

H.U.G.S.

A parent-child interaction program

by Jennifer McIntosh and Lynette Green

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a brief account of a group program developed by Alys Key Family Care for parents and pre-school children where the growth of a sound, nurturing relationship has been significantly impaired. HUGS is an acronym for "Happiness, Understanding, Giving and Sharing". The program has the overall aim of fostering positive interaction, enjoyment and the development of a reciprocal caring, confident bond between parents and children. The group has been evolving since 1987, with many refinements in its conceptualisation along the way. The agency is currently producing a manual which describes in detail the rationale and operation of the program, pilot evaluations, HUGS activities and styles of intervention and support which seem particularly effective within the group.

ALYS KEY FAMILY CARE

Alys Key Family Care is a non-government Family Support Agency auspiced by the Children's Protection Society. It was established in Melbourne in 1986, initially as a three year Demonstration project, with a focus of providing intensive, relatively long-term support and intervention for families experiencing severe and multiple difficulties, many of whom were at risk of losing their children into state care. In many of these families a clear cycle of abuse and neglect over many generations was evident.

With this target group in mind, the Alys Key Family Support Program was formulated, aimed at prevention and remediation through intensive outreach work. The original service

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model was based on a team approach, involving the coordinated input of Family Counsellors, Family Support Workers and Child Care Workers. A full time research and evaluation component was also incorporated into the program, producing a thorough critique of all aspects of the service (McIntosh, 1989).

The HUGS playgroup commenced one year into the Demonstration Program. In its pilot form, research and casework staff set out to explore the structured playgroup setting as a means of addressing the quality of parent-child interaction with the targeted population of families. From the perspectives of research and casework, this paper aims to describe the origins of the HUGS program and its role within Alys Key Family Care.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

From the extremes of an explosive, physically volatile relationship to a disengaged, emotional emptiness, the quality of interaction between parent and child has long been an area of concern in the field of child protection. As research and casework practices at AKFC grew over the first year of our project, concerns escalated about the extremely poor quality of relationships evident between many parents and children. Staff comments about families such as, "They're just not communicating", "Nobody plays with him at home because they don't know how" and "Whenever I suggest things they could be doing together, she changes the subject and starts talking about herself" became more frequent.

On the broadest level, the importance of communication appeared to be unrecognised or undervalued in so many families with whom we were involved and the skills of communication undeveloped in both parents and children. Many of these practice

observations are reinforced in the research literature (eg as summarised in Steele, 1986) about characteristics which serve to maintain poor quality relationships between parents and young children, eg:

- overwhelmed and overly self-involved parents
- power assertive and negatively oriented discipline methods
- inconsistent parenting techniques
- poor verbal communication and an absence of eye contact
- parents childhood experiences
- hyperactive or withdrawn children.

On another level, both practice and research wisdom point to the unmet basic emotional needs of the parents from their own childhoods as a crucial factor in the current quality of interaction between parent and child in so many ways, many of the parents we see continue to search for gratification of basic emotional needs - encouragement, respect, nurture, love. Parents who may seem self-involved, power assertive and demanding and who gear much of what goes on in their relationships with their own children to themselves can be seen as trying to fill gaps from their own upbringing. Yet in so doing, gaps start to open up for their children. Selma Freiberg's image of "ghosts in the nursery" conveys these notions powerfully. She writes,

"In every nursery there are ghosts - visitors from the unremembered pasts of the parents, the uninvited guests at the christening. In some families they have been present at the christening for two or more generations. While no-one has issued an invitation, the ghosts take up residence in the nursery and conduct the rehearsal of the family tragedy from a tattered script, in which the baby is a silent actor." (1980, p. 165).

Against this background HUGS was formed and continues to develop.

WHAT THE GROUP AIMS TO DO

The central mandate of the group is to foster parent-child interactions in a small, structured and supportive group setting which provides for the needs of both parent and child:

- the need for parents to be supported and empowered with the confidence and skills to deal more effectively with, enjoy and value their children
- the children's need for added stimulation which is often lacking in the home
- the need for enriched opportunity for enjoyment and growth within an environment which recognised the nurturance needs of both parents and child
- the need of families to form and maintain supportive friendships and effective social networks
- the need to promote the parent-child relationship through positive interactions, instead of working only on an individual basis with parents and children.

