



COOL KIDS & RAINBOWS PROGRAM

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND

Cool Kids and Rainbows is a therapeutic group program for children from refugee backgrounds who are aged between 7 and 12 years. The Migrant Information Centre's (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) Cool Kids program was developed in June 2004 in collaboration with Wesley Resilient Kids and the Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House). Wesley Resilient Kids children's program focused on children experiencing homelessness and/or family violence, whilst Foundation House program worked with refugee children in schools and supported them in their resettlement in Australia. The MIC Cool Kids and Rainbows program incorporated aspects of both of these programs to design a program which best met the needs of the refugee children who attended a range of schools across the Eastern Metropolitan Region.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

The Cool Kids and Rainbows program aims to assist children from refugee backgrounds in developing life skills to assist them as they go through the resettlement process. The program uses play, role-plays, discussion, art, games and activities to explore emotions and feelings, develop day-to-day coping strategies and social skills and live happily in a new cultural and social environment. The Cool Kids and Rainbows program has been developed with a recognition of the challenges that children from refugee backgrounds often face as they begin their new life in Australia.

Prior to resettlement in Australia, children from refugee backgrounds have often experienced significant trauma. This trauma can be as a result of numerous factors including separation from extended or immediate family members, experiences of family members dying or being permanently injured as a result of the conflict in their homeland, being witness or subject to violence, many years living in refugee camps and/or in war torn countries and disrupted or lack of education and schooling.

Some of the challenges faced by children from refugee backgrounds when they arrive in Australia include learning a new language, living in a culture that is vastly different from their homelands and attending formal schooling, often for the first time. Such experiences can lead to further difficulties of children experiencing isolation and bullying. These kinds of experiences can have a significant impact on children's positive sense of self and their ability to adapt to life in Australia. The Cool Kids and Rainbows program aims to work with children in developing their ability to overcome these kinds of challenges and to assist in them building positive lives in Australia.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The Cool Kids and Rainbows program is designed to:

- Help children effectively identify their feelings and to recognize and focus on their strengths
- Foster an enhanced sense of self through identifying and recognizing individual, familial and cultural strengths
- Prepare and support children in (or soon to enter) the mainstream schools in Australia
- Provide a safe space for children to talk about and gain an understanding of their past and present experiences
- Assist children and their families to better understand and adjust to Australian culture
- Provide ongoing support and point of referral to other services

PROGRAM LOGISTICS

The Cool Kids and Rainbows program runs weekly during the school term, between 4pm and 5.30pm. Depending on participants' needs, programs may run for a duration of one to two terms. Each Cool Kids and Rainbows program is facilitated by two MIC workers, who are assisted in some programs by a reliable and skilled volunteer or Social Work/Community Development student. The program is held in a community centre or hall in an area central to where group participants live or attend school. The group venue is chosen to have kitchen facilities, as well as appropriate spaces for discussions, games and craft activities to occur.

Facilitators pick up participants from their schools and drive them to the venue where the program is held; they then drop children home again at the conclusion of the program. Facilitators use the car trips to speak to the children individually, providing an opportunity for each child to discuss particular issues that are affecting them. Facilitators try to create an informal environment during the car rides that allows for participants to feel comfortable to discuss different issues. Facilitators may raise particular topics with participants, such as their behavior during the group session or something that has happened for them at home or school during the week whilst in the car, to allow for an opportunity for the child to discuss this privately and the facilitator to provide some individual support.

PARTICIPATION

Participants are girls and boys, between 7 and 12 years old from refugee backgrounds residing in the Eastern Metropolitan Region. The children are referred to the program by MIC settlement workers, local primary schools, Blackburn English Language School, family support agencies, refuges, and other local agencies. Each group usually consists of between 6 and 9 participants. Groups are specifically designed to cater for children of the same age and/or gender. Participants may be referred for a number of reasons which can include:

- Disruptive behavior in the classroom
- Angry, violent or depressive behaviors
- Lack of social skills
- Lack of confidence
- A need for extra support due to settlement difficulties or family issues
- Issues/concerns as identified by MIC settlement support workers, youth workers, teachers and/or family members

PROGRAM OUTLINE AND DