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Keeping Children Safe parent education programme: improving access to parent education in the context of child protection

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Article

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Abstract

This article reports on an evaluation of the Keeping Children Safe parent education programme run in Central West New South Wales. The programme, conducted since 2004, and continuing today, primarily targets parents of children at risk and other vulnerable and disadvantaged families. The evaluation covers a 13-year period, from the first group held in May 2004 to February 2017. From the beginning, the authors strategically endeavoured to recruit and retain parents from the target group. Findings from the literature indicate that this group is difficult to engage and retain in parent education groups. Parents targeted for the groups in this study were generally not receiving parent education elsewhere. Using mixed methods, the facilitators have continuously evaluated the programme in terms of attendance rates, process and impact. The results of these evaluations show successful recruitment and retention of participants from the target group over the 13 years of the evaluation reporting period and indicate that the programme's immediate impact on participants has been favourable. The findings complement other programme evaluations focusing on recruitment and retention to programmes in the child protection context and on hard-to-reach clients. The authors also argue the importance of education for parents about child abuse and neglect.

Introduction

In 2004, the authors were concerned about the number of parents they worked with who were subject to child protection concerns or experiencing social disadvantage who were not attending parent education programmes that were available to them. The authors identified a number of factors that contributed to this lack of engagement and discussed strategies to address the barriers to recruitment and retention. They decided to run a parent education programme specifically catering to these parents, using tailored recruitment and retention strategies. The six-session Keeping Children Safe (KCS) programme, which had recently been designed and published by Uniting Care Burnside at North Parramatta in Sydney (later becoming the Uniting Institute of Education), was the programme to be delivered. It was designed to educate parents on child abuse and neglect, their effects on children and ways of prevention, with the aim that parents might 'make changes in order to prevent abuse and neglect' (Uniting Institute of Education [UIE], 2003, p. 1) The programme contains some of the information on child abuse included in mandatory child protection training for workers. For example, information on definitions, signs and responding is included (Uniting Institute of Education [UIE], 2003, p. 1; National Register on Vocational Education and Training (VET), 2015).

The authors commenced the KCS programme at Orange Family Support Service (OFSS) in May 2004 and it was conducted by the authors with occasional assistance from other staff during the period 2004 to February 2017. The programme was generally run three times a year as a partnership between OFSS and Orange Health Service. KCS has continued to be delivered at OFSS since this time; however, one of the authors who retired, withdrew from co-facilitation of the groups and has focused on research and evaluation of the programme.

Literature review – access issues

Involvement and retention of parents and carers in child abuse prevention services have been a recognised problem in service delivery in Australia since before 2003 when Stanley and Kovacs reported on an Australian study into 'Accessibility Issues in Child Abuse Prevention Services'. Accessibility in the child protection context was defined by them as 'the ease with which families most in need of a child abuse and neglect prevention programme are able to find and avail themselves of a suitable programme (Stanley & Kovacs, 2003, p. 1).

Stanley and Kovacs (2003) observed that 'engaging families in child abuse prevention programmes is difficult and attrition is often high' but 'little research has been done on what factors

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predict or correlate with participation and retention' (pp. 3–4). In acknowledging the high attrition rates for vulnerable families from programmes and evaluations, Holzer et al. (2006, p. 21) argued the need for practitioners to not only evaluate outcomes but 'also how effective their programme is in engaging and maintaining the involvement of those families at greatest risk'. In reviewing research into the effectiveness of parent education programmes, Tully (2009, p. 6) referred to economically disadvantaged families, who also tend to have related problems and vulnerabilities, as being 'more likely to decline participation in parenting programmes and to drop out before completion'. Her review indicated that motivating strategies, incentives and reminder calls have been helpful, though the programmes in which they were used were not specifically for vulnerable or economically disadvantaged families. Tully (2009) also found that there is 'some evidence that including fathers in parenting programmes can enhance the outcomes' (p. 7).

