rates; the protective factor of a bicultural parenting identity; knowledge of the school system; discipline options and child abuse laws; and how to gain support. The program was subsequently independently evaluated. Quantitative and qualitative information from both the process and outcomes of the program revealed that it was effective, particularly in fostering an understanding of the impact of culture on parenting, knowledge of the school system, non-physical disciplinary methods and child abuse laws. This study may be one of the first targeted ethnic parenting programs to be independently evaluated in Australia.

Carole Kayrooz
Director, Centre for Professional and
Vocational Education,
University of Canberra, ACT 2601

Cathy Blunt
Co-ordinator Family Skills,
Marymead Child and Family Centre,
PO Box 4260, Kingston ACT 2604

Since 1996, an international trend in governmental priority has shifted the emphasis away from investigating child abuse towards supporting families so that child abuse is prevented (Tomison 1998a, 1998b). The trend is, in part, a reaction to the increase in the number of unsubstantiated notifications, the realisation of poor outcomes for families who became involved in the child protection system, and welfare rationalisation. Parent education has come to be seen as a core component of community response to child abuse prevention.

While there are many parent education programs in Australia, there have been few developed to cater specifically to the needs of migrant groups. This is the case despite 13.9% of the population speaking a language other than English at home, and 28% of new migrants not speaking English at all or not speaking it well (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996). This is of some concern because studies have shown that families with little English are more likely to have incomes below the poverty line, be unemployed and have the highest measures of dissatisfaction with family relationships (Weston 1996). The combination of isolation and poverty has the potential to escalate well-known risk factors for child abuse and neglect for this portion of the community.

Whatever level of child abuse prevention is targeted, primary, secondary or tertiary, simply translating generic parenting programs for bilingual parents may not be the answer. The critical parenting issues for families who have migrated and experienced the challenge of resettlement may be very different from those of generic parenting programs which are based on western values and priorities.

THE PROGRAM: PARENTING BETWEEN CULTURES

Based on their experience in offering parenting programs to migrant groups since 1995, the Marymead Child and Family Centre was successful in obtaining a Department of Health and Family Services child abuse prevention grant (1999) to develop a parenting program for parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The aim of the 'Parenting between Cultures' program was to prevent child abuse and neglect in migrant communities by devising a flexible, bilingual, parenting program package for parents of 5-12 year olds which could be utilised nationally by schools, health centres and community organisations.

The program was structured around research findings concerning the critical issues for such parents. These were identified from several information sources: focus groups with parents in Canberra; interviews with key local informants who worked with migrant families; and discussions with local and national agencies with interest or involvement in the area. An extensive literature review also informed the design of the program. As specific Australian data on child abuse research amongst ethnic groups was scarce, related fields such as crime prevention, homelessness and youth mental health

were used as they share common risk and protective factors.

THE KEY ISSUES FOR PARENTS FROM CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

There was a remarkable alignment in the significant issues raised by the various information sources.

The major common issue for all parents was the importance of improving and maintaining parent-child closeness in order to build good relationships and to avoid problems with their children. **Secure parent-child attachment** is a protective factor in crime prevention (National Crime Prevention 1999), child abuse, youth mental health (Fuller 1998), and homelessness (Frederico, Cooper & Picton 1997).

There are six key issues for parents from diverse cultural backgrounds:

1. **Intergenerational conflict** is the major source of concern for such parents (Prince 1995) and the most common reason for homelessness amongst Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese youth (Frederico et al 1997). Different acculturation rates of parents and children contribute to changed family roles and structure, increasing the risk of family conflict as children challenge parental authority (Korbin 1991). Parents and key informants noted the contribution of poor language skills to intergenerational conflict and how this acts as a restraint for parents implementing their most cherished value, that their children are the centre of their world and the reason for migration.

2. The development of a **bicultural parenting identity,** where parents value and identify with the ways of parenting of two or more cultures, is a protective factor against homelessness for adolescents (Frederico et al 1997) and a strong factor in crime prevention (National Crime Prevention 1999). Key informants noted that the families who survive and thrive are those that want to blend their culture with the best of Australian culture.

