



Solving the Jigsaw

Changing the culture of violence,
building a culture of well-being

by Michelle Stevenson

Solving the Jigsaw is a school-based early intervention program which originated in the Loddon Campaspe region of Victoria and is now operating throughout regional and metropolitan Victoria. The program has a whole-school approach and assists the school community to address violence and bullying at school by changing a 'culture of violence' and building a 'culture of well-being'.

Solving the Jigsaw was developed by EASE, a feminist women's organisation, in Bendigo, Victoria, in response to the devastating statistic that 25 percent of children and young people in Australia witness violence in their homes. Most of this violence is perpetrated by men towards their female partners and children.

EASE is a community managed organisation providing accommodation, information and support to women and children who are escaping domestic violence as well as women and children who are homeless. EASE and its newly established Centre for Non-Violence also provides men's behaviour change programs and violence prevention and recovery programs for young people and their parents.

EASE was concerned about the number of children accompanying their mothers for support regarding domestic and family violence, and that the service system appeared to be unable to respond to the needs of children, and more importantly, respond in a way that would work towards prevention of not only gendered violence, but more broadly, all forms of violence experienced by children in our community.

Solving the Jigsaw's beginnings in Bendigo were not accidental. The city is in the Loddon-Campaspe region of Victoria where high levels of domestic violence, bullying, suicide, and alcohol and substance abuse exist. These problems exist throughout Victorian communities but their character is often different in a rural and regional environment. The project's target group includes children and young people in rural/remote towns identified as being disadvantaged.

For this reason, EASE did not set out to 'target' children who were directly impacted by domestic and family violence. We chose to work with the school community to talk about violence in all its forms—from gendered violence—all forms of violence against women, domestic and family violence, school

based/peer violence including bullying, racism, sexism, homophobia etc.

In order to provide age-appropriate language and concepts, and because the program was initially delivered in a primary school setting, we had to think about the most effective way to simply communicate concepts about violence in all its forms.

In the absence of a universally accepted definition, *Solving the Jigsaw* describes bullying and violence as "a misuse of power that intentionally hurts, controls, silences and belittles another person or persons". This has enabled us to talk about different types of violence in a range of different contexts, ie. the violence experienced by women and children in the home, the violence experienced by a same-sex attracted young person and so on.

Solving the Jigsaw commenced in two primary schools in Bendigo in 1997. Positive responses led to the program expanding to 26 schools in the next two years.

By building capacity in teachers, welfare workers and others who work with children and young people with the development of a comprehensive training program, more than 22,000 children have now participated in classroom programs in Victoria and in 2010, 50 schools were running the program. Significantly, 890 teachers have taken part in training programs.

The program seeks to strengthen connectedness and resilience in young people in primary and lower secondary school. One-hour weekly sessions in 20 or 40-week programs are conducted for whole classes as well as for targeted groups of 'at risk' students. The sessions are run by an accredited Jigsaw facilitator with the classroom teacher participating. *Solving the Jigsaw* also runs professional development days for teachers, facilitator training courses and information sessions for parents.

The need for Jigsaw

The raw figures show the extent of the damage.

- One Australian child in six is bullied every week.
- Children who are bullied have higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, illness and thoughts of suicide.
- Former bullies are four times more likely to take part in serious crime, and

more likely to drop out of school and use drugs and alcohol. By the age of 20, 60 percent of bullies will have a criminal record.

The statistics on domestic violence and its effects on children are equally disturbing. More than half a million teenagers in Australia are living with violence in the home. Up to 25 percent of young people aged between 12 and 20 have witnessed parental violence against their mother or stepmother.

The *Solving the Jigsaw* program is designed to act as an early intervention-and-recovery program for children who are experiencing these issues, or might be confronted by them. The students are all in the age group in which early-intervention and prevention programs are likely to have significant short and long-term benefits.

Philosophy of the Program

Solving the Jigsaw is strongly influenced by resilience research, and systemic understandings of violence, bullying and family violence as well as frameworks for developing emotional health and well-being at an individual, group and community level.