In the UK, it was reported that for parenting programmes, drop-out rates tended to be around 50% or higher, and even higher for disadvantaged parents (Smith, 2006, p. 49). In Quebec, Canada, Hebert et al. (2002, p. 367) reported on the positive outcomes of a parent education workshop run in conjunction with a programme for children on sexual abuse prevention, but which had a 'disappointing' attendance rate of just 20% of invitees. With reference to parent education around child sexual abuse, those authors referred to other studies that showed 'very few parents take part in workshops offered', even though there was evidence of their benefits for parents and their children (Hebert et al., 2002, p. 357). In the USA, Frey and Snow (2005, p. 161) reported from the literature 'consistent drop-out rates ranging from 30% to as high as 53%' in relation to parent education programmes. Frey and Snow found that the personality construct of high sense of 'entitlement' was a predictor of attrition, but reported mixed success when addressing this factor.

Policy Brief No. 18 (2010, p. 1) from the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) on 'Engaging Marginalised and Vulnerable Families' concluded from the literature that 'parents in most need tend to be the ones who are least likely to access support'. From research conducted in a formative education context in Western Australia, Heath et al. (2018, p. 264) also observed 'parents whose children are most likely to benefit from their workshop participation are precisely the ones most likely NOT to be able to get there'. Cortis et al. (2009, p. V) reported on qualitative research into the perceptions and experiences of providers in 'engaging hard-to-reach families and children' under the Australian Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004–09. They expressed concern that, without engagement in programmes, hard-to-reach families would be 'left behind' and identified this as an equity issue. Service providers responding to the research identified a number of people or family groups as being hard to reach. Their list included families on low incomes or in poverty, Indigenous families, fathers and families with child protection issues, among others (Cortis et al., 2009, p. 13). Meanwhile, the CCCH Policy Brief (2010, p. 2) highlighted that the 'key issue' is one of retention, rather than families making contact in the first place. It was also our experience, when the OFSS programme was begun, that parents who most needed parenting education, because of child protection concerns, were not only dropping out from other programmes, but were sometimes excluded from starting due to the participation criteria set by providers. The only exclusion criterion that the authors had for the KCS programme at OFSS was parents or other persons with a history of perpetrating child sexual abuse.

Cortis et al. (2009, pp. 4–10) listed and classified a wide range of factors that challenged engagement including individual factors (relating to the families), provider factors, practice approaches, programme factors and social and neighbourhood factors, which is a framework attributed to McCurdy and Daro (2001). Stanley and Kovacs (2003, pp. 4–7) reported and discussed findings of a number of local and overseas authors on accessibility and barriers in a child protection context. These included parental marginalisation, low self-esteem and sense of powerlessness, tendency to seek help in a crisis rather than use preventive services, lack of proximity, convenience and approachability of services. Other research and writings apart from the ones sourced in the early days of the project, and referred to above, have also identified similar issues (Frey & Snow 2005; Sanders & Pidgeon, 2011). The CCCH Policy Brief (2010, p. 2) also identified 'why families don't use services' within a framework of 'service level (or structural) barriers, family-level barriers and relational or interpersonal barriers'. Using this framework, we have listed below barriers and challenges for clients identified from our practice experience.

Service and structural barriers:

1. Location and transport issues
2. Low income and financial issues; cost of groups
3. Need for child care for younger children
4. Scheduling and venue issues
5. Competing commitments and priorities such as court, welfare agency appointments
6. Unfavourable selection and exclusion criteria by existing parenting programmes
7. Unaware of programmes and groups

Family- and individual-level barriers:

8. Low self-esteem and sense of powerlessness
9. The crises and stresses of life
10. Motivational and insight issues, lack of readiness, more inclined to seek help when in need than attend preventive education
11. Impact of mental health problems such as depression
12. Fear or lack of confidence
13. Wariness associated with previous negative experience with a service
14. Forgetting to come

Relational or interpersonal barriers:

15. Not feeling comfortable in available groups and the associated perceived stigma
16. Discouragement by another family member