3. **A strong ethnic identity** is a protective factor not only against

homelessness (Frederico et al 1997), and crime prevention (National Crime Prevention 1999), but also for youth mental health (Fuller 1998). As children grow up with a 'split identity', forced to be loyal to both the ethnic and host cultures (D'Mello 1992), the parents' cultural values can provide both a sense of pride and a reference point for settlement difficulties. A key objective of an ethnic parenting program would be to strengthen and increase families' ability to transmit cultural beliefs and practices in a way that is developmentally appropriate, maintains family harmony and lies within Australian child abuse laws.

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4. Clashes between the **school system** and parental cultural values are cited as one of the intrafamilial factors associated with homelessness (Frederico et al 1997) and the reason for poor school performance (Schoeffel et al 1996). Peer connectedness and fitting in at school were factors rated highly by young people as being central to their mental health (Fuller 1998). School is highly important in families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds as it is through the education system that pathways to a better life (the reason for migration) are achieved.

5. Family violence is a strong risk factor in child abuse (National Crime Prevention 1999) and **learning new discipline techniques and understanding Australian child protection laws** can lessen the use

of physical punishment. A shared definition of child abuse is lacking in a multicultural context. While Seitz and Kaufman (1993) take a strong stand for workers in the field to understand the cultural relativism of their work, they also urge a clear understanding of where cultural relativism ends and a lesser standard of care for some children begins.

6. **Knowledge of services and ways of gaining parenting support** assists in preventing family breakdown (Frederico et al 1997). Frequent social interaction presents more opportunity for the monitoring and regulation of children's behaviour and for unconditional support and shared child-rearing practices (MacPhee, Fritz & Miller-Heyl 1996). This is a particularly important issue as there is a lack of available extended family for support in migrant families to a greater degree than mainstream families (Batrouney & Stone 1998). Mothers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds use less child care, playgroups, and library facilities than English-speaking immigrant or Australian families (McDonald & Taylor 1994).

The content of the program was designed to address these issues over six 2½ hour sessions. In devising the program to address these issues, the choice and inclusion of parenting techniques and models was problematic.

From the literature review it was apparent that there is little solid evidence for the superiority of one form of parenting practice over another which transfers across all socio-economic and cultural groups (eg, see Seitz & Kaufman 1993; McGurk & Kolar 1997; Sternberg et al 1996, in National Crime Prevention 1999). This does not include the protective factor of secure parent-child attachment and the risk factor of family violence, which are maintained across ethnicity (National Crime Prevention 1999).

The dilemma was resolved by utilising the participants' experiences and strengths as a source of information and education. The use of a solution-focused and strengths-based approach (Scott & O'Neill 1996) was based on

recommendations for parent education generally (Tomison 1998a, 1998b) and for culturally and linguistically diverse groups specifically (McGurk & Kolar 1997; NSW Child Protection 1997). This approach assists participants to identify strengths and uses these to solve problems; focuses on solutions rather than problems; emphasises that only small changes are necessary to make a difference; and stresses that people are experts on their own situations.

Three principles guided the choice of content and process:

1. **Parental efficacy**, that is, assisting parents to believe in their own effectiveness. This could be increased by fostering cultural self esteem, emphasising individual and parental strengths, and gaining knowledge of the systems, such as the school system, the child abuse laws and social support networks;

2. **Parental choice**, that is, widening the repertoire of parenting options by increasing awareness of parenting styles, and providing the information required to make informed choices;

3. **Parental flexibility**, which involves seeing from the child's point of view how it is to live between cultures and then deciding how much to 'bend' from traditional beliefs; the more flexible the parent becomes, the more they will need skills of negotiation and compromise.

The program was run by bilingual community educators and settlement workers who were supervised and supported by experienced group work supervisors.

CONTENT OF SESSIONS

The six sessions were:

1. **Where do we come from and what is important to us?**

This session raises awareness of what is important in families which work well by analysing the strengths and weaknesses, the similarities and differences of parenting styles and practices in two cultures.

2. **Keeping our culture**

This session aims to strengthen families' ability to transmit their own

cultural practices and beliefs by participants sharing successful experiences and being introduced to the concept of structuring parenting[1].

3. **Bending like a river – how do we do it?**

This session increases parents' ability to meet their own and their children's needs in ways which are developmentally appropriate in the specific context and which maintain family harmony.

4. **What happens at school and why?**

The aim of this session is to promote parents' understanding of how the school system operates and to show ways of helping children at school.

