

Building Generations

A strengths-based, solution-focused parenting program for female adult survivors of intra-familial sexual assault

Carol Ronken & Nadine McKillop

In this article, Carol Ronken and Nadine McKillop from Bravehearts review a parenting program for adult survivors of childhood intra-familial sexual assault.

Building Generations sets out a valuable parenting program for adult survivors of childhood intra-familial sexual assault. Produced by the Incest Survivors Association in Western Australia, this manual provides for a much-needed program with valuable objectives.

Difficulty with parenting is one of the most common experiences for survivors of child sexual assault, and particularly for female survivors of incest. Survivors often struggle with parenting practices, including fears of:

- not being a “good” parent;
- being overly protective;
- being a “neglectful” parent;
- not being able to protect their own child;
- repeating patterns of abuse; and
- not trusting their own decisions.

The program is embedded in both a research-based and practice-based framework, providing a strong rationale for the program and its objectives. Utilising information from women about their parenting concerns, the Incest Survivors Association developed the manual to reflect a number of themes common among women who were sexually assaulted as children.

Although the authors of the manual have assumed that facilitators using the program are trained in the facilitation of groups, and have knowledge of the dynamics of both child sexual assault and family violence, the background information in the manual’s early chapters is valuable in assisting with the implementation of the program’s objectives in a consistent and practical manner.

One issue that may arise is the need for more than one facilitator when delivering the program. Although it is stressed that the program is not a therapeutic group, when working with survivors of sexual assault there are many potential triggers of emotional distress. Having two facilitators at each group would allow for individual debriefing if the discussion triggers painful memories or creates distress for a group member.

The comprehensive manual is well set out and easy to follow. The structure lays the groundwork for understanding the parenting concerns and issues experienced by survivors of incest. The manual is divided broadly into 5 sections:

- background and theoretical framework;
- information for facilitators on group management;
- session instructions and handouts;
- feedback from participants; and
- additional information.

Placing their understanding of parenting issues into the theoretical frameworks of Bowlby’s Attachment Theory and Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, the authors utilise Belsky’s model of multiple determinants of parenting to summarise the interaction of seemingly independent factors, and how these factors influence the way in which parents relate to their children. The premise of this theory is that qualities of parents’ dispositions (e.g., their history, temperament, personality) influence how they parent.

The authors also identify intergenerational issues associated with abuse. For example, the authors identify the silence, false sense of shame and guilt, difficulties disclosing abuse, pressures from family members, patriarchal dynamics and “masks over abuse” (e.g., addictions, psychological issues, family violence) that survivors of abuse often experience.

Facilitators using the program are advised to pre-interview participants to ensure suitability and effective group dynamics. This acknowledges the importance of assessing an individual’s capacity to engage effectively in group work. It is certainly important to acknowledge that group work is not beneficial for all and, particularly when working with adult survivors of sexual assault, it is essential to recognise that individual therapy should precede group work.

The provision of folders, handouts and copies of the completed group work to each participant allows them to “build their own resource file,” providing them with a level of ownership over the information and skills learnt, and a resource to reflect back on as needed.

Each of the eight sessions link well to the last. The format builds on skills in an empowering way, allowing facilitators and group members to easily pick up and work with the manual on a weekly basis. Information is provided for facilitators to distribute to participants, which sets out the structure and objectives of the program, and assists in setting group boundaries and rules in the first week.

The weekly topics include:

1. **Problems and expectations**—provides an opportunity for participants to identify the major issues and questions they have and the group’s expectations of the program.
2. **Healthy versus unhealthy parenting**—challenges unhealthy parenting patterns and provides alternative parenting approaches.
3. **A consistent parent**—building on the previous week, this session further explores healthy parenting styles and provides participants with an understanding of how our internal and core beliefs inform our parenting actions.
4. **Handling emotions in the family**—provides exercises that help participants explore the differences and interrelationship between feelings/emotions and behaviours/actions.
5. **Child development and behaviour**—provides practical summaries of child development theories (specifically Piaget and Erickson) and behavioural theories (Popkin’s ABC of behaviour).
6. **Safety issues for children**—gives information to parents on a range of child safety issues, including differentiations between discipline and punishment. Importantly, it acknowledges the potentially triggering impact of the child’s behaviours for the survivor parent.
7. **Options when things go wrong**—this part of the program explores negative emotions and how to handle and respond to feelings of anger and instances of violence in a positive way. Activities help participants explore alternatives to old patterns of response and action.
8. **Self-care, group closure and evaluation**—focuses on parents and their need for self-care, as well as providing them with tools to instil self-care behaviours in their children. A positive way to finish the program.

Transactional analysis is one of the main concepts used across the activities. It provides a useful framework for understanding the influence of internal psychological dynamics on people’s interactions (parent/adult/child ego state).

The realistic scenarios built into the group work cover several important aspects of parenting, allowing groups to practice the implementation of skills and knowledge in a range of situations.

It may be beneficial to further explore the child protection issues covered in week 6. Although the manual provides in-depth guidelines for both parents and young people in relation to cyber safety, the manual does not build on general child protection “skills” that can be applied more widely to different types of risk (e.g., sexual, physical, emotional). One suggestion would be to include general personal safety and “touching” rules.

The section that provides data and feedback from previous participants is incredibly useful in showing how the program works in practice. The information published here provides practitioners with a valuable understanding of the program’s development; this type of information is often crucial to ensure that facilitators have a common understanding of the program’s history and objectives.

The concluding chapters of the manual provide additional information including references and resource sources.

As a final observation, it would be useful to extend this program (and there is no reason why it could not be easily adapted) to include male survivors and survivors of extra-familial sexual abuse. While

there are certainly some aspects of parenting that are of particular concern for female incest survivors, these other groups also experience parenting issues as a result of childhood sexual assault.

Taking the aforementioned comments and suggestions into consideration, the Incest Survivors Association has produced an invaluable tool for practitioners working with female adult survivors of incest in a group context. Furthermore, the overall program objectives will greatly benefit female survivors, not only in providing an opportunity to validate their own experiences, but also in providing them with necessary parenting skills and, most importantly, the confidence to use them.

Building Generations: A strengths-based, solution-focused parenting program for female adult survivors of intra-familial sexual assault was developed by the Incest Survivors Association. All inquiries about the program, including requests for the workbook, or to be trained in using the framework, should be addressed to the Coordinator at ISA offices. Visit <http://www.isa.asn.au/> for further information.

Bravehearts is a research, counselling and advocacy organisation that specialises in providing counselling for children and young people who have experienced, or who are at risk of, child sexual assault; advocacy and support for adult survivors; and education, prevention, and early intervention programs.

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Appropriate topics for contributions include:

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- program profiles;
- notices about upcoming conferences, workshops, events; and
- book reviews, pointers to new publications, online papers, resources/links, websites, and so on.

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The *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter* is published bi-annually. Contributions must be submitted four months in advance of publication to allow for review, revision, typesetting and printing timelines.

The average length of contributions is 1000–1500 words, but may be as short as 300–500 words. If you are unsure about the appropriateness of a piece, contact the National Child Protection Clearinghouse to discuss your submission.

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Consideration will also be given to the following criteria: timeliness of article; significance of the topic; factual accuracy; clear presentation and logical organisation of material; conclusions substantiated by convincing analytical argument; argument supported by references; quality and balance of the argument or information presented; and balance and relevance of any policy implications drawn.

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