Based on their qualitative research with programme providers, Cortis et al. (2009, pp. 17–25) reported strategies that were found to be helpful in engaging hard-to-reach families. These included tailoring services, being client-focussed and strength-based, using outreach, soft entry points and incentives, developing partnerships and networks. Sanders and Pidgeon (2011, p. 204), whose article is specifically about parent education in the context of child protection, presented a range of practical 'possible solutions' to the challenge of engagement. These included regular contact with the clients (such as reminders), provision of transport, and being flexible and supportive. Bowes and Grace (2014, pp. 2–3), in their review of programmes for Indigenous families, reported that successful engagement depended on 'building trust and building

relationships', the qualities and training of facilitators, community involvement and ownership. Tully et al. (2018, pp. 109–110) stated that the 'majority of studies on parenting interventions do not report rates of father participation' and, if reported, 'only around 13–20% of attendees are fathers'. They further stated that low levels of father engagement affect the known positive impact of father involvement on the outcomes of interventions. These researchers surveyed 210 practitioners and found that practitioner experience, competence and organisational support were associated with higher rates of father attendance. Duppong-Hurley et al. (2016, p. 5) reported an interest by parents interviewed in the idea of delivering workshops online and by social media.

The evaluation reported in this article is considered to be important because it has obtained the perceptions of the clients themselves over a long period of time, including mothers and fathers, and has the benefit of both quantitative and qualitative data concerning recruitment, retention and programme impact.

Programme at OFSS

The KCS programme presents information on what is regarded as child abuse and neglect. Each session describes an aspect of abuse, its effects on children and ways to prevent it (Uniting Institute of Education, 2003).

Session titles:

1. Introduction to abuse and risk assessment
2. Child neglect and its prevention
3. Physical abuse and its prevention
4. Emotional abuse, domestic violence and preventing emotional abuse
5. Child sexual abuse and protective behaviours
6. Responding to child abuse and the role of family and community services

The programme is interactive and DVDs are also used, along with scenarios. Participants are given handouts, but literacy is not a requirement in order to complete or benefit from the programme.

The authors were not aware of research evidence supporting the use of KCS although it had received an award from the Australian National Child Protection Council in 2003. However, the authors were attracted to KCS because it seemed to be the only programme specifically and systematically educating parents about child abuse and neglect, which was a primary referral issue for many of the families being targeted. KCS also substantially meets the criteria for a good parent education programme in the child welfare context, as described by Holzer et al. (2006, p. 14) – 'targeted recruitment', 'structured program', a 'combination of interventions/strategies' offered and a 'strength-based approach'. Most parenting education programmes focus on parental 'warmth and responsiveness', 'discipline consistency', 'levels of monitoring and supervision' and 'decreasing harsh and coercive parenting' (Tully, 2009, p. 1). Sanders and Pidgeon (2011, p. 201) discussed the role harsh, and punitive parenting plays in child abuse and the need to address this in programmes. KCS is consistent with all these themes, but from a different starting point that builds a better understanding of child abuse, an appreciation of its effects on children, both short and long term, and child-focussed responses. It also covers child neglect, child sexual abuse and emotional abuse, including exposure to domestic violence. Some readers might consider the programme offered to be negative. However, each session contains positive, prevention input, and it was the authors' experience that the participants viewed the material, while difficult, as necessary, rather than negative. The minimum requirement by authorities of any parent is to not abuse or neglect his/her children, so it made sense to the authors to ensure that parents grasp what child abuse is, in all its forms, and in what ways it harms children. Workers in the field are required to receive this information on a systematic basis through mandatory child protection training in order to 'recognise and respond' to abuse (National Register on Vocational Education and Training (VET), 2015), but this is not necessarily the case for parents. The failure of society to proactively educate parents might be considered a hangover from the early 'residual' approach to child protection, in contrast to 'institutional' approaches, a conception of welfare by Wilensky and Lebeaux (1965), and cited by Zastrow (1999, p. 49). The residual approach would say that learning about abuse is a family or individual responsibility, and the state should only be involved when child abuse comes to the attention of authorities. An institutional approach would favour longer term, structural, universal and more preventative approaches. The authors' experience is that there is insufficient recognition in child protection policy of the value of systematically educating parents on child abuse and its effects, in spite of child abuse rates. The practice of mandating such information only to professionals and other workers is analogous to a government deciding that in future, police officers were to be the only drivers required to meet training and testing requirements in relation to road rules, to be able to drive motor vehicles. Would that be acceptable?

