



Background

Women and their children are traumatised by the experience of family violence. It terrifies them. It destabilises the foundations of their world. It undermines the strengths of their relationships. It can overwhelm them.

Women and their children experience family violence deep in their mind and body. They see it. They often hear it. Their bodies react to it as a threat to their survival. They see the aftermaths of it. They sense its impact. They watch for it.

It forces women and their children to know what can set it off. It teaches them to avoid answering certain questions. It shapes who they can trust - who will hurt them and who might protect them.

Experiences of family violence shape what women and their children can say when and to whom. It dictates what they should think. It determines how they should react.

It sometimes makes the truth a secret.

Children are forced to see the violence that is directed towards their mothers. They see the aftermath of it. Children feel the vulnerability in their mother and in themselves. Women fear for the safety of their children. They worry about its impact on them. It sometimes keeps them living with the person who has acted violently. They fear the unknown. They worry for their future.

For women and their children, family violence often disconnects them from their family, their community and their place in the world. It disrupts how everything works. It forces their routines to be less certain, less predictable.

Family violence corrupts how women and their children know themselves. It amplifies any vulnerabilities about themselves and their relationships. It makes every worry feel so much stronger.

Women and children experience loss as a result of family violence. They sometimes have to leave behind their home, their neighbourhood. Some children have to change schools. They miss their teacher, their friends. Some women become isolated from their network of support.

Women and children take away many messages from the violence they have endured. They have to make sense of such violence. They need to understand why it happened. They need to know what it means. They have so many questions that need answers. Was it my fault? Could I have done something to stop it? Is violence how you show love? Will it happen again? Should I tell someone? Will someone get into trouble?

Often, these questions build and build up in them. They jumble up with other thoughts. They feel unsettled. Their bodies tense up. They feel sick. They are not sure if anyone knows what it is like for them.

In the face of family violence, women and their children need to experience safety. They need to be comforted and re-assured. They need their questions answered and their feelings



acknowledged and validated. They need the world to feel more consistent. They need their bodies to relax and feel calmer. They need to experience softness in their relationships.

When protection becomes available, safety and security spreads in concentric circles around women and children affected by family violence locating the basis of change in their relationships.

In the aftermath of family violence, women can have a range of experiences that affect their parenting. They can engage with the parts of themselves that survived and supported their efforts to offer protection to their children. They have a sense of themselves as resourced by friends and family. They feel empowered by the decisions they have made for themselves and their children. On the other hand, they can engage with the parts of themselves that were frightened, or felt hopeless, or were anxious about their children. They can lose confidence in their parenting, not knowing how to adopt roles that better meet the needs of their children as a result of the way the violence affected them. They can experience a gulf between themselves and their children, feeling the absence of connection and trust.

Women sometimes take with them the messages that the violence has reinforced for them. *It was your fault. What kind of mother are you? Your children do not appreciate you. They don't trust you. You are not able to look after them properly. Give up and leave them alone. They will do better without you.*

In the aftermath of family violence, there are many challenges facing women. They often need a place to live. They need to take court action to keep themselves and their children safe. They need to establish themselves in a new community. They need to find a job. They need to open a new bank account.

If they have children, one of these challenges is to be a parent in a way that makes sense of their past but is not defined by it.

Introduction

The *Bringing Up Great Kids – Parenting After Family Violence Program* is a mindful reflective program that offers support to women to explore and reclaim their confidence and belief in themselves about their parenting.

BUGK – *Parenting After Family Violence* provides a safe, respectful and reflective space for participants to reflect and explore their parenting story in the family violence space they have been living in and provides an opportunity to create a new safe, strong, positive and hopeful parenting story moving forward.

It is based on the original *Bringing Up Great Kids* (BUGK) Parenting Program which was developed by the Australian Childhood Foundation in 2011. The original version was deemed to meet the evidence-based program criteria by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. It is underpinned by a philosophy of promoting and supporting respectful, caring and nurturing relationships between parents and their children. Parents and all other adults involved in the care of children, are encouraged to become more reflective and mindful in their parenting approach.



The *BUGK – Parenting After Family Violence* program and resources support parents who have been affected by family violence to

- reflect on the messages that the violence communicated to them about their approach to parenting;
- understand how they were able to hold onto what was important to them in the face of the violence;
- learn more about and reclaim the origins of their own parenting style to adapt with their children in the here and now;
- identify the important messages they want to convey to the children in their care and how to achieve this;
- learn more about how they can support their children's development;
- understand the meaning of children's behaviour and what may be influencing it from their experience of the violence;
- appreciate how to welcome safety, respect, care and love into their relationships with their children;
- discover ways to take care of themselves and find support when they need it.

The program offers participants the opportunity to receive support from the facilitators and other parents with similar experiences. If delivered as a group, the relationships between parents acts as an important recourse which can amplify a sense of solidarity and connection. This is in itself an act of self care.

Preparing to deliver Bringing Up Great Kids – Parenting After Family Violence

Setting the context

Parenthood has been described as “the last stand of the amateur” where adults across the world take on the role of parenting without any qualifications, skills or training. There is a mythical belief that parents will instinctively know how to provide nurturing environment for their children where they can develop, feel loved, connected and flourish. Parents may have managed their parenting role in this way throughout previous generations because support, skills and training were available through their families with whom they lived.

The Frameworks Institute (2016) reference evidence that suggested that whilst parenting has the greatest impact on the long-term health and wellbeing of children it is a skill learnt ‘on the job’ rather than the widely held belief in the community that ‘parenting comes naturally’.

