Homeless Children in SA and Together4Kids, Specialist Children’s Therapeutic Service

**AUSTRALIAN CLIENTS OF SPECIALIST HOMELESSNESS SERVICES 2013-14**

254,000 people used specialist homelessness services

More than a quarter were under 18, just less than 70,000, and 16% were under 10, 41,000. An estimated 84,774 (33% of the total) adults and children sought assistance because of domestic/family violence. Of these 26% were children aged 0-14.

An estimated 2,205 children on a Child Protection Order received assistance from specialist homelessness services. 52% were aged between 15 and 17, 31% were aged between 0-9.

On any day over 10,000 specialist homelessness service clients were young people alone and over 13,500 were children in families.

**SA CLIENTS OF SPECIALIST HOMELESSNESS SERVICES 2013-14, ADJUSTED FOR NON-RESPONSE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-9</td>
<td>3,555</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>1,221</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>15-17</td>
<td>1,397</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
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Together4Kids, Specialist Children’s Therapeutic Service in SA, sees children aged 0 – 12 years

93% of children referred to T4K over 5 years of age are at risk of disengagement from school.

The opportunities presented by the National Affordable Housing Agreement propelled the SA Homelessness Strategy Unit into implementing a range of reforms that built on existing strengths of the specialist homelessness services sector. As a major contribution to homelessness service system reform, SA took the decisive step of considering accompanying children as clients of specialist homelessness services. This was a major achievement that recognised the impact that adult problems can have on children’s wellbeing. Children who are homeless frequently come from families with multiple and complex needs relating to domestic/family violence, mental illness, drug and alcohol misuse, unemployment and poverty. Increasingly both policy and research attention has focused on the need for efforts to prevent and to intervene early to limit the negative effects of homelessness on children’s development and their relationships.

Children who are homeless can often feel insecure and will sometimes be traumatised. Their routines and their relationships are likely to have been disrupted and their parents may not always be able to provide the emotional support they need. Coping with homelessness appears to be determined by children’s level of connectedness to family and community, and by the absence of fear, instability and insecurity. This reinforces the importance of (1) listening to and acknowledging children’s experiences of homelessness, (2) considering the homeless child as a client of a service in their own right, and (3) providing tailored therapeutic support for children who are homeless (and/or escaping domestic violence) beyond the assistance provided to their parents.
In SA children were no longer to merely be considered as appendages to adults or as latent adults but as actual service users with their own particular needs to be addressed. Recognition of the sometimes traumatic effects that homelessness and the circumstances leading to it can have on children led to the creation of a specialist service, Together4Kids, operated by Relationships Australia (SA). Together4Kids was funded from July 2010 to provide therapeutic support for children experiencing homelessness. A Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services clinician joined the team in April 2011 – 2014. These additional resources supported the commitment of the sector to improve and develop child focused practice to enhance homeless children’s mental wellbeing along with addressing their other needs.

With its expert practitioners, Together4Kids began to engage with specialist homelessness service workers across the state so as to forge the relationships essential to working collaboratively to address children’s needs. Once these relationships were forged children in homelessness services could gain access to individual counselling and participate in therapeutic groups as required. Over time connections between Together4Kids and workers from specialist homelessness services deepened as trust was built and positive results for children were recognised.

Together 4 Kids works directly with children in collaboration with parents and homelessness service providers. Caring, skilled staff help children to make sense of their experiences, to understand and manage their feelings, feel safe and develop friendships. Together4Kids broadened its range of services to encompass training for workers to enhance their skills about, for example, how to run specific group programs suitable for children of different ages. A range of manuals for group-work programs suitable for girls and boys have been developed. As well as individual work, Together4Kids holds school holiday events for children of different ages.

Together4Kids staff also developed their own knowledge-base by taking part in the child and family sensitive workshops provided by the Australian Centre for Child Protection. This skill-building and supportive relationship between the Australian Centre for Child Protection and Together4Kids led to incorporation of child and family sensitive practice into the Together4Kids training calendar. Following additional training, the Together4Kids Coordinator became an endorsed child and family sensitive practice Train the Trainer. RASA recently launched Child Focused Practice a free online training course for those working with children. SA specialist homelessness services with support from Together4Kids continue to address the needs of children as service users in their own right.

The Final Report of the Evaluation of the South Australian Homelessness Reforms October 2013 (Department of Communities and Social Inclusion) reflects positive changes in the homelessness workforce in relation to working with children 2011-2013. Many workers were provided with relevant training and resources and a variety of programs and supports, including specialist workers, became available.

