



EARLY INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION PROGRAMME:
WITH CHILDREN WHO DISPLAY
CONCERNING SEXUALISED BEHAVIOUR

Report for the Ministry of Justice

January 2011

Executive Summary

Background

WellStop Inc. and STOP Trust provide community-based assessment and treatment services for adolescents and adults who have sexually abused and for children who have engaged in concerning sexualised behaviour. The need for the project arose for a number of reasons. Firstly the WellStop and STOP Adolescent treatment programmes became aware that some of the adolescents referred to them had a history of concerning sexualised behaviour as children. At times this concerning sexual behaviour was initiated in the school setting. We recognised that if children who showed significant concerning sexual behaviour at school or home received early and appropriate intervention, they could be prevented from developing sexual abusing behaviours in adolescence. This would result in less sexual abuse and consequently fewer victims and safer communities. Secondly, over the last four years there has been increasing demand from social workers, community and educational professionals seeking guidance, support and intervention for managing incidents of sexualised behaviour in younger children.

The Ministry of Justice Crime Prevention Unit approved a funding grant to WellStop and STOP to develop a pilot programme for early intervention and prevention with at-risk children showing concerning sexual behaviour and to evaluate its effectiveness.

Method

The Early Intervention and Prevention Programme was carried out at two centres, WellStop, which dealt with children from the greater Wellington area; and STOP, which dealt with children from the Canterbury region. The Early Intervention and Prevention Programme had three distinct components:

- Teacher training seminars
- School intervention
- Intensive intervention

1. Teacher Training Seminars:

Twelve community-based teacher-training seminars were held in Christchurch and Wellington attended by over 200 schools. The purpose of the teacher training seminars were firstly to educate school personnel about understanding when sexual behaviours are concerning and inappropriate and when they are developmentally appropriate. A secondary purpose was to provide an opportunity for conversations around dealing with sexualised behaviour in school and providing school personnel with the skills to use, when managing sexualised behaviour 'in the moment'. The seminars were interactive and provided a forum for facilitated discussion on a range of themes, topics and specific scenarios relating to managing incidents of sexualised behaviour. Over 400 school and education personnel attended the community and school-based training seminars during 2009 and 2010.

2. School Intervention:

A total of 12 schools were identified as being suitable for the Early Intervention and Prevention Programme, Six in the Canterbury region and six in the greater Wellington area. Some schools identified particular children to focus the intervention around, other schools wanted a school-wide intervention to assist generally with children exhibiting concerning sexual behaviour.

3. Intensive Intervention:

Eight children (four in each region) were identified as requiring intensive intervention as part of the Early Intervention and Prevention Programme. These children were referred for individualized intensive intervention for two main reasons: firstly, the sexualised behaviour they exhibited was of a more intrusive and serious nature and therefore

required in-depth therapeutic intervention with a skilled clinician; and secondly, the sexualised behaviour occurred in multiple environments and was therefore unable to be successfully managed through school-based intervention alone.

Results

1. Teacher Training Seminars:

The twelve training seminars clearly increased the skill-base and confidence of school personnel in dealing with instances of sexualised behaviour. Ratings from participants show very high levels of satisfaction (91%) with the training provided. Overall, teachers who attended the trainings stated that they were more confident in recognizing and dealing with instances of sexually inappropriate behaviour. Since the initial training was carried out, a number of schools have requested in-school training. The vast majority (79%) reported that the training was useful in clarifying the difference between normal and concerning sexualised behaviour. Several respondents commented on the clarity and informative nature of the training as well as the appropriateness of the methods used in presentations. A few concerns were raised in the early trainings regarding the issue of whether the information about developmentally appropriate sexual behaviour was applicable to children with special needs. This led to the presentations being revised to include information specifically relating to children with special needs.

2. School Intervention:

80% of children, who were individually identified by schools, ceased or reduced the intensity and frequency of sexualised behaviour in both the school and home environments. For the schools that requested school-wide intervention, there is evidence of increased confidence and skill shown by school personnel in dealing with instances of sexualised behaviours. This is reflected in the follow up interviews where personnel have outlined changes in their approach to sexualised behaviour and a greater understanding of how to manage it within the school environment.

Referrals to WellStop and STOP also reflect schools are more able to identify when a child's behaviour needs more intensive intervention than they are able to provide. An issue that was apparent for some school staff and families involved with managing children with their concerning sexualised behaviour, was that some had their own experiences of abuse and this impacted on their ability to engage with the Early Intervention and Prevention Programme. Some struggled to discuss the relevant issues with the clinicians due to a limited knowledge of appropriate language and terminology relating to children of this age and others viewed the children's behaviour as being similar to adult sexual offending behaviour.

The cases in which the Early Intervention was most effective were where there were high levels of collaboration, engagement and communication between the family, the school and the agency. In the instances where one or other party had been disengaged, the intervention required more time and effort, and yielded poorer results.

