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Published

2016

Journal Title

Children Australia

Version

Accepted Manuscript (AM)

DOI

[10.1017/cha.2016.35](https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2016.35)

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TITLE

Empowered with WINGS: Professional development for supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing in South West Queensland

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Abstract

Wings: Social and Emotional Wellbeing in the Early Years 0- 5 years (WINGS), is a program of professional development to support educators in early years services to improve outcomes for children. It is strengths based approach and supports educators to understand the impact of their interactions and to use communication strategies such as descriptive feedback in developing the capacity of children. Using these strategies helps to children to recognize their own strengths and capabilities and builds their capacity to self regulate and manage their social and emotional well being. This paper reports on utilization of the WINGS program in early childhood services in rural and remote South West Queensland, Australia as part of the "Community Well Being Project" initially called "Drought Project". The WINGS program built the confidence and knowledge of child care educators to promote children's social and emotional well being.

Introduction

WINGS: Social and emotional wellbeing for children birth – 5 years is a professional development program which addresses the importance of interactions and communication and the role of the learning environment in fostering the key learning components for wellbeing. The professional development program encourages reflection on practice by educators working with children aged birth to 5 years. WINGS was one of the key programs presented by the Pathways to Resilience Trust in partnership Anglicare as they undertook to deliver a range of services in South West Queensland in the shires of Bullo, Paroo, Balonne, Maranoa, Murweh, Quilpie, Goondiwindi as part of an initiative to support drought affected areas. The aim of the initiative which became known as the Community Wellbeing Project was to engage both indigenous and non-indigenous community members as part of the resilience-building process; develop social and emotional wellbeing and resilience skills across the lifespan by building individual and community capacity in order to support and

create sustainability of the skills beyond the work of the Pathways to Resilience Trust within the community.

A snapshot examination of available data from the Australian Early Developmental Census (2015) shows considerable vulnerability of children across the 7 shire regions. Within many instances, the AEDC data showing an increase in social and emotional vulnerability from 2009 – 2015. Further, the introduction of Belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and the National Quality Framework and National Quality Standard (Australian Education and Quality and Care Authority (ACECQA), 2012) for the education and care of children includes an explicit focus on children's social and emotional wellbeing including statements such as 'when children feel safe, secure and supported they grow in confidence to explore and learn' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 20). For educators there is an increased focus on their capacity to support children's social and emotional wellbeing. The WINGS program acknowledges the importance of the early years to maximize the mental health and well being of the individual and the wider community and subsequently the experiences and activities have been devised using current research insights.

The Pathways to Resilience Trust began the initiative by conducting pre-tour visits and listening to the needs of the community. The organisation customized offerings of their programs to meet community need around wellbeing and resilience. Further they selected to build community capacity by conducting additional training sessions and community workshops to train key people within the community to be wellbeing champions who could act as mentors. The WINGS program was delivered in three locations and educators and community champions from across the seven shires attended.

WINGS contains information about child development with a strong emphasis on brain development as well as a collection of activities or experiences for an educator to work through with children. It fosters critical reflection as educators are encouraged to reflect upon not "what will I do with children" but 'How will I be?' The training program uses the strategies of workshops and mentoring to develop

educators understanding and skills about how to support the social and emotional well being of children. In turn they provide supports to families and the community.

Adults working with young children need to understand the importance of emotional and social well being as critical to the ability to function, and subsequently the need to provide environments that encourage positive mental states and adaptive functioning (Kendall-Taylor & Lindland, 2013). One of the challenges to nurturing children's social and emotional well being is the assumption that young children lack awareness of mental states, which makes communicating about early child mental health challenging (Kendall-Taylor & Lindland, 2013). This challenge assumes that very young children are not aware of, and do not understand, their thoughts, emotions and desires' (Kendall-Taylor & Lindland, 2013,p.24) which makes it very difficult to communicate with them about their mental health. The WINGS program redresses this challenge by providing the educators who work with young children in children's services with knowledge and strategies to support children to develop a selection of strategies around resilience to overcome the many adversities they will face in life. The WINGS program has a focus on providing educators with practical experiences and guidance in interactions to build children's wellbeing.

WINGS contains 10 modules and has drawn together the many facets of understanding about children's emotional and social wellbeing. The program presents information about children's developments and includes coaching for practical strategies. Statham and Chase (2010) conceptualise children's well-being as multi-dimensional, incorporating physical, emotional and social well-being and focusing on children's immediate as well as their future lives. Similarly, Andrews, Sullivan and Minichiello (2004) conceptualized well-being as multi-dimensional, with the recognition of the importance of relationships within the context of a social ecological approach that is consistent with the reality of children's lives. Subsequently WINGS is used with educators' to support changes in daily practices and impact on the emotional climate and physical environment of the children's services that in turn promotes children's social and emotional well-being.