On one hand, the group is about providing on-going education to facilitate the growth of the parent-child relationship, to encourage better understanding of children's individual needs and to inspire parents with self-confidence in meeting these needs. On the other hand, the anxiety and threat that parents may feel as they attempt to respond to their children, sometimes on a more intimate basis than they have attempted before or on a level unfamiliar from their own childhoods, is understood and every attempt is made to give positive support and reinforcement of their efforts.

RUNNING THE GROUP

HUGS is an exciting and innovative program where we work towards improving confidence and caring in the parent-child relationship by providing an environment where both are supported, accepted and nurtured - where fair, firm, consistent limits are set - where we involve and encourage parents in play activities with their children. HUGS is a special time for parents and their children, allowing them and

encouraging them to have fun with each other - to enjoy being together.

WHERE AND WHEN

HUGS is run on a school term basis, with an average of six families attending each term. Some families continue for more than one or two terms if this is appropriate. Recruitment to the group is based on individual family needs as perceived by the team involved and the family. Both mothers and fathers are actively encouraged to participate. Sessions are held weekly for two hours, usually in the Alys Key Family Care playroom, with occasional outings. Transport to and from sessions and outings is provided where necessary.

THE FACILITATING PROCESS

Given the delicate nature of the work involved, HUGS requires skilful and sensitive facilitation. The group to date has been facilitated by two workers, a Children's Services worker and a Family Support worker, bringing a good blend of skills to the program.

Facilitators take on a number of roles, all of which must be carefully balanced. They actively intervene in the group with a combination of empathy, guidance, support and encouragement - providing time and space for both parent and child. Appropriate and realistic expectations are conveyed through role-modelling, creativity, concern, laughter, hugging and kidding along. Picking up on difficult issues in interaction requires honesty, directness and flexibility of approach. For example, there is a fine line between motivating a mother to discipline her child, without undermining her ability to do so. We attempt to help parents to read their child's behavioural cues and moods, modelling appropriate alternative discipline strategies and encouraging praise of achievements, no matter how small.

Some parents do lose control in the group, as they do at home - the long standing stresses and strains of a poor relationship don't disappear instantly as they walk in the door. At times they lose confidence and become

increasingly frustrated at their unsuccessful attempts to handle their child's behaviour. The facilitator must start by acknowledging the anger or embarrassment they might be feeling and together work on other ways of managing the situation and helping them to follow through. In many cases, the parents have not effectively established "executive control" in the relationship, and it's a case of redefining "uncontrollable" children as "uncontrolled" children who are seeking some firm and consistent limits.

INTRODUCING THE GROUP TO THE PARENTS

In the first session of term, facilitators explain to parents that HUGS is a special time to enjoy their children - a time in which they can work on building the kind of relationship they would like to have together. Facilitators emphasise that parents are responsible for looking after and disciplining their own children during the sessions, but that we are there to help. Simple rules are brief and clearly outlined. Badges are given to families as an indication of group membership, as are activity folders with information on the day's session, for use as a resource at home. Parents understand fully what the purpose of the group is - they know what it means when facilitators say; "Hey! That's not HUGS stuff you're doing there" or "That's a great HUGS thing to do". This is what makes HUGS very different from many other groups the parents may have been involved in. Essentially, they come to HUGS for quality time with their children, rather than having a break away from them.

PLANNING AND ACTIVITIES

Planning each session involves a careful process of choosing activities which will encourage positive interactions between parents and children as well as being "age" appropriate and fun for both. We have found that many pleasurable childhood experiences, which we may take for granted, were lacking in these parents' lives. HUGS aims to help by

acknowledging that playing with children is "OK" for parents, by showing the importance of a supportive, reciprocal relationship and by structuring activities so that parents and children find pleasure in actively participating together. Activities are designed to promote positive physical and verbal interaction, to help parents become more attuned to their child's signals and to find better ways of responding to them. All activities are geared to be inexpensive, easy and fun to repeat at home. Parents are assisted in recognising which activities are possible and appropriate for their children.