However of the 64% of accompanied children who had a case management plan, the majority had a plan the same as that of their unit head. The associated goals were frequently broad and not child-related. Happily a quarter of interviewees with children in their care said that workers spent time with their children and that their child was linked with or referred to other services.

These findings relate to the introductory period after the reform changes were introduced. Consequently it is unsurprising that evidence of adaptation to children as service clients was somewhat uneven over the period of the evaluation.
Thirty-two workers from a range of settings were asked what words about Together4Kids spring to mind, whether they would recommend Together4Kids and about their experiences of referring clients/participating in training.

Of the 75 words provided 69 could be considered positive.

62.5% indicated that they had referred a least one client to Together4Kids and 61% indicated that they were extremely likely to refer another client.

83% indicated that they had participated in Together4Kids training.

With the Specialist Homelessness Services embracing and developing a child focus to their work, Case Managers and children’s workers within services are calling on Together4Kids to work with them to support children and their families. After an assessment, Together4Kids may provide individual therapeutic sessions for children and work with Case Managers to support children with complex needs. Involvement in a therapeutic group may also be advised. Working with children’s workers within services; children can engage with a variety of group processes tailored to meet the needs and interests of each child.

Individual therapeutic work focuses on validating the experiences of children, assisting them to understand and make meaning of their complex experiences so that they feel psychologically safe. It also supports their emotional literacy and expression and develops a strong relationship through which they can process future life events. Sessions include age appropriate activities using art and play therapeutic models and all work is trauma informed. An important aspect of the work with the child is to support the parent to better understand the child’s experience and assist them to develop strategies to support the therapeutic goals.

Together4Kids has been awarded two Play Your Part Awards from NAPCAN (National Association for Prevention of Childhood Neglect and Abuse). In 2014 Together4Kids was recognised for its work towards preventing child abuse and neglect. In 2015 one of the innovative programs within T4K (and across Relationships Australia SA child and family programs), the Infant Massage Project received the award. This project involves a qualified Infant Massage Instructor visiting homeless parents with infants. The visits are not related to a crisis nor requested to ‘fix’ a problem but as a friendly supportive service to new parents. The teaching of Infant Massage includes recognising and following baby cues, use of songs and verbalisation and respectful touch. Infant Massage supports relationships and attachment development is therefore a preventative measure for parents who are in unstable housing.

Therapeutic Goals, Data Collection and Evidence Base

A child’s therapeutic goals document is developed out of the use of the T4K intake, screening and assessment tool used at commencement of the service. Progress is measured at three and six months and at the end of service. The PACES tool used by T4K provides information regarding the child’s physical health, agency, connectedness, emotional wellbeing and safety. Parents’ and others’ (e.g. childcare workers or teachers) perceptions of the child are collected using the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire and age-related tools like BITSEA, ASQ-SE2 and the KARITANE Parent Confidence Scale. Revisiting the SDQ at points in time and at conclusion of a therapeutic group process or a one on one session with a practitioner provides evidence to inform treatment plans.
By developing safety plans that have the child at the centre and connecting the family to appropriate specialist medical, social and community services our collaborative work with Specialist Homeless Services facilitates addressing the child’s mental health needs and a shared response to their other health, education, social and developmental needs.

Providing training in child focused practice to homelessness services helps to ensure that assessment and intake practices lead to appropriate case planning and appropriate referrals to Together4Kids. Skills training is enhanced by providing in-service mentoring to individual services over a number of weeks.

The data collection and research methods used by T4K facilitate integration and collaboration within the specialist homelessness sector for best outcomes for the most vulnerable children and families. Providing practical assistance and supporting the development of child-focused intake, assessment and case management tools together with training in data collection using SDQ helps children get the service they need.

A report on the Together4Kids program is currently being prepared. Early evidence from the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and Therapeutic Goals shows impressive positive results for children and families engaging with the service.

References:

Specialist homelessness services: 2013-14 and attached material, AIHW
Evaluation of SA Homelessness Reforms Final Report October 2013 DCSI
Homelessness Australia Homelessness and Children factsheet April 2013
Homelessness Sector Survey December 2013- Jan 2014, Together4Kids RASA

Christine Gibson, Australian Centre for Child Protection
Deborah Lockwood, Relationships Australia (SA)