

Prevention through connection: Restorative practices and Family and Community Group Conferencing for promoting engagement of young people with school, family and community

Angela McCullagh & Shandell Blythe:

Family and Community Group Conference Convenors
Upper Hume Community Health Service

Alyson Miller:

Assistant Principal, Wodonga Middle Years College
Trained Convenor for Restorative Practices and Family and Community Group Conferencing

Kevin Mack:

Leading Senior Constable, Wodonga Police
Trained Convenor for Restorative Practices and Family and Community Group Conferencing

Community concerns about young people and crime, substance use, dropping out of school, violence and other antisocial behaviour frequently result in calls for “something to be done” to or about young people. Consequences of not doing so are often described in terms of community safety, costs of dealing with unemployment, relationship breakdown, homelessness, health and injury, incarceration, policing, damage to self, others and property, service delivery.

This interactive workshop will lead participants through theory and practical activities drawn from a school community partnership in a regional Victorian city, which is pioneering exciting new ways of addressing such concerns. The partners include young people, their families and professionals working in schools, community health, policing, child protection, local government and university research programs.

Often there has been a lack of shared responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of young people, resulting in fragmented approaches. Families may feel excluded from the processes of community agencies and schools, and professionals may feel frustrated about duplication of activities, gaps in service provision and competing demands of policy and practice. Restorative approaches to building, maintaining and repairing relationships offer promise for addressing barriers to the positive development of young people and building family and community wellbeing.

Using Restorative Practice and Family and Community Group Conferencing, this project is building new relationships to break the cycle of disengagement and disadvantage. This workshop will be of interest to policymakers, school leaders and others interested in the development of the young people within strong communities. It will outline the approach taken and present stories of how the school-community partnership has already created positive outcomes for children, young people and, importantly, for families, schools and community. The workshop acknowledges the process of “transformational change” is a long term goal and will demonstrate how the commitment to a long term and sustainable partnership is now evidenced in joint strategic planning across schools, welfare agencies, police and other community services.

The Partners: Wodonga Network Schools, Upper Hume Community Health Service, Wodonga Police, the Upper Hume Interagency Team (a collective of youth sector service providers including community groups, local government), The Centre for Adolescent Health, Melbourne University, Deakin University and the Australian Catholic University.