Recruitment and retention strategies

The course was conducted at the OFSS premises, a large old house with a homely feel, well known and less intimidating to potential participants, many of whom attended this venue for other activities, such as the supportive playgroup. From 2008 to 2010, one group a year was held at the Orange Probation and Parole Service, specifically for clients of that service.

Several strategies were developed to address attendance and retention barriers, including:

1. a combined parenting education, empowerment and strength-based approach;
2. proactive recruitment through agencies, schools and other services and directly from OFSS caseload and enquiries;
3. provision of free transport to and from sessions as required;
4. funding of occasional child care for the programme time as resources permitted;
5. coffee/tea available on arrival and a short break for morning tea;
6. no fees payable;
7. attention to group processes and environment by:
   i) creation of a respectful atmosphere in which participants and their contributions were valued;
   ii) interactive style of programme that was also careful not to force participation in discussions;
   iii) allowing participants to leave the room without embarrassment if uncomfortable or stressed about any material under discussion;
   iv) support of participants, including before the group and between sessions, to encourage attendance and address their concerns;
   v) building facilitator/participant relationships.

vi) Assistance given to participants with low literacy when completing forms and in the explanation of concepts. But it was considered important to acquaint participants with, and not avoid, the terminology used by child welfare authorities.

8. Recognition of attendance and achievement through the presentation of a certificate of attendance.

The certificate showed the number of sessions attended so was useful for the parent to take back to their referring agency or case manager. There was no claim for particular learning achievement on the certificate, as change was not formally measured. However, for a number of participants, programme completion was an achievement in itself, for some a proud 'first'.

After the initial group, when it was observed that participants lingered, not wanting to leave the venue, a celebratory end-of-programme lunch in the dining room was instituted for subsequent groups. This was a simple meal of barbequed sausages and salad which had the additional function for many participants of experiencing the pleasure and interaction of a sit-down meal together.

After the first couple of groups, some important decisions had to be made by the authors. A child of a participant, who had attended an early group, died. This was, naturally, a very distressing event and prompted the facilitators to review the programme and what improvements might be made. An even more explicit emphasis on the paramount responsibility of parents for the welfare of their children was incorporated into the first strategic element, session topics and discussions. Part of this involved challenging of viewpoints expressed in the sessions which were not in the interests of children. This has been done consistently over the years, but respectfully and constructively. For example, one of the viewpoints challenged is that which minimises the reality and effect of neglect or abuse on children, by excusing parents who have a difficult life issue or condition. Parents have been encouraged to be more child-focussed. This has also meant encouraging parents to seek help for their parenting in times of crisis or other need. Numerous productive discussions have then taken place with parents who reported negative experiences in seeking help in the past. Because of this, the authors decided to evaluate any change, as a result of attendance at the programme, in the inclination of participants to seek help if they felt they could not cope. Finally, facilitators have been careful not to be drawn by clients into negativity towards other agencies, and to short circuit any similar group hostility. The roles of relevant agencies are discussed, and clients have often been assisted individually on the side with their issues and complaints. In evaluations, it has been reported by some participants and agencies that the programme has led to improved client – agency cooperation.

Methodology of the evaluation

The literature highlights the growing importance of evidence-based practice and the need for social workers to evaluate their interventions (Alston & Bowles, 2003, p. 169). In the context of evaluating child abuse prevention programmes, Tomison (2000, p. 2–3), Holzer et al. (2006, pp. 5–6) and Lamont (2009, p. 1) distinguished between three kinds of evaluations. Firstly, there are those concerned with 'inputs' and 'processes', secondly those with immediate 'impacts', and thirdly the 'outcomes'. Outcome measures evaluate the 'underlying' and 'long-term goals' of a programme such as reduction in child abuse (Holzer et al., 2006; Lamont, 2009). The focus of this paper, however, is on the first two elements – recruitment and retention rates for the programme, the inputs and processes influencing them, and the reported immediate impact of the programme on participants.

Since 2004, the authors have kept records of attendance and conducted initial and end-of-group evaluations, which have collected data on the inputs and processes of this programme, recruitment and retention information and impacts. Questionnaires given to participants at the beginning and the end of groups gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. Participants completed the questionnaires in the first and last sessions, respectively. The questionnaires that came with the KCS programme handbook were first used. Over the years, new questions have been introduced by the authors and some of the questions changed. So the numbers of responses to various questions covered in this paper vary. Emphasis in the reporting and analysis of results is therefore often placed upon percentages rather than raw numbers.