We have found over time that successful activities are those which gently encourage individual attention, eye-contact, touching and laughing, and any sort of communication which has potential to strengthen the often weak bonds between parents and children. It is a core belief of the program that any valued activity achieved together by parent and child will promote communication and an emotional connection between the two.

FEEDBACK

Feedback from parents has been very encouraging throughout the sessions. At the end of each term they are given a simple, confidential question-

naire, which is helpful in evaluating and developing the program. These are some of the comments we have received:

- "HUGS helps me to get more close to my kids and them to me"
- "I like going to HUGS because we do things together"
- "This is great. I can never think of things to do with my kids. Now I'm getting some good ideas"
- We like coming here. It's not like other playgroups where you sit back and watch. We do things together here"
- "Thanks for having me - NO - US"

Particularly rewarding too, has been the ample evidence of increased spontaneous hugging and parents initiating activities with their children. The facilitators have seen parents grow in confidence in their ability to relate to and be involved with their children. A group cohesiveness develops too as parents see that they are not alone in having difficulties coping. As the sessions develop, parents tend to support each other and help out with children who are not their own. Family teams have often commented that mothers are spending more 'positive' time with their children, doing activities with them and approaching discipline issues in a more appropriate manner.

SUMMARY

HUGS has had its teething difficulties too, with ups and downs in attendance, finding out which activities will work and which won't, learning when and how to intervene and at times taking risks which may or may not work. Staff have been very enthusiastic and supportive of the group during this time, believing that HUGS meets a real need for families which are isolated and have been reluctant to participate in community playgroups. Within the Alys Key Family Care program, we believe that HUGS provides the opportunity to learn and practice basic communication skills and to re-experience the parent-child relationship in a supportive and positive context - an important step in overcoming histories of child abuse and neglect.

REFERENCES

- Freiberg, Selma (1980). *Clinical studies in infant mental health*. Basic Books Inc.: New York
- McIntosh, J. (1989). *Alys Key Family Care: A study of growth and change*. Final research and evaluation report. Children's Protection Society publication.
- Steele, B. F. (1986). Notes on the lasting effects of early child abuse throughout the life cycle. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 10 pp 283-291.

HEAPS Health Education and Promotion System

HEAPS is an Australia-wide computerised listing of programs and resource materials. It is jointly funded by the state and territory health departments, and by the Commonwealth Department of Community Services and Health. The database contains more than 5,400 entries on programs and resources.

Special subject files include:

- Parent Education
- Intellectual Disability
- Pre-natal Care and Child Birth
- Adolescence
- Child Health

HEAPS is a valuable resource for community health workers, social workers, health planners, patient educators, GPs, trainers and librarians.

For more information

To get further details or to arrange a free HEAPS search, call the HEAPS office in your state or territory:

ACT	(062) 45 4244
New South Wales	(02) 217 5933
Northern Territory	(089) 20 3370
Queensland	(07) 234 0902
South Australia	(08) 226 6053
Tasmania	(002) 30 3554
Victoria	(03) 616 7449
Western Australia	(09) 222 2040
National Office	(03) 542 7338

Parent Help Programs

Victoria

The **Parent Help Program** was developed as a result of 'An Investigation into Parent Education Opportunities for Vulnerable Families in Victoria' undertaken by Community Services Victoria (CSV) in 1989. The Parent Help Program is a multifaceted community development approach to parent education. The program was funded by CSV for a fifteen month pilot period which began in October 1989. The purpose of the program is to increase opportunities for families to participate in effective, appropriate, and relevant parent education and parent skills development.

The program includes four key elements:

Parent Resource Coordinators are employed in four metropolitan and four rural localities where they act as a catalyst for developing increased access/options for parent education and parent support opportunities.