The role of parents in modern society has changed as parents are more likely to be living in more isolated circumstances without support yet are under public scrutiny as the governments take on more responsibility in the welfare of children and feel under increasing pressure to be viewed as ‘good’ parents. The *BUGK – Parenting After Family Violence* program is designed to support parents/carers on their parenting journey and thereby improve children's outcomes.

Moqvist (2003) in Bloch, Holmund, Moqvist and Popkewitz writes of the emergence of “the child with human rights, internationally recognised and under protection of the United Nations, a complete human being” (p118). Moqvist then reminds us that this child is positioned differently in the community and society and therefore needs a different type of parenting experience and support to become the parent this child needs.



Increasingly we are more aware that nurturing parenting is not innate and that many parents require support and information to become more actively engaged with their children (Tasmanian Early Years Foundation, 2009). Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) and others have identified that parents can benefit from 'education' and support to build, change and modify their parenting approach.

Early definitions of parent education took the form of "instruction" that was delivered to parents by 'experts'. Parents were instructed on ways to 'manage' children's behaviour according to the research and thinking of the day. Many of the most widely adopted parent support and education programs focus on how parent-child interactions can be managed so as to secure parental control over the child's behaviour, particularly where matters of discipline are concerned (McGurk 1996). The focus of these programs tends to be equipping parents with a set of skills which can be applied to a range of child behaviours that are deemed problematic.

Over time parent 'education' turned into parent 'support' when writers such as Gottman (1997) identified the importance of supporting parents in their nurturing relationships with their children. Moqvist (2003) defines parenthood as

"a relationship, and the partners are the parent and the child. More importantly that the parent is not seen as supreme to the child other than in experience and wisdom, which puts a greater demand on the parent to be reasoning and patient" (p 123).

Parental warmth, sensitivity and acceptance of children's basic needs are core features associated with positive outcomes for children, just as harsh, coercive parenting is regarded as detrimental (Centre for Community Child Health, 2004, citing Teti and Candelaria, 2002). Although there is apparently no grand unifying theory of effective parenting, different kinds of evidence suggest strong links between the quality of the parent-child relationship and children's well-being (O'Connor, 2002).

Why use the metaphor of 'messages'?

The basis of every BUGK Program is the way the metaphor of *messages* is used to examine how parents interpret the attitudes, values and beliefs that underpin their approach to parenting. Parents are encouraged to explore and reflect upon the messages they received from their own experience of being parented and from views of those around them.

Parents are invited to consider the ways in which these messages might be affecting on their own parenting style and the messages they, in turn, are sending their own children.

The concept of communication from parent to child is more complex than just the verbal and non-verbal forms of *how* we communicate. Communication is also about *what* parents communicate to their children and *why*. This is influenced by dominant messages arising from their own experiences and histories, the dominant parenting dialogues around them and the shared experiences of their relationship with their children.

These themes combine and translate meanings associated with parenting into resonant 'messages' that communicate parental values and worldviews. 'Messages' are not only transmitted through what parents say, they are also communicated in parental behaviour, feelings and interactions. They form the basis through which children come to understand the meaning, rules and expectations of relationships.



'Messages' can contain intentional and unintentional meaning. In this sense, parents may not always be aware of the 'messages' they are communicating. They may also not recognise whether these 'messages' are leading children to learn the life lessons that parents intend.

Throughout the program, the metaphor of 'messages' is used to help parents reflect on where their beliefs, ideas and attitudes about parenting and children come from and how they influence their parenting approach and relationships with their own children. The meaning of 'messages' can be a transformative metaphor for parents. It can help develop a framework for reviewing and evaluating the outcomes that parents want to achieve with their parenting and support their success.

Messages have particular relevance to the experience of family violence for women and their children. Violence perpetrated by men are accompanied by messages of control, power and oppression. These messages organise how women and children see themselves, what is possible and how they related to each other. The violence often undermines the trust between mother and children. It tears away at the sense of connection between them. And it destroys the sense of agency in women about their parenting.

However, it is also important to recognise that in the face of violence, women find ways to resist the totalising effects of these messages. They try not to believe them. They disagree with them. They refuse to submit to their influence. They offer their children softness when all they experience is harshness, humiliation and hurt. They hold onto even the smallest voices of hope when they are repeatedly told that there is no hope for them or their children. These mothers ensure that they still read their children a book before bed, or cut the crust off their sandwiches. All little signs to them and themselves that the violence does define everything about their family and that safety even in the smallest of doses can act as resource for change.

The ways that women hold onto safety, care, trust in their relationships with their children in the face of violence is the platform for the *BUGK – Parenting After Family Violence Program*. It takes the small acts of resistance and strengthens them in the presence of the facilitator and other mothers in the group. It amplifies their importance and their influence in the lives of women as parents. It shows women that they still have access to their strengths.

As the messages of violence are challenged and replace with messages about safety and love, women find in themselves narratives of courage and self belief. They re-engage with the parent that they have wanted to be but had to adapt in order to survive. They re-examine the messages that their children received during the violence and they start to recast them in ways that help them to know they are safe now. Women provide their children with a different set of messages that they know will change the beliefs and feelings children hold about themselves. They become re-attuned to their children's needs. Slowly, the trust and commitment to each other is pieced back together.

The *BUGK – Parenting After Violence Program* supports women to reclaim their parenting approach in ways that help their children's journey to healing from the shared trauma they experienced as a family.