The initial questionnaire asked for demographic and referral information and obtained baseline information on participants' perceptions of their knowledge and understanding of abuse issues. From 2005, participants were asked whether they previously attended a parenting education group and if not, the reason for this.

The end-of-group questionnaire asked participants, for example, whether the group 'was helpful for their parenting', to identify what they gained from the group and any application of the material, and to comment on their experience of being in the programme. From 2007, in order to understand what influenced participants' attendance, participants were asked to identify factors having a 'strong influence on your decision to register for this course and to keep coming'. A number of factors were listed for possible selection (more than one could be ticked). This list was revised in 2011, and the perceptions of 107 participants responding to this question in the period 2011 to Feb/Mar 2017 are reported on here.

Participants with literacy problems were assisted to complete the forms.

Data analysis

The results of the questionnaires were collated and reviewed for each group. All the data have been entered into spreadsheets. Quantitative data have been analysed and compared with themes identified from some of the qualitative data.

As stated, the focus of this article is on the ongoing evaluation of attendance rates, processes and the immediate impact of the KCS programme at Orange. Particular focus is directed at attendance rates and the influences on these.

Results

Participants

From the beginning of the programme in May 2004 to February 2017, a total of 344 people attended 34 KCS groups. Of those who started a group, 107 (31.1%) were males and 237 (68.9%) were females. Of the 34 groups, 70.6% of groups attracted between 7 and 11 participants. Eighty-four (24.4%) participants identified as being an Indigenous Australian.

The above data include workers and students who attended the programme, and totalled just 5.2% (18) of participants. These were workers accompanying clients and/or getting to know the programme, and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) welfare and social work students. They were all females and included

Table 1. Recruitment and retention 2004 to 2017 for 34 groups

No. of sessions attended	All participants (%)	Males (%)	Females (%)	Indigenous participants (%)	Non-Indigenous participants (%)
One session	6.1	6.5	5.5	13.3	3.7
Two sessions	7.1	8.4	6.4	13.3	4.9
Three sessions	6.4	2.9	7.3	4.8	7.0
Four sessions	14.4	16.8	12.8	6.0	17.3
Five sessions	35.9	33.6	39.3	32.5	37.0
Six sessions	30.1	31.8	28.7	30.1	30.1
Total % (Total No.)	100 (326) *	100 (107)	100 (219)	100 (83)	100 (243)

Table 2. Attendance at 4 or more sessions 2004 to 2017 for 34 groups

No. of sessions attended	All participants	Males	Females	Indigenous participants	Non-Indigenous participants
Four or more sessions	262 (80.4%)	88 (82.2%)	117 (80.8%)	57 (68.7%)	174 (71.6%)
Five or more sessions	215 (66%)	70 (65.4%)	149 (68%)	52 (62.7%)	163 (67.1%)
Six sessions	98 (30.1%)	34 (31.8%)	63 (28.8%)	25 (30.1%)	73 (30.1%)

the one Aboriginal worker. The reason for inclusion in the data is that they were encouraged to participate as equals in the groups, not just to observe. Many did fully take part and reported favourably on the experience. Some chose to complete questionnaires, some chose not to.

Initial questionnaires were completed by 307 participants on the first day of the programme they attended. Not all 344 participants were able to be surveyed. For example, a participant might have failed to complete the questionnaire on Day One and then did not return. At the end of the groups, 243 participants were surveyed using the end-of-group questionnaire. Again, not all who undertook the programme were able to be surveyed at the end. Those who attended only a couple of sessions were generally not surveyed, as questionnaires were routinely done at the end of the last group. Only some of those who did not come to the last session were followed up to complete a questionnaire. Finally, it should be noted that the completion of any questionnaire was voluntary.

In total, 801 children were represented. In some cases, the children were in substitute care due to abuse or neglect at the time of the parent's attendance at the group. Of those participants initially surveyed, 257 (82.4%) identified Centrelink payments as their main source of income.