Each module contains a range of experiences and activities to enhance the children's learning and skills development, and directly relate to the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) used in Australian early learning settings. The key intent of the experiences are based on the interactions and communication between adults and children to enhance the development of self regulation and resilience and other competencies associated with the emotional and social development of all children from birth to 5 years. As part of the training each participant receives a training manual, which contains a multitude of practical strategies for educators to use. Examples of the language that can be used to initiate and maintain the communication while using the strategies are described. Additionally, resource packs that included some puppets, children's stories used in the strategies are provided.

Traditional methods of review focus on measuring and reporting on programme effectiveness are not easy to administer and often provide little or no clue as to why the intervention worked or did not work when applied in different contexts or circumstances. For the WINGS program as part of the Community Wellbeing project this was particularly difficult in a short time frame. As Pawson (2006) argues programmes are often introduced within complex social systems, which are in constant transformation, therefore evaluation needs to take account of the context within which they are implemented. As such pre and post surveys were undertaken about participants knowledge and skills.

The WINGS program was formulated using a combination of factors including deductive and inductive processes and mental models (Funnell and Rogers, 2011). Deductive development involves developing the programme theory from a review of the research literature on how the programme is understood or expected to work. Inductive development encompasses inferring the programme theory from how the programme operates in practice based on observations or interviews with staff aspects of the implementation of the programme. The interviews and systematic reviews together provided data that were used to formulate the programme theories. WINGS had been trialled in 2015 with six Queensland sites (Cartmel, 2015). There had been gains in educators' knowledge and increased use of strategies that were observed in the changes in the physical environment and subsequently the behavior of children.

Participants (n= 24) included educators, social workers, family support workers and manager/leaders from a range of childrens' services. Participants completed pre and post surveys that asked them to rate their knowledge and confidence in supporting the emotional and social well being of children. It included items included items such as 'How would your level of understanding of key learning concepts for building resilience? How do you rate your repertoire of strategies? In addition, there were open-ended questions about expectations and knowledge about supporting children's well being. The survey was abridged from a project that has examined childcare educators' knowledge of, and confidence in addressing children's mental health problems (Davis, et al, 2014). Due to the complexity of the circumstances in supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing this evaluation has focused on the educators involved in the daily care of children. Further research is needed to yield responses from parents and from children about the impact of the educators increased knowledge and practice supporting children's well being.

Findings

The training and resources provided to educators as part of the programme acted as facilitating mechanisms that improved their understanding and confidence to support children's social and emotional well-being. The programme elicited positive changes in the way in which educators considered strategies for working with children.

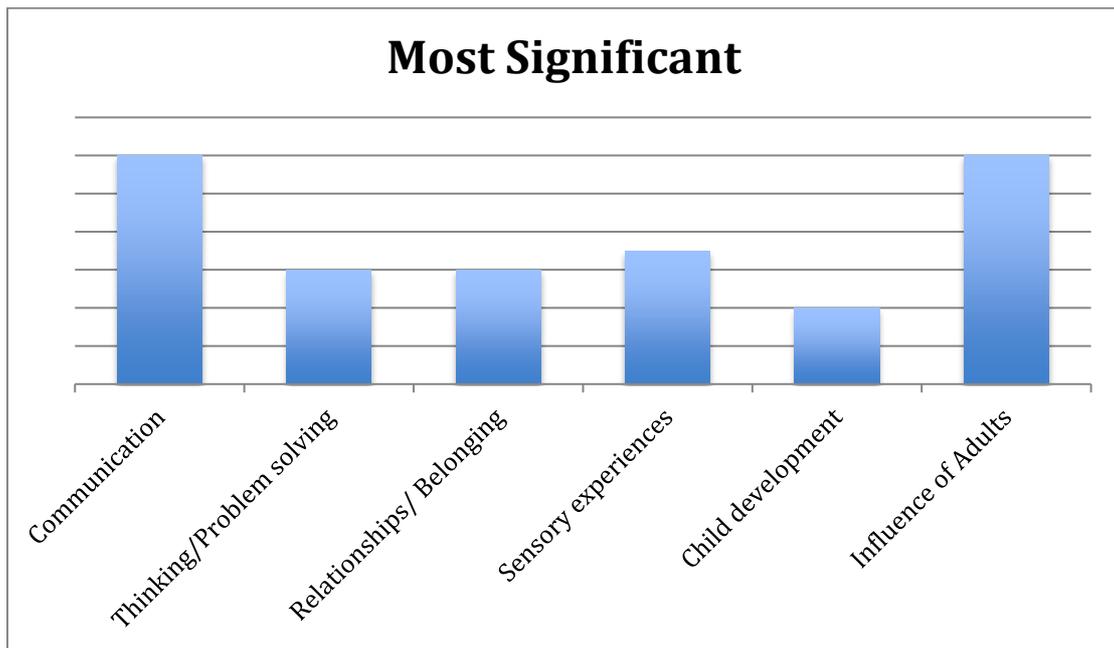
In the pre training survey participants noted a lack of confidence in their understanding of key learning concepts for building resilience.

