



FACT SHEET

Working with Young People with Behavioural Challenges

Setting up for Success

Many of the biggest challenges in working with behavioural challenges come from poor planning and set up procedures. Amongst the most critical issues prior to starting any group intervention is choosing who will participate. Not all young people are developmentally able to participate in group work and putting too many young people with behavioural difficulties together is a recipe for disaster. Group make up should ensure a range of different individuals are present who can learn from each other, and share a similar developmental level. Facilitators should work with another adult who is committed to the program and wherever possible has an existing, respectful relationship, with those involved. In outreach work, where a facilitator is contracted to work for another school or organisation, the co-facilitator needs to be someone who can manage challenging behaviours effectively. A suitable room should be provided that has minimal distractions and is acoustically benign. Scheduling for these classes should be consistent – same time, same place, same group members, same facilitators.

Clear Boundaries

Determining clear boundaries for these sessions is an early priority. Boundaries should be explored with, and drawn from, the group members themselves with a particular focus on emotional and physical safety. Giving participants responsibility for monitoring the boundary they contributed is an effective way of promoting social responsibility. This should be done in a way that avoids blame.

Flow

The concept of 'flow' where people become wholly immersed in an activity is an important one for behaviour management. Flow is about engagement and momentum and when students are in flow there is no opportunity for behavioural problems to arise. The state of flow is commonly associated with drumming and can be further enhanced by ensuring that sessions don't get bogged down in overly long discussions or the learning of challenging rhythms that test focus and patience. Flow stems from a dynamic mix of music, games, exercises & discussion.

Fun & Safety

A large number of behavioural issues can be avoided by focusing on establishing a safe and secure environment for participants. For many people safety relates closely to stability and consistency; thus predictable routines, faces, spaces and the environment itself can help reduce anxieties and defensiveness borne from uncertainty. Closed groups, where membership stays the same each session, are always preferable, as new faces mean new levels of trust must be re-established. Equally, changing facilitators or having new staff members sit in on sessions can undermine safety for participants and impact behaviour. Safety is critical in group work practice where individuals with social phobias can become very uncomfortable, & where power dynamics can leave individuals vulnerable to bullying or physical violence. Fun needs to be fun for all, not fun for some, and whenever possible the facilitator needs to ensure activities and games are non-competitive and inclusive. Although the subject matter addressed in our rhythmic interventions can be quite serious, it is important not to lose track of having fun. It is the fun nature of group music making that gets people engaged and feeling comfortable and whenever we are having fun we are feeling safe, banishing our anxieties and the worries of the past and the future. There is a field of thought for some that fun is not conducive to learning but research has shown that not only are people more fully engaged when they are having fun, but that they are also more likely to learn and hold onto that learning (Willis, 2007).

Willis, J. (2007). The Neuroscience of Joyful Education, *Journal of Education* 64

Organisational Support

It is vital that the school or organisation contracting your service value the work you do and support you in that work. Many facilitators have come unstuck because of a lack of support from their hosts and even deliberate undermining of their work, which has been undervalued due to ignorance of its purpose. One simple way to reduce this risk is to run a short presentation for the host organisation and its staff prior to beginning the intervention. During this presentation you ensure that people understand the purpose and research that supports your work and the basic requirements for its success. Amongst the most important issues that need to be raised are the withdrawal of students from your class – it is important that participants attend regularly, that they are encouraged to attend from other staff, & not sanctioned from attending because of poor behaviour in other areas.