3. Intensive Intervention:

All of the children who were a part of the intensive intervention showed stable and positive change as a result of the Early Intervention and Prevention Programme. Where further instances were reported the concerning sexualised behaviour was at a lower level of seriousness and frequency. Feedback showed that families and schools involved with these children were responding quicker and more appropriately to concerning sexualised behaviour, and coping with adverse experiences while maintaining consistency for the children. The intervention with the families and the individual work with the children resulted in marked reductions in anti-social, oppositional and inappropriate sexuality scores on assessment scales. Similar patterns were found in the case of intensive intervention as with the school-based intervention – that the intervention worked best when all three parties were engaged and communicated well and the most common problems occurred when there was a lack of communication between the school and the family. Where this occurred the agencies (WellStop or STOP) played a pivotal role in enhancing the communication, and ensuring

the intervention was consistent between the school and family environment.

Overall, the Early Intervention Programme results show:

- Early intervention with children exhibiting concerning sexual behaviour yields positive results for children, families and schools.
- The skills provided by the programme increase the overall ability of the schools to manage concerning sexualised behaviours.
- The intervention resulted in children showing increased pro-social interactions with their peers.
- Specialist support and education around sexualised behaviour to families and schools created better outcomes for both the children exhibiting concerning sexualised behaviours (e.g., not being stood down or excluded from school) and their families.
- Teachers and parents involved with the intervention reported increased confidence and competence to manage other instances of children displaying sexualised behaviour in the future.

The most consistent feedback received from schools, families and other agencies regarding the Early Intervention and Prevention Programme is that the skilled advice and support provided by WellStop and STOP was critical in ensuring a holistic, consistent and focused treatment plan for children exhibiting concerning sexualised behaviour. Teachers and principals' feedback indicated that there had been a significant gap in their knowledge and ability to deal with children showing concerning sexual behaviour and the Early Intervention and Prevention Programme provided the necessary support to them to deal with this issue.

Recommendations

1. Funding for the Early Intervention and Prevention Programme:

The effectiveness of the pilot programme shows that it would have long-term positive outcomes for children, families and the community. Given the seriousness

of the effects of concerning sexualised behaviour on the children and on others, it is important that there is intervention at the earliest opportunity. With earlier intervention the programme is likely to result in significantly less children being victims of sexual abuse. The programme also enhances the development of pro-social behaviour and relationships in children.

The cost of intervention with children is also much lower than the cost of intervention with adolescents. Moreover the cost of intervening when the behaviour first appears, often in a school setting, is also lower than once the behaviour has become evident in wider settings. Another significant benefit of involvement in a specialised early intervention and prevention programme is that children who have been exposed to sexualised behaviour in advance of their years by other children, have the opportunity of experiencing a systemic and holistic response to the incident within the context of their current peer social group.

The Intensive Intervention component is critical in accommodating the more serious and complex cases of children who engage in sexualised behaviour and require more in-depth intervention. These are the cases where schools may not have the time or therapeutic training and skill to make long-term effective changes.

In order to deal with a child's concerning sexual behaviour all systems involved with that child need to be involved in the intervention. This needs to include at least the family, the school and the agency providing the intervention. Failure to have all parties involved in the intervention leads to less than ideal and occasionally adverse outcomes, for the child.

It is therefore recommended that the Early Intervention and Prevention Programme be funded to enable the programmes to be delivered in an on-going way. Moreover to be most effective, it is recommended that all components of the Early Intervention and Prevention Programme be funded including the school-based intervention and the intensive intervention.

2. Teacher Education:

The project showed that there is a significant gap in the understanding and management by teachers and education personnel, of children showing concerning sexualised behaviours. In order for the Early Intervention and Prevention Programme to be effective, any school taking up the services of this programme needs to set aside time to attend the teacher training seminars. Ideally long-term education about the management of children with concerning sexualised behaviour should be included as part of teacher's training curriculum or as part of regular in-service training. This pilot programme indicates there is an identified need for continued training of school personnel in identifying and managing incidents of sexualised behaviour within the school context. It is also necessary to tailor the training for teachers and education personnel to include specific information relevant to children with special needs.

In order for schools to effectively undertake early intervention with children they need to understand that their own staff may be negatively impacted by the children's behaviour. It is therefore recommended that schools consider supports for staff, through general support from the agencies providing the service, or for those that need further support, from Employee Assistance Programmes or other counselling.

3. Further research into the areas of Early Intervention and Prevention:

This pilot programme indicates that there is a need for further research in the area of early intervention and prevention including:

- Longer term follow-up to research the effectiveness of the interventions;
- Increased understanding about the nature of the development of sexuality in children;
- Follow up on the impact of intervention with primary-age children as they enter puberty;
- And the impact of cyber technologies on the sexual behaviour of children.