More confidence in myself, more strategies and different ideas about how to deal with situations (Participant 325).

On the post training survey the participants recorded the most significant information that they had learnt during the training session. Participants noted that understanding

about the importance of communication strategies were critical and indicated they had a deeper understanding about the impact adults have on the behavior of children.

Figure 1: Most significant elements of knowledge gained during training



Discovery that we can make a difference in children's lives by the way we think, act and behave. (Participant 323)

The participants noted that the strategies provided were not complicated and easy to implement in their classrooms or in their practices with children.

Ideas to give to teachers to change the way they talk to kids (Participant 335)

Simple yet powerful things you can do to build social and emotional wellbeing in the early years. (Participant 330)

The highest response was attributed to the manner in which the educators built relationships and connected with the children. The modules about feeling calm and relaxation (Miller, 2015 p 39-52) made a difference to the manner in which adults respond and defused rather than escalated the behaviour of the child. The content of this module was rated highly across all participants.

Connecting correctly with the children in helping to understand and accept their emotions and the importance of my role in helping (Participant 331)

More strategies and the “words” to use in situation with young children such as mindfulness activities, positive thinking, self talk, developing empathy (Participant 323)

Actually would love my whole centre to have done it so they can support my actions gained during WINGS sessions when I bring it to the class (Participant 176)

Participants also noted that the training offered ideas to support their own well being and how that was important to being about to support others.

Filling our own bucket is as important as filling others (Participant 182)

Particularly educators acknowledged that their understanding and confidence to use effective strategies had improved. The educators particularly reported a change in confidence. Educators created awareness about social and emotional well being through sharing knowledge with each other and parents and more particularly helping children to recognise and regulate their feelings.

How to translate unhealthy thought to healthy thoughts (Participant 132)

The programme had a positive influence on the knowledge and confidence of educators regarding being able to support children social and emotional wellbeing. When educators can spend less time on managing behaviours and more time engaged in learning opportunities there is a greater sense of well being for all. These changes in behaviour have an overall positive influence on the whole of the group setting.

Discussion

Research continually points to the quality of the care environment as being one of the leading factors in increasing the resilience and wellbeing in of children aged 0-8 (Hall, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2009). Therefore, by increasing the capacity and competency of the educators and teachers in child care, kindergartens and schools we in turn increase the outcomes for the children. There is the potential to enhance the quality of the care environments by the WINGS program. Staff acknowledged the sense of positive personal wellbeing. Positive staff well being reduces staff turnover. Staff turnover has the most far-reaching and potentially long-lasting consequences to the wider community as this affects the quality of the relationships between educators and children in child care (Gable, Rothrauff, Thornburg & Mauzy, [2007](#)) and in schools. Furthermore, high staff turnover can affect the quality of professional practice within services for children and can undermine the professional culture (Whitebook & Ryan [2011](#)), this can have a cyclic effect on staff as it further contributes to levels of stress and depression on the employees who remain in services and can cause further turnover (Groeneveld, Vermeer, van Ijzendoorn, & Linting, [2012](#)). Experiences such as these may potentially undermine educators' capacity to provide their own personal well-being which in turn affects their ability to provide quality education and care for the children in their services (Whitebook & Ryan [2011](#)). These characteristics enhanced capacity of child care and kindergartens to meet the assessment ratings of the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2012). The WINGS program undertaken by staff teams can contributed positively to staff well being and staff culture. In communities which are vulnerable due to conditions such as drought being able to enhance the positive social and physical environment of children's services can contribute to overall community well being.

The WINGS program works when there was a high level of motivation and commitment by all staff members in the service and the community. This was particularly evident in the Community Wellbeing Project when professionals from all parts of the community joined together to undertake the WINGS program. It helped that there were community champions that could help staff teams from service for

children collaborated together to support the social and emotional wellbeing of children.

Conclusion

This paper has described the introduction of the WINGS program to children's services in regional and remote areas of south west Queensland. The increase in the knowledge of professionals working with children and families and their capacity to use effective strategies within their programs to support children's social and well being was lauded. The deepening of knowledge about children's development and the characteristics of adult/child communication has the potential to enhance children's resilience which is critical for providing a foundation for life long well being and academic performance.

Children's social and emotional wellbeing is linked to their communication and self regulation skills. These capabilities provide the foundation on which further skills such as literacy and numeracy develop. Adults working with children in group settings need to be confident and have a deep understanding and confidence in their practices to support children's social and emotional well being. This enhanced capacity will further contribute to overall community wellbeing.

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Note: Pathways to Resilience Trust staff travelled many kilometres and connected with more than 4000 people during their delivery of suite of programs which included WINGS.