5. **Maintaining harmony in the family**

This session intends to increase parental competency in non-physical discipline techniques and knowledge of child abuse laws.

6. **Parenting is hard work – how to get support?**

Participants in this session share traditional and new ways of gaining informal and formal support.

EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

The Program was trialed separately with the Croatian, Chinese and Samoan communities and independently evaluated by The Centre for Professional and Vocational Education, at the University of Canberra. The aim of the evaluation was to determine the process and outcome of the program from the participant, facilitator and supervisor perspectives. The evaluators were involved in the project from the design phase, assuring that important evaluation methodology issues were acknowledged from the outset.

DESIGN

The evaluation consisted of a triangulated mix of qualitative and

quantitative information about the process and outcomes of the program.

The **process evaluation** involved both participant and facilitator responses to approximately ten questions assessing content, facilitation, handouts and activities for each of the six sessions. Facilitators also kept a short journal of their impressions of each session.

The **outcome evaluation** consisted of a pre- and post-survey of 15 self statements on the key aspects of the program as outlined in the framework arising from the seven key issues. Participants responded on a 1 to 5 Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) to such statements as 'I am aware of the ways in which my culture has affected me', 'I am aware of the ideas behind the way the Australian schools are run', 'I know who to go to if I need help at my children's school', 'I understand the child abuse laws'.

The outcome evaluation also consisted of a satisfaction survey, that is, 10 items scored according to a 1 to 5 Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). Participant profiles were formed on the basis of participants' source of information about the program, their age, educational attainment, size of family, income source, sources of support for the family, time in Australia, English competence and prior experience with violence. In addition, the evaluators conducted a focus group of facilitators on their impressions of the program and separate interviews with each of the supervisors of the facilitators.

SAMPLE

The sample consisted of twenty one people, comprising the Croatian (n = 6) Chinese (n = 8) and Samoan (n = 7) communities. These people were contacted using a snowball sampling method that gathered additional people from the original applicants on the program. There was considerable attrition from the Samoan group where 20 or so people attended initially but soon left the group. This was probably due to several reasons, but it seems as though the leaders of the Samoan Community were unsure about the content of the program and felt that it might erode Samoan traditional parenting. They wanted to attend to

[1] Structuring parenting is one of four ways of parenting defined by Jean Illsley Clarke (1981) which includes parental modelling of competent behaviour, teaching children family morals and values and setting age appropriate limits.

Figure 1: Participants' overall satisfaction with the program
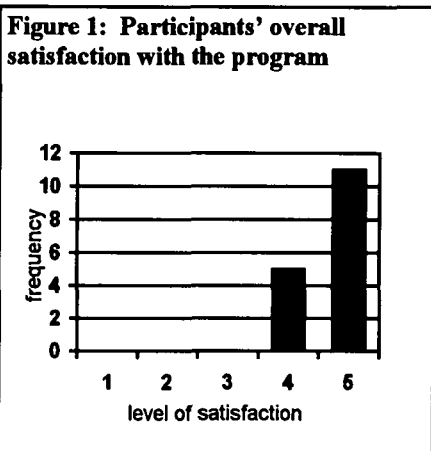
make sure it was acceptable; on attending, they decided it was acceptable and soon dropped off.

EVALUATION PROCEDURES AND APPROACH TO ANALYSIS

As the evaluation was intended to be external and independent, the external evaluators conducted the surveys, focus groups and interviews. However, due to economic and time constraints, the process evaluation sheets and the knowledge, skills and attitudes survey for the participants were translated so that each person could fill out the form, independent of an assessor.

Descriptive statistics were used to present the information contained in the process evaluations, the demographic information in the skills knowledge and attitudes survey. Paired sample T-tests were used to determine the differences between the pre- and post-tests for the Croatian and Samoan groups.

RESULTS

Participant profiles

The majority of the participants on the program were in the 30-35 years age grouping, had been in Australia for two or more years, had one or two children, and had attained educational levels spread right across the spectrum from primary to college. The educational spread, in particular, made the conduct of the program a challenge for the facilitators.

The English language ability was reasonable across the three ethnic groups and, not surprisingly, the Samoans, who had been in Australia for the longest of the three ethnic groupings, had the highest level of competence in English. The Croatian participants had experienced an alarmingly high level of family violence (50%). Sources of support for the participants' role as parents within the family were spread across the spectrum of friends, agencies, family and none at all.