From October 2005, attending parents were asked in the initial questionnaire if they had been to any parenting education group before. A majority of parents (53.2%) indicated they had not attended a group before. The most common reasons for not previously attending a group were 'not being aware of a programme', 'not having a need to attend', 'not having transport', 'not feeling comfortable' and/or 'not being interested'.

Recruitment and retention

The results show that the programme at OFSS has been successful in not only attracting parents in the target group, but in retaining most of them. This included a majority who had not been to a parenting group before. The retention data presented in Tables 1 and 2 are based on the attendance of all participants in the period, less the 18 workers and students. So the retention data are based on 326 participants, being 107 males and 219 females, and including 83 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.

A total of 80.4% of participants attended four or more sessions, and 98 (30.1%) attended all six sessions. The retention rate for men was marginally higher, with 82.2% attending four or more sessions, compared to that for women with 80.8%. In the case of Indigenous participants, slightly less, 68.7%, attended four or more sessions, compared to non-Indigenous participants (71.6%), while their attendance rates for six sessions was the same as for non-Indigenous participants (30.1%). A higher proportion of Indigenous clients attended just one or two sessions compared with other participants but as with other participants, there was a high proportion attending five or more sessions. The modal number of sessions attended was 5, by 117 parents (35.9%), and this was the modal for all categories of participants shown.

Influences on recruitment and retention

In the period 2011 to February 2017, 107 participants were surveyed on factors influencing their attendance, and given a number of options to choose from. Table 3 presents the results. Of those surveyed, 73.8% selected 'Content of the Course', 72% 'The atmosphere created by the leaders in the group', 69.6% 'Getting to know other participants', 62.6% 'Personal contact from group leaders between group sessions', 55.1% 'No charge', and 53.3% 'Provision of morning tea'. Other reasons selected with less frequency, but still important, were 'Transport provided' and 'Assistance with child care'. The latter might have been more frequently selected had more parents had the care of their children.

It is appreciated that a proportion of the group members were required to attend by authorities, but this was not a factor highlighted nor explicitly drawn out in the above question or in other items. Participants did have the opportunity to record this voluntarily at different points in the survey forms. Fifteen of the 307 participants surveyed initially stated, under 'other reasons', that they were required to attend by another agency, Community Corrections or court, in response to a question on 'Reason for coming to the group'. However, in answer to the above question in the end-of-group survey about what influenced their retention, only

Table 3. Reported influences on attendance, 2011–2017, at 17 groups

Strong influence on 'decision to register and keep coming'	No. of participants who ticked this reason	% of 107 participants who ticked this reason
Transport was provided	45	42.1
No charge for course	59	55.1
Assistance with child care	27	25.2
Provision of morning tea	57	53.3
Personal contact from the leaders before and between sessions	67	62.6
The atmosphere created by the leaders during the course	77	72
Getting to know other participants	74	69.2
The content of the course	79	73.8
Other reasons	12	11.2
No response	4	3.7

one participant mentioned a requirement to attend – 'Made to come by Corrective Services, then really enjoyed and found it helpful'. This man's partner subsequently attended the KCS programme at his suggestion and then the couple started coming with their young children to the supported playgroup run at OFSS. There was just one participant who identified a work reason as an influence – 'working with children'.

By way of complementary data, in responding to two other elements in the end-of-group questionnaire, 84.7% of participants indicated that they 'enjoyed the support of others in the group' and 94.3% of participants thought 'the group leaders were supportive of me as a parent'.

Initial impact of the programme

Participants reported that they gained a better knowledge of child abuse through the programme. For participants surveyed since 2014, 21.3% said at the first session that they had 'no' or 'little' knowledge of abuse. At the end of the programme, only one person (2.1%) fitted into this category. The proportion of participants who felt their knowledge was 'basic' or a 'lot' rose from 72% at commencement to 97.9% on completion. In the end-of-group questionnaire, in response to a rating scale of agreement from 1 to 7 (strongly disagree to strongly agree), that they 'felt more comfortable about talking to their children about child abuse', 78.5% of participants gave a rating of 6 or 7. Similarly, in rating whether the programme was 'helpful for their parenting', 88% of participants gave a rating of 6 or 7. 47.7% of participants said they had 'tried a new parenting strategy learnt in the group' and 48.1% said they intended to.