Solving the Jigsaw resources schools to create a culture of well-being where children and young people feel they belong; feel safe and secure; are listened to and heard; are valued; feel lovable and gorgeous; are encouraged to reflect and consider; feel and show compassion; feel and show trust and respect; develop responsibility and optimism; experience connection and support; have fun; can make mistakes and be challenged and learn new ways; learn about new ideas and stories and make up their own minds as to what they think and what their values are; share what's in their hearts, what's important to them, what's troubling them, what makes them happy, what makes them sad; know their experiences are valued; are supported in the relationships they have with their families, their friends and associates; are supported in negotiating difficult issues and life challenges; can recognise that life can have all sorts of ups and downs and that they are cared for and supported as they negotiate these.

Solving the Jigsaw resources schools to change a culture of violence by supporting teachers and students to:

- be resolute in their commitment to changing and challenging violence in all its forms;
- be informed in their understanding of the types of violence and how violence affects individuals and groups;
- actively implement practices and policies about violence and bullying;
- understand the connections between the types of violence;
- understand the ways in which power and control is used to belittle and diminish other people and to understand that this happens in the play ground, classroom, the home, the workplace and the community;
- understand that experiences of violence can impact on the personal safety, security and self-worth of children and young people;
- understand that experiences of violence can inhibit the capacity of children and young people to fully participate in educational and social developmental opportunities.

The *Solving the Jigsaw* program has chosen to locate violence and bullying at school in a social and cultural context. We see violence as a tool of power and view violence and bullying at school in the context of wider violence in society. We cannot look at violence in a school context without looking at

issues of power in society, and including the contexts of gender, race and class.

The program fosters the belief that self-esteem, well-being and resilience are enhanced when a person feels lovable, valued and connected to self and others. We also strongly believe that every person has the right to feel safe and that most people would prefer to develop respectful ways to deal with conflict. In some cases people use violence if they have not learned to reflect on what is happening and to choose alternative behaviours. We believe that providing students and the school community with the skills and resources to foster positive relationships and to respectfully deal with conflict can have a major effect on the well-being of the whole school community. We also believe that when students carry these resources and skills into their home environments this has a positive flow-on effect into the community.

Principles underlying our approach

When schools seek assistance for problems in the area of violence and bullying, our approach rests on several principles:

- Everyone has the right to be safe and to feel safe—violence is not acceptable.
- We never minimise violence and always accept the victim's story.
- Students who engage in bullying and violence do so because they experience bullying as a successful exercise of power, and they lack the skills to use more pro-social means to express and resolve both inner and interpersonal conflicts.
- An inclusive and collaborative whole-school approach will yield optimum results. We work together with the school and invite teachers to be involved in the hands-on running of the program.
- Violence and bullying in a school context can be part of a negative group dynamic which needs to be deconstructed and explored to create a focus on the positive aspects of the class group dynamic.
- Violence and bullying in a school environment has connections with family violence and violence in wider society.
- We locate violence and bullying in a school environment in a social and cultural context. A political stance in relation to violence allows examination of imbalances of power and responsibility in society.
- We view violence and bullying as tools of power and related to imbalances of power in society, including the contexts of gender, race and social class.

Aims of the Program

The program utilises a whole-school approach to violence and bullying, which means that it is inclusive of the school and wider community, working with students, teachers and parents to enhance the well-being of the whole school community.

Students

- To promote a culture, language and understanding that encourages discussion and constructive action on the issues of violence, bullying and abuse.
- To develop skills in conflict resolution, assertive communication, and social skills.
- To promote increased self-awareness, empathy, optimism and resilience.
- To acknowledge and reduce the effects of trauma on children who have lived or are living with family violence.
- To strengthen the relationships between students and school, and students and caregivers.