THE RESULTS OVERALL

The overall collection of quantitative and qualitative information was extremely positive. Both the process and outcome sheets showed that the general content, individual sessions, facilitators, handouts and activities were highly appropriate, and educational for the participants. Further, this information was validated by all of the three information sources – participants, facilitators and supervisors.

The outcome evaluation showed that there were significant improvements overall for the Croatian group between pre-test ($\underline{m}$ = 3.92, s^2 = 0.27), and post-test ($\underline{m}$ = 4.92, s^2 = 0.01), $\underline{p}$ = .0004. These changes were maintained at follow-up, $\underline{p}$ = 0.1. For the Samoan group, there were significant improvements between pre-test ($\underline{m}$ = 3.68, s^2 = .026) and post-test ($\underline{m}$ = 4.71 s^2 = 0.06), p = .00001. Both groups thought that they had changed in their knowledge of the school system and the child abuse laws. The Croatian group also thought that they had come to understand the ways in which their culture had impacted on their parenting while the Samoan group learnt more effective problem-solving methods, and felt more supported in their parenting. Due to an oversight, the Chinese group did not complete this test.

These perceptions of change were reinforced by the findings of the facilitators' focus group. Participants grew to understand that what was normal in Anglo culture was not necessarily normal in their ethnic culture, for example, children questioning parental authority is part of Anglo culture but unthinkable in Chinese culture. In this sense, the program helped facilitate the development of parents' understanding of the clash children experience between home and school, and for parents to work out ways in which they can hold onto their values, while at the same time 'bending like a river' and responding to the needs of their children to 'fit in'.

There was consensus on overall satisfaction with the program. The majority of the participants found the program satisfactory or highly satisfactory. In response to the statement, 'This program was very useful to me', 69% of the participants stated that they strongly agreed, 31% stated that they agreed (see Figure 1). Both the focus group discussions and the supervisor feedback in the facilitators' focus groups validated the satisfaction survey.

The process evaluation of the various sessions for the participants and the facilitators demonstrated the same dramatic success. As can be seen from Figure 2, the participants

Figure 2: Mean satisfaction score for each session x ethnic grouping
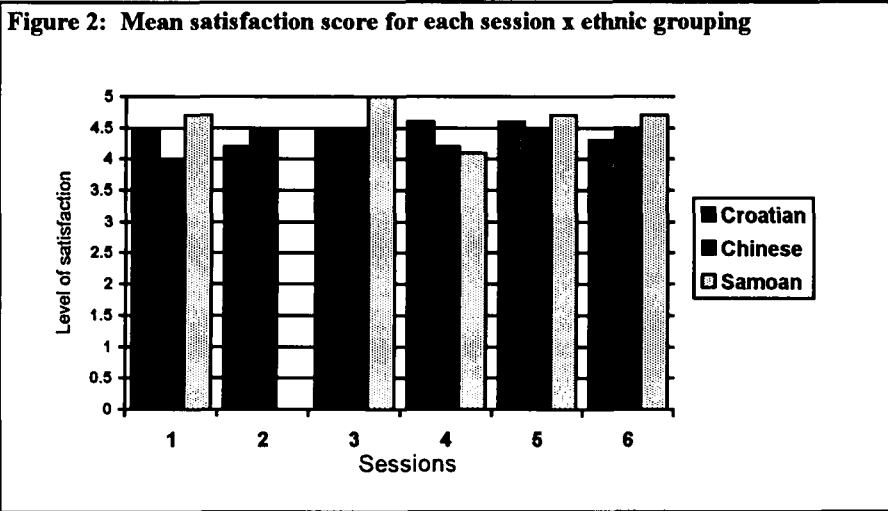
overwhelmingly graded each statement in each session with either a 4 or 5, that is, agreed or strongly agreed. Figure 2 shows the mean score for each ethnic group allocated to a sum of approximately ten statements assessing the content, process, facilitation, handouts and activities of the session. These results were validated by the analysis of the journal notes for the facilitators.