In terms of any change in their confidence to seek help, of the 165 participants who responded to the statement 'I would now be more confident about asking for help, if I found myself in a situation where I was not coping as a parent', 77.6% of participants gave a rating of 6 or 7, whereas four participants (2.4%) gave a rating of 1 or 2 in strong disagreement with the statement. Depending on the cohort, some participants were asked this question in a different way. This question was asked in the initial questionnaire as a baseline: 'How confident would you be to ask for help, if you found yourself in a situation where you, as a parent, were not coping?' and was repeated in the end-of-group questionnaire with the addition of the word 'now'. Of the 74 initially asked the question, 48 were able to be surveyed later. 82.4% of the 74 asked in the first session said they would be confident to seek help, and this proportion rose to 91.7% of the 48 who were asked at completion of the group.

Qualitative data

In the end-of-group questionnaire participants were asked 'What were two ideas you got from the course?', which resulted in responses from 243 participants surveyed in the period 2004 to 2017. The answers ranged from just one word such as 'supervision' to statements such as 'understanding where I went wrong'. There were 25 participants who did not respond to the question and some who named just one idea. The answers were grouped into themes, the two most common being:

1. Ideas around being sensitive, empathic and in communication with their children, which were stated by 93 participants. Some examples of their responses include: 'Listening more intently to your child, including asking questions', 'To look at things through my children's eyes', 'Awareness of the effects that removed my children', 'How much my kids had to go through, effects of abuse', 'Children have feelings and needs', 'To stop and listen to my children', 'Talking to my children about abuse (physical, sexual)'.
2. Ideas about the protection of children, the management of risks, identifying a safe network for children, which were stated by 85 participants. Some of the responses were: 'Supervision', 'How to help protect my children', 'How to keep my children safe', 'Protecting children from other people', 'Network hand of people and correct name of body parts'. The network hand is a visual aid which is used with children for them to identify a network of trusted adults to tell things to.

Two other significant themes were:

1. Learning about other parenting strategies and gaining confidence in the parenting role (60 responses). Participant responses included: 'Giving the child praise helps boost them emotionally', 'Understanding where I went wrong', 'How to deal with my own emotions', 'Parenting skills – staying calm, keeping cool, explaining to children'.
2. Understanding what is regarded as child abuse and neglect, how these can come about, and their effects, particularly about neglect, child sexual abuse and domestic violence (49 responses). Participant responses included: 'How neglect can happen and how easy it is to do it without knowing you are doing it', 'Unintentional neglect', 'Grooming', 'DV is more than physical violence and impacts on kids'.

Other less common themes were:

1. An awareness of available help and services, the need to use services and the need for parents to have support (17 responses). Responses included: 'There is help out there', 'Where to go to get information on parenting', 'I now know there is help out there, I don't have to do it alone'.
2. An understanding of the child protection system, risk assessment and how to respond if a child were to disclose abuse (15 responses). Reponses included: 'How to approach things when a child discloses', 'Knowing the risk assessment', 'How to work with DOCS'.

These themes were often repeated in other parts of the questionnaire. For example, the person who learned 'DV is more than physical violence and impacts on kids' later wrote in her questionnaire 'I realised my current relationship is not good for my children'. Other participants also wrote, for example, : 'Now have more confidence talking to my children about abuse and neglect'; 'Thank you so much ... I really appreciated your support and incentive to be willing to identify and change (the) ways I was and change for myself and my children, thank you'; 'I look back and see I have neglected my children and didn't even realise it'; 'It's very useful, it has turned the light on for me and I can now see, especially, what neglect is and its effect on kids'.

Discussion

The positive attendance and retention data from the KCS programme at Orange indicate vulnerable, disadvantaged parents can be attracted to parenting education with appropriate strategies put in place, and this includes fathers and mothers as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents. Participants indicated that the content was a strong influence, and in other parts of the questionnaire, highly relevant and helpful to their parenting. Also important to retention were process factors such as the support from the facilitators, the level of support between group members, the contact from group leaders between sessions, and other more practical measures. The results therefore provide a level of evidence in support of the strategies developed and employed by the facilitators. They also provide complementary evidence for some of those strategies reported in their research of service providers by Cortis et al. (2009, pp. 17–25), and evidence for some of the 'possible solutions' listed by Sanders and Pidgeon (2011, p. 204).