Community Education Strategy aims to heighten community awareness on the difficulty of parenting. This has included local and national media coverage of the program, as well as statewide distribution of a 'Parent Help' brochure and four posters with the following themes:

'Being a parent: it's not easy but it's worth it'

'Being a parent: we're not experts but we care'

'Being a parent: it's worth it for a smile'

'Being a parent: it's men's work too'

Training for parent educators was highlighted as an area to be addressed. To this end, CSV has funded Prahran College of TAFE to develop a parent education leadership training curriculum. It is expected that parent education leadership training will eventually be offered through the TAFE system as an accredited course.

A News and Information Service, based at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) will gather information on parent education programs, resources and contact people throughout Victoria.

The publication of the regular newsletter, *Parent Help Program - News and Information Bulletin* is a means of maintaining linkages between parent educators, and providing professionals and other people with information on parent help courses, programs, groups and resources.

George John, Co-ordinator, Parent Help Program

Phone: (03) 412 7777

Carole Finnigan, Project Officer

Parent Help Program Information Collection, ACER

Phone: (03) 819 1400

South Australia

The **Adelaide Central Mission** runs programs to assist and support parents in avoiding family breakdown and the resultant placement of children in care outside the family.

*Gary Wright,
Adelaide Central Mission
10 Pitt Street
Adelaide 5000*

Tel: (08) 212 2599

Queensland

The **Parent Education Centre** is a community based non-profit organisation which aims to promote community awareness of the need for parent education and to create a focus for workers in the field. It recently received a Community Development Grant from the Brisbane City Council to assist financially disadvantaged parents to attend the Centre's positive parenting courses.

*Parent Education Centre,
32 Park Road,
Milton 4064*

(07) 369 1210

Tasmania

The **Philip Smith Education Centre Inc.** has a big commitment to parent education and runs a variety of courses in this area. It also produces a *Directory of Parent Services*.

*Felicity Hickman
Philip Smith Education Centre Inc.
2 Edward Street
Glebe 7000*

Tel: 307246

Western Australia

The **Office of the Family** is conducting a review of parent education programs in Western Australia and is due to report the results to the Premier in March 1991.

*Carey Drake-Brockman
Office of the Family
3rd floor, May Holman Centre
St Georges Terrace
Perth W.A.*

Tel: (09) 222 0408

National

The Commonwealth Attorney General's Department has initiated a national project in **Family Skills Training**. Four centres (listed below) have been given initial funding for six months with a brief to develop programs in positive parenting and problem solving skills for disadvantaged families who would not normally have access to existing programs.

*Centacare Family Services,
Newtown, Tasmania*

Tel: 002 78 1660

*Marriage Guidance Council of S.A.,
Adelaide.*

Tel: 08 223 2566

*Centacare Catholic Family Welfare Service,
Woolongong, NSW.*

Tel: 042 27 1122

*Broadmeadows Family Services Centre,
Victoria*

Tel: 03 306 1244

Mr Phil Bretherton (tel: 054 43 2377) is the National Project Officer, and his brief is to develop core resource material for subsequent programs.

Parenting Resources

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) operates as a distributor of resources in this field. Some of these resources are detailed below and are available from:

ACER Customer Services,
PO Box 210
Hawthorn Vic 3122

Tel: (03) 819 1400
Fax: (03) 819 5502

PARENTING TODAY by Ailsa Drent

A new Australian parenting program, which offers parents the chance to learn positive discipline strategies which are commonly used in Australian schools to foster the development of self-disciplined, co-operative young people with high self esteem. The program can be delivered to parents of children of all ages and in a range of settings. Its focus is to teach those parenting skills which have been identified by research as essential for the encouragement of appropriate behaviour and autonomy in young people.

Parenting Today Leader's Book ISBN 0 86431 073 0 \$36.95

Parenting Today Parent's Book ISBN 0 86431 074 9 \$12.95

BECOMING BETTER PARENTS 3rd ed. by Maurice Balson

Since first released in 1981, this book has sold over 25000 copies. This 3rd edition is completely updated and includes a valuable new chapter on common behaviour problems. Instead of a bewildering array of advice on different surface behaviours, *Becoming Better Parents* offers parents an understanding of the motivation underlying all their child's behaviour - and the skills to which parents are introduced arise naturally out of this understanding.

