

The Education of Boys.

Barnardos is a non-government child welfare agency providing a range of family support, alternative care and supported accommodation services to disadvantaged children, adolescents and their families. At the Children and Family Centre in the ACT there has been a Volunteer Literacy Tutoring Program operating for the past two years. From the operation of this program and from other educational work done with young people in care, we have gathered a substantial amount of evidence-based practice in how best to work with disadvantaged young people in the schooling system and to observe the particular experiences boys.

The Tutoring Program was developed to assist socioeconomically disadvantaged children between the ages of 6 and 16 years who were not only struggling with their literacy and numeracy skills, but who did not have anybody at home to help with their homework. Children/young people come from families where there is domestic violence, poverty, homelessness, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse and social isolation. There is often a home environment where learning is not valued or too chaotic/crisis-driven in which to do regular homework.

The program was also developed to assist children who were continually suspended from school in an attempt to re-engage them in the learning process. To do this the program offers the young person a volunteer Tutor outside of school hours, who regularly teaches literacy and numeracy skills to the child, assisting them with literacy and numeracy tasks. The Tutor is also someone the young person can trust as a new friend and mentor to talk to about their daily lives and problems outside of their family circle and the education system. Tutors are carefully selected and screened by Barnardos staff.

The program is unique in that not only does it offer literacy and numeracy volunteer tutoring to socioeconomically disadvantaged children/young people, but it also offers support to families who may be dealing with alcohol and drug issues, issues of domestic violence, poverty and stress. Family support and alternative care programs can readily be accessed through other Barnardos programs on site or by way of referral to another agency. This has been an advantage in having the program located within a welfare setting, however, training and educational support for Tutors has been provided external academic institutions (mainly the Australian Catholic University).

To re-engage children who have been continually suspended from school takes more than the classroom teacher's efforts. The children in the Tutoring Program very often have to deal with so many complex issues at home. They can also be experiencing bullying by other children at school, criticism from teachers for incomplete homework or attending lessons they find too difficult. The "easiest way out" for young people in this situation is often to truant.

To be able to offer these children a Tutor who will not only be able to show interest in the child as a person, but will also be able to assist with their school work, how to get along with family members and their activities is extremely beneficial. This is the first

program of its kind in Australia where the welfare sector and the education sector are working from within the same program.

Of the children referred to the program more than two thirds are boys. The specific problems they have are:

- great difficulty adapting to their first year at high school after years of disjointed primary schooling
- a history of many suspensions from school
- poor literacy and numeracy skills as a result of disjointed schooling because of regular inattendance
- poor communication between the home and the school
- displaying increasingly “acting out”, aggressive and violent behaviour as a response to the particular problems they are experiencing in their lives. This behaviour in turn leads to more frequent suspensions from school.
- generally having poor social skills that increasingly isolates them from their peers and makes it difficult for them to work in group activities at school
- generally coming from disadvantaged single parent families where there are few positive male role models for boys
- having marginalised parents who for a range of reasons have difficulty accessing resources for their children and poor advocacy skills

The Barnardos Tutoring Program has been able to recruit a number of male volunteers who can be matched with particularly difficult young boys. In acting as a mentor and positive male role model for the boy, we have observed some significant improvements in these boys' educational and social skills.

Through a program like the Tutoring Program, bridges can be rebuilt between the home and the school because the Tutor contacts the school and the teacher on a regular basis about the child/young person with whom they are working. Discussions will then take place in the child's home between the parents, Tutor and child about their school and any problems that may be taking place within the school setting.

Children are also assisted with their literacy and numeracy skills and encouraged, through innovative ideas, to re-engage in the learning process. This re-engagement in learning may also be introduced by the Tutor through the child's favourite activity or hobby. Tutors can assist children to access computers, visit libraries and access educational resources the child's parents may not have been able to achieve.

To date the program is keeping children/young people, and particularly boys, in the mainstream education system, assisting families with the many schooling issues they find stressful and ultimately bringing the home and school community closer together.