The authors strongly believe, with the benefit of their long experience in facilitating and evaluating the programme, that KCS provides necessary and vital knowledge to all parents, whether in a primary, secondary or tertiary prevention context. However, to be successful in attracting and retaining parents in the challenging child protection tertiary service context, it is necessary to employ a range of recruitment and retention strategies tailored to the target group, not just one.

The results also indicate that, not only did participants gain knowledge of child abuse and its effects, but some participants reported an increase in insight, changed attitudes, and an application to behaviour, whether actual or intended. The focus of many parents on the need to be sensitive and attentive to their children as a result of the programme content indicated the possibility of an increase in child-centred parenting in their families. Also, with the number of parents reporting greater confidence to talk to their children about abuse and the introduction of safety measures, the programme might have contributed to a more protective environment for the children involved.

In the tertiary child protection setting the programme should be more than a stand-alone programme, as it can complement other elements of the service network that assist clients with casework, counselling and home visiting. Some parents stated they came to an understanding of why their children were removed from their care. To the extent that these parents and some clients reported a greater willingness to seek help and/or a better working relationship with other providers, there was an indication that the KCS programme at Orange was increasing the possibility that parents and their children would achieve more benefit from the service network. Informal feedback the authors received from referring agencies supported this assessment. Many participants also had the confidence and motivation to attend another parent education programme offered at OFSS, the 1–2–3 Magic and Emotion Coaching course, as a result of their positive experience with KCS.

Evaluation limitations

Some participants only completed one or two sessions and did not complete an end-of-group questionnaire. The known reasons included gaining employment, moving house, sickness, and other conflicting commitments. There was a proportion of people who left without word or a clear reason. It would have enhanced the evaluation to have surveyed those who left the programme early, to formally record reasons for this and obtain any feedback. Duppong-Hurley et al. (2016) reported on a study of 27 parents, being 12% of a list of parents who had failed to attend a parenting programme in Omaha USA. Scheduling issues were the most common reason given for their non-attendance (33% of interviewees). In the case of our programme, it needs to be noted that several participants who dropped out returned to complete a subsequent programme.

The evaluation does not explore outcomes of the KCS programme for participants and their families over time, which is desirable for evidence-based practice (Tomison, 2000, p. 2–3). But Tomison (2000, p. 2) also stated 'comprehensive programme evaluation requires the completion of input, process and outcome evaluation –with input and process evaluations informing the latter'. He further recognised and discussed the difficulties of obtaining outcome evidence in child protection programmes and identified a general shortfall of systematic evidence for programmes in Australia at that time (p. 4). Holzer et al. (2006, p. 7) also highlighted the challenges of obtaining valid data and therefore the limitations of evaluations being undertaken. We were always concerned about the lack of follow-up data for the KCS programme and though encouraged by the process and impact data and our knowledge of numerous participants' responses to the programme, were aware of the caution needing to be exercised in interpreting the immediate impact findings. An exploratory outcome evaluation was finally able to be undertaken with the help of social work students in the period 2015 to 2017. This research is the subject of a forthcoming article, complementing and enhancing the findings from the evaluation reported here.

Conclusion

This evaluation of the KCS programme at Orange has shown that disadvantaged parents and parents of vulnerable children can be recruited and retained in a child protection education programme with relevant content and using a range of strategies tailored to the target group. The evaluation has also shown the programme to have a number of benefits for the participants in their parenting roles. The factors that had a strong influence on their attendance and programme completion, as reported by participants, may inform the implementation of parent education programmes by other practitioners working in child abuse prevention and treatment. The extent of information obtained from the evaluation over such a long period also offers the possibility of further analysis of the data held.

The critical importance of parents having the benefit of an education programme, which gives them an understanding of child abuse and neglect and an empathic appreciation of their effects on children, as a foundation for child-centred parenting and

integrating other parent education, has been highlighted. The authors also believe that the KCS programme can improve the working relationship between parents and agencies in the child welfare context.

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Conflict of interest. The authors of the article have been the primary facilitators of the programme evaluated.

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