ISBN 0 86431 076 5 \$14.95

THE PARENTING PUZZLE by Ramon and Susan Lewis

This is a new Australian book which outlines three approaches to disciplining children. A simple questionnaire helps parents to decide which approach is most suited to their own temperament and those of their children. As a child grows or as the situation changes, a different approach may become necessary or more appropriate. The authors encourage parents to be flexible and sensitive to the changing needs, ages and circumstances of their children.

ISBN 0 86431 036 6 \$13.95

THE NEW EXPLORERS: A PSYCHODYNAMIC APPROACH TO PARENTING IN A CHANGING SOCIETY by Ruth Schmidt Neven

In the psychodynamic approach, importance is given to the individual's emotional or inner life and how this affects outer relationships. Parents are made aware that the developmental transitions that the child goes through have an emotional dimension that they, as parents, can acknowledge and respond to in an on-going (psychodynamic) way which will continue to nurture the developing child. Sections of this book focus on adapting the psychodynamic model to specific situations such as sole parenting, fathering, family changes and stresses. It also discusses the creation of support networks for parents.

ISBN 0 7316 9552 6 \$24.95

TEACHING YOUR CHILD SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR by Lindy Petersen

This book introduces parents and children to the STOP-THINK-DO method of improving skills in the management of day-to-day family difficulties and in the development of social skills generally.

ISBN 0 646 01188 X \$14.95

FROM BIRTH TO FIVE YEARS by Mary D. Sheridan

This acclaimed and best selling guide to young children's development uses non-technical language and simple line drawings to describe the various stages of child development under the headings of posture and large movement; vision and fine movement; hearing and speech; and social behaviour and play.

ISBN 0 86431 042 0 \$12.95

YOUR CHILD FROM ONE TO TEN by Peter Bowler

In a light-hearted yet accurate and reassuring manner, this book gives parents the facts about the developmental stages of their children from ages one to ten. Physical and emotional development do not proceed at the same pace and this author's helpful approach will relieve parents of unrealistic expectations and anxiety about their children.

ISBN 0 86431 034 X \$13.95

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN by Jeannette Harison

This book is designed to foster confident and responsive interactions between adults and young children. Its theoretical framework combines a knowledge of social and emotional development in early childhood with an Adlerian understanding of children's behaviour and of mutually respectful relationships. The final section of the book is concerned with caring for the carers and with providing educative and supportive programs for parents.

ISBN 0 86431 087 0 \$24.95

EARLY CHILDHOOD STEP American Guidance Service

Based on the STEP (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting) program, this new program adapts and expands the principles and techniques to the special challenge of parenting infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers. It is intended not only for parents, but for caregivers and teachers in childcare and pre-school settings.

Early Childhood STEP Complete Kit (with PAL video) \$275

Leaders Manual \$51

Parent Handbook "Parenting young children" \$18.95

PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR WORKING WITH PARENTS by Dolores Curran

Written in a lively anecdotal style, Curran's book provides a wealth of practical information and techniques on such topics as identifying parents' needs, how to empower parents, the rewards and frustrations of working with parents, how to deal with problem parents, parent education as a career and more.

\$22.50

LIVING IN A STEP FAMILY by Ruth Webber

This Australian educational program, with its strong visual component and jargon-free handbook, has been designed to help step families from all cultural and socio-economic groups. It is a six week program for couples, where one or both have children from an earlier relationship. It gives information, provides support, and helps develop parenting strategies that are appropriate to the special needs of step families.

Complete Kit (includes video) \$295

Stepparents' Handbook \$15

Video \$225

KIDS SKILLS by Thelma Paull

This is a resource for leaders of discussion groups with young adolescents. It encourages discussion, and aims to support, teach skills and expand the awareness of young people so that they are better prepared to achieve the maturational tasks of adolescence. The program is full of strategies and activities and allow maximum flexibility according to the needs of the group.

ISBN 0 86431 084 6 \$39.95