SPECIFIC RESULTS

The group leaders and supervisors attributed the success of the program to:

- focusing on participants' strengths, and the best of one's own culture and Anglo culture;

- increased awareness of the different parenting styles and how they matched with the needs of children;

- the opportunity to talk about parenting in a safe environment;

- information gained through the school system session and the guest speaker on the Child Protection Laws;

- the skill of the facilitator;

- the inclusion of supervision in the design of the program

The facilitators made a number of suggestions for improving the program and these were validated by the supervisors' comments and participants' comments on the process sheets. These are discussed below.

Insufficient time allocation

Generally, there was too much material to cover in 2½ hours in this and subsequent sessions. All felt that the program would have benefited from an allocation of three hours. The Chinese group had continuous tea and coffee to apportion more time to the content of the sessions. More time was particularly needed in Sessions Four and Five for understanding the school structure and the Child Protection Laws.

The translation process was time-consuming

The facilitators found the translation process time-consuming, in the initial preparation for the session and, also, in the lengthy explanations in session

because participants sometimes could not understand the concept. General progress was suspended while the facilitator tried to explain to the group what the concept meant. The Chinese group had difficulty with the concept of self esteem as an individual goal; self esteem was not a Chinese concept. The facilitator thought that more time should be allotted to the topic of self-esteem or a separate session devoted to it. There were similar problems in the Croatian group with the concepts of flexibility, and setting limits.

In the Samoan group, some participants were unaware of aims and objectives of the program due to poor advertising and some alarm about the intent of the program

The aims, objectives and goals of the program needed to be more clearly advertised in the Samoan group as some participants did not know it was a parenting group until two or three sessions into the program. Specific advertising for parenting 5 to 12 year olds was needed to more clearly outline the program and to allay fears that the program was going to impose Anglo values. Also the facilitator needed to re-advertise because there was considerable attrition of the participants two or three sessions into the program.

The quantitative and qualitative array of evidence for the three ethnic groups suggests that the program achieved its goal of strengthening parents' ability to parent confidently and capably between cultures.

DISCUSSION

The quantitative and qualitative array of evidence for the three ethnic groups suggests that the program achieved its goal of strengthening parents' ability to parent confidently and capably between cultures. The information collected

clearly attributes the success of the program to its content, activities, handouts, exercises and role plays. Targeting the critical ethnic issues and the corresponding principles to be incorporated into the design of the program was central to each aspect of the program and must be cited as the chief reason for its success. The interviews and focus groups also specify the critical importance of the facilitators' skill and the quality of supervision, particularly where the facilitator may be less experienced.

Despite the overwhelming amount of information suggesting that the program was very effective, it is important to take into account the general tendency of participants towards giving socially desirable responses. Given the highly sensitive nature of the program, and ethnic sensitivities, it was reasonable to expect that some participants would give responses that were designed to please the facilitator. This tendency was countered somewhat by the independence of the evaluation procedure. The agency took great care to keep the evaluation independent and the evaluators kept participants' responses confidential. The pre- and post-group standardised instrument of choice for Anglo families (Walmyr Index of Parental Attitude) could not be used because, as stated in its manual, the material does not necessarily transfer across cultures.

In discussing these limitations of the evaluation, it is also important to note that the sample sizes were small and the findings will need replication to increase confidence in the results. Replication, including long term follow-up data, would be recommended to assess maintenance of any effects arising from the program. In citing the low sample sizes, it is also important to note that high significance levels can only occur through dramatic improvements.

The program was intended to be adapted to the needs of other ethnic groups. Given that the program was successfully implemented in three distinctly different cultural and linguistic groups, then it is likely that it could be implemented successfully in other similarly-based ethnic cultures. The evaluators recommended that it be

extended to a greater range of cultures. This process would need careful monitoring and fine-tuning in order to detect and adapt to differences between cultures. To responsibly encourage implementation, publication of precise protocol would be essential.

CONCLUSION

There are very real differences that need to be acknowledged, respected and worked with in ethnic parenting programs but there are also, possibly, universal principles that enable a blending of the best of both host and ethnic cultures. We need not only to target the design of programs to the specific needs of groups, but to elevate the design, conduct and evaluation of such programs to the level of principles, such as parental efficacy, flexibility and choice. These may be capable of transcending cultures and time and, more importantly, leave the translation and implementation respectfully to the parents concerned.

This study may be one of the first targeted ethnic parenting programs to be independently evaluated in Australia. Its successful implementation fills a gap in the theory and practice of prevention for child abuse. ☐

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