Parents

- To increase awareness of the complexity of violence and bullying and its effects on children.
- To strengthen family relationships by promoting a culture of respect and well-being.
- To empower caregivers to be more effective parents.
- To develop a positive outlook and personal links between parents and schools.

School communities

- To develop visible, credible and valued programs that address the 'culture of violence' and build a 'culture of well-being'.
- To model classroom strategies for teachers through co-facilitation of programs.
- To develop curriculum-based strategies in consultation with schools.
- To strengthen the school environment.
- To address identified needs of schools.
- To link schools with external support agencies.
- To provide professional development and facilitator training to teachers.

Training the Facilitator

Jigsaw runs nationally accredited professional development days for teachers, facilitator training courses, and information sessions for parents. The program offers six professional development days over 12 months that give teachers additional skills in the classroom.

The flow-on effect of the professional development training program is that teachers are better able to respond to the emotional health and well-being needs of children and families. Teachers have effective strategies to work through issues of violence and bullying, to respond to children and young people experiencing traumas such as domestic violence, abuse, grief and loss. Teachers are better resourced to play support roles in the lives of young people. The capacity of the whole community is enhanced as schools develop their capacity to play an effective role in the safety net and support network that cares for young people.

The training days cover a whole-school approach to violence and bullying; awkward conversations with kids; conflict within the school community; facilitating respect, valuing diversity, encouraging discussion, and maintaining confidentiality; creating a caring and nurturing classroom and school; and exploring feelings and emotions in the classroom.

Those who wish to become accredited *Solving the Jigsaw* facilitators must attend a further 12 months of Facilitator Training. This year of further training involves participation in eight additional training days, completion of assessment tasks and the facilitation of a weekly Jigsaw classroom program whereby session logs are submitted for assessment and feedback. The training is accredited through TAFE and the National Community Services Training Package.

External Program evaluation

In 2005, EASE commissioned Family Transitions to undertake an in-depth

internal review of the current clinical material in the *Solving the Jigsaw* program. The review was based on careful analysis of the written materials that support the program, including the training manuals, and on a complete set of videotaped sessions that cover each session in one program. The review was completed in March 2006 and reported that:

"Solving the Jigsaw promotes constructive thought and action for children on issues of pro and anti-social conduct, increasing self knowledge, resilience and reducing the effects of trauma on those who have lived with violence".

Dr Lisa Milne, Clinical Review

Awards

Over the years the *Solving the Jigsaw* program has been reviewed by professional panels with expertise in the areas of child protection, violence prevention, community safety and crime prevention, public health, loss and grief, drug and alcohol abuse. *Solving the Jigsaw* is a multi-award winning best practice program:

- 2010 Australian & New Zealand Mental Health Services media award—*Kids' Business* documentary.
- 2009 Human Rights Awards—*Kids' Business* documentary highly recommended.
- National Child Abuse Award 2003—Community Development, Capacity Building and Strengthening (Children's and Youth Services).
- Australian Violence Prevention Award 2003, 2002, 2001, 2000.
- Certificate of Merit—Australian Heads of Government.
- Victorian Community Safety and Crime Prevention Awards 2002—School based responses.
- Victorian Public Health Award 2001—Innovative Public Health Development.
- National Association for Loss and Grief Award 2001.
- National Australian Drug Foundation Awards 2000—Excellence in Schools based responses.
- Victorian Community Safety and Crime Prevention Awards 2000 Anti-Violence.

Kids' Business

A decision to produce training videos to assist with Facilitator Training developed into the *Kids' Business* documentary, aired on the ABC in 2009. The documentary drew national attention to the program attracting over 1,000 online responses and ongoing requests for program information from across the country.

Our vision

Following the response to the airing of *Kids' Business*, EASE is looking to develop partnerships to introduce *Solving the Jigsaw* into other States whilst continuing to provide classroom programs and professional development to support children and young people in Victoria.

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A short trailer based on *Kids' Business* can be found on YouTube. Copies of the *Kids' Business* documentary can be obtained from www.peoplepictures.com.au.