



Family Access Network Young People, Group Work and Engagement Practices

Young People as Ambassadors:

Offering opportunities for young people to contribute to and experience the role of ambassadors is a significant direction at FAN, particularly within the last three years. It is encouraging to witness the resulting growth, social networks and community connectedness and the affirmation provided to young people.

Over the past 26 years of service delivery to homeless and at risk young people, FAN has actively encouraged client participation in the delivery of services and contribution within the broader community. It has been FAN's experience that fostering a young person's contribution and participation is an empowering involvement for them and an enriching one for FAN.

Encouraging client participation and conducting group work is an important direction for FAN's, which is stated clearly within the service objectives:

- Create an environment that encourages self expression and acceptance of racial, cultural, sexual and religious diversity.
- Develop and enhance social / emotional wellbeing through fostering a sense of connectedness, resilience and participation.
- Empower clients to determine their own path towards secure, independent living.
- Encourage clients to plan, facilitate and participate in a range of creative, educational and personal development workshops in a supportive and safe environment.
- Skills development in independent and shared living
- Inform clients about local community supports and resources.
- Provide a variety of workshops and programs that address the emotional needs of clients while fostering possible social interaction and a sense of community.

Young people supported at FAN over these 26 years would add up literally to thousands. Many of them at various stages return or re-contact to advise of new developments and positive outcomes in their lives. For many of us choosing a career in the profession, this is one of many rewards that inspire and nourish us through the sometimes more difficult or less positive times. FAN's model is build around a client-focused rights based

approach. It underpins all aspects of service delivery. As a result young people are encouraged to participate in fostering awareness within the broader community of the positive contributions that young people can make.

Since 1994 FAN has acknowledged the particular efforts of selected young people at the Annual General Meeting as recipients of the Rhys Fox Encouragement Award. The Award was made possible through the bequest from the estate of Rhys Fox who was active in the development of housing responses for homeless and at risk young people in the eastern suburbs during the 1980's to 1990's.

In 2005 City of Whitehorse introduced a Young Person of the Month Award, where support workers can make nominations on behalf of their clients. Recipients of this award are automatically in the running for the Young Citizen of the Year Award, where certificates and awards are presented at the Australian Day ceremonies on a yearly basis.

Group Work:

The purpose for running a group is based on a rationale of client identified needs and service gaps. FAN staff actively participate in a Portfolio system, which is based on identified service gaps, guided through client surveys, case management processes, data and trends. Many of the identified portfolio areas lead to the development of workshops, groups and in some cases new program areas.

Group work is a key component of the community response to at risk young people and their accompanying children. Specific therapeutic and educational activities provide opportunities for participants to re-establish positive social supports and reconnect with the community and may provide important changes in their lives. Workshops and other group work may further assist and encourage participants to be linked into future workshops.

When facilitating group work it's a good idea to consider the following:

- What is the context of the group?
- Who is the target group?
- How many participants/facilitators?
- Time frames/commitment to the group.
- Client commitment may vary due to their circumstances.
- Costs and budget plan.
- Establishing a group and setting the scene.
- Negotiating your role and setting clear group boundaries together.
- Create a safe/non-threatening space.
- Key facilitation techniques
- Balancing organisational expectations, project/program objectives with wishes of the group.
- Incorporating individual's experiences.
- Building trust within a group.
- Listening to each person.
- Understanding how our own feelings may affect facilitation of a group.

- Partnerships, communication, preparation and holding the same values when co-facilitating a group.
- Partnership may be internal or external to FAN, based on need of the group and skills required.

Aims of group work:

- Provide therapeutic interventions that promote safety and personal/social empowerment.
- Provide young people with advice/information.
- Create more awareness around self-care.
- Encourage decision making skills and problem solving.
- Create a sense of belonging.
- Foster social networks with each other.
- Community connectedness.

Preparation/starting a group:

Preparation is what makes a program successfully reach its objectives, sustain equal client participation and run smoothly. Before starting a group facilitators need to meet to establish a similar focus and understanding around aims, program development, budgeting and hypothesised outcomes.

To develop a safe and appropriately focussed group, a balance needs to exist in planning, flexibility and a willingness to negotiate with the group.

This includes:

- Different / various facilitation roles including co-facilitation.
- Design, planning and preparation of group processes and agendas is necessary for effective group work, however flexibility is also needed.
- Group work can also be steered by the participants and less structured by the facilitators where appropriate.
- Informing the groups about your role and group process.
- Initial assessments are a good way to give us an understanding of individuals past experiences and an opportunity to understand their behaviour in a group. It gives participants the chance to meet you, know what to expect from the group and to come prepared.
- It's important to understand a young persons or child's behaviour to be able to offer them the support they need to be able to redirect their behaviour positively.
- Make rules with your group during the first session that all members agree on and contribute to, this may give them responsibility and ownership of the group.

Working as/with co-facilitators:

- Focus on the way you interact with your co-facilitators, as it is very important to present positive relationship role modelling and mutual respect.
- Debrief and reflect together on what did/didn't work and how do you learn from this for the next time.

- Express feedback to each other and reinforce things that worked well.
- Be careful how you present and interact with participants, as a facilitator you may give out an impression of power over the participants or over a co-facilitator. Vulnerable young people and children may feel overpowered easily due to their life experiences.

Guiding Principals Include:

- Creating a safe place equals creating opportunity for growth, which young people and children can process in order to express their thoughts and feelings.
- The intention for group work, no matter what the format of the group, should be providing links for young people and accompanying children to enhance their self esteem and up skilling in identified area.
- Giving young people and accompanying children choices and guidance: never give orders as this makes them feel inadequate and lowers their motivation. Choice fosters empowerment.

Important Outcomes:

- Providing young people and accompanying children with appropriate referrals and follow up discussions.
- Providing a safe environment to tell their stories while building trust amongst others and the opportunity to process emotions and work through them to meet identified goals.
- Providing young people with the opportunity to reconnect with the community and positive social supports.
- Prevention of social isolation.
- Providing access to knowledge, skills and resources in developing strategies for self-care and empowerment.
- Opportunities to feel empowered through being given responsibilities to assist others, solve problems, suggest strategies and offer support.

Taking Care of Ourselves:

To remain focused in our work we need to have good self-care skills: These include:

- Understanding and addressing the difficulties involved in facilitation and the effect this has on us.
- Structures and processes to assist us to take better care of ourselves.
- Some practical tools for prioritising our objectives.

Supervision and debriefing are essential to the function of a group.