Discussion Paper 9

Engaging collegial support for the implementation of SMART

Introduction

This paper is the basis for the latest SMART online discussion forum to run between 26/5/08 – 16/6/08. It compliments and extends the training provided through the SMART program. The SMART Program is an initiative of the South Australian Government Department of Education and Children's Services.

This discussion paper acknowledges the critical importance of SMART PRACTICE being implemented as a whole site program to facilitate real change for children who are at risk of, or who have experienced, abuse related trauma. During the SMART seminar four key questions are posed to consider how this collegial support can be generated. This paper looks at examples of responses to each of those questions in more detail. The ideas presented in this discussion paper stem from the work of the SMART team as well as those of schools and early childhood settings across South Australia who have incorporated the program into their everyday work.

The intent of this paper is to generate discussion. The forum provides an opportunity for participants to share specific knowledge and strategies. It also poses a series of questions to further enhance forum participant responses to building a SMART school or early childhood program**.**

Section 1: 4 key questions to build collegial support for SMART

Question 1:   To what extent is the impact of abuse and trauma on a child's behaviour and learning widely understood and identified across the setting?

Understanding the impact and manifestations of abuse related trauma is a key element to implementing SMART strategies because it facilitates a shared response framework and supports all staff to interpret the behaviours of traumatised children.

Having a shared response framework is crucial to supporting children who have experienced trauma because it:
- enables consistency and repetition of response which supports brain "re-wiring";
- ensures no one person within the site carries the challenging load of supporting these children;

- facilitates creative and flexible response options such as being able to move a child between rooms;
- particularly reduces playground issues as all staff have a clear plan.

To build this knowledge, schools and early childhood sites can access the set of SMART resources including the seminars, online learning and 2 hour staff summary session which can be downloaded on www.childhood.org.au/smart. In the past, schools and early childhood sites have used the program by:
- utilising the online learning as a team activity during curriculum days;
- accessing the online learning program to help staff achieve their pd hours;
- facilitating the 2 hour summary session in a staff meeting;
- engaging an outside facilitator to run the 2 hour session;
- pooled their resources with other sites to fund a customised SMART session; and
- organised a district wide session for specific groups eg: SSO's.

Other knowledge areas also provide significant links to SMART content and may support the development of shared knowledge. Some of the areas linked to SMART may include:
- Restorative justice and restorative practices
- Circle of courage (Kym Brown)
- Peer mediation
- Success for boys
- Building class cohesion
- Tribes process
- Other training provided by Australian Childhood Foundation www.childhood.org.au, and
- Of course DECS' CPC.

Question 2:   To what extent does the existing service culture (embodied in charters/policies/processes) reflect understanding and compassion for the needs of traumatised children?

This question gives each school and early childhood site an opportunity to revise their Learning Plan to incorporate goals around student wellbeing as well as a focus on staff wellbeing, given they are supporting children whose behaviour can be experienced as very difficult and challenging.

For example, when looking at school values that most support the needs of traumatised children you might consider:
- trust
- belonging
- positive regard
- genuineness
- relationship
- security
- safety

Question 3:   To what extent does the informal site culture demonstrate a positive and shared commitment to meeting the specific needs of these children?

It is important to acknowledge that the issue of child abuse and its impact are very difficult for many adults to engage with. Adults can experience a range of unconscious responses when confronted with the behaviour and needs of a traumatised child. Some people minimise the problem, others divert their discomfort to other people, and some disengage from reminders of the issue. Understanding these possible responses can help to work with colleagues who find the issue of child abuse challenging.

In thinking about strategies for enhancing a supportive organisational culture, schools and early childhood sites can draw upon the SMART PRACTICE framework for ideas. These suggestions are included below:

Predictable
- Always use SMART language or consistent language around issues to do with children who have experienced abuse related trauma. This builds a sense of consistency.

Responsive
- Understand the confronting nature of the issues of child abuse and how this might be mirrored in adult's behaviour toward colleagues and children. Respond to the behaviour from this understanding.

Attuned
- Frame children's behaviour in terms of their emotional issues and responses ie: this is clearly a child who is feeling shamed at the moment. Equally, acknowledging that these children can be very hard work is important in terms of minimising the potential for vicarious traumatisation.

Connecting
- Acknowledge the strengths that each peer brings to work with children who have experienced trauma. While it is a cliché, it really can be that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts!

Translating
- Continually refer back to organisational documentation, such as the Site Learning Plan, to reinforce the overall focus and priority of supporting traumatised children across the site.
- Undertake a staff culture survey to build a story of understanding regarding perceptions of the site as a whole.

Involving
- Developing and maintaining a range of peer support mechanisms that meet the needs of all staff is invaluable in an effective whole of site response.

Calming
- It is as true for adults as it is for children that we are best able to think clearly and learn more when we are calm and our cortex are most engaged. Does the overall environment support a calm workplace?

Engaging
- Strong and robust relationships with key staff members enable an overall sense of cohesiveness and shared vision. For school leaders, a clear conceptualisation of your management style and framework enhance the relationships across the site.

Question 4: **To what extent does the setting incorporate collaborative strategies and processes for supporting traumatised children?**

The following ideas give guidance and/or reinforcement of collaborative process both internally and externally:
- Clear communication methods that include a variety of modalities ie: face to face, staff newsletters/information sheets and email/intranet
- Acknowledge the value of social activities that are inclusive of all staff
- Cross district and whole of DECS peer networks- particularly around welfare, child protection and the counsellor role
- Build protocols with key agencies outside of DECS.
- The key elements of any collaboration are: networking, service coordinator, shared learning, information sharing, dispute resolution and cultural shifts. These provide the basis for a communication audit.

Section 2. Questions for consideration

Use this series of questions to prompt your participation in the online discussion forum. To take part in the online discussion forum, click here - http://www.childhood.org.au/smart/news.asp

It is easy to take part. Choose a question, think of your answer, follow this link and write down your thoughts and comments. You can follow this link to read and respond to what your colleagues are saying about the topic.

Consider these questions

1. What do you see as the biggest issue that influences the level of collegiate support for SMART at your site - be it positively or negatively?
2. Which of these questions is of most relevance to your site and your work? Why?
3. How have you engaged your colleagues effectively with the SMART PRACTICE framework?
4. Please share one example of a collaborative process or strategy that has worked well for your site.

Remember, this SMART online discussion forum runs between 26/5/08 – 16/6/08. After this time, you will be able to read an archive of the discussion but will no longer be able to take part.

Thank you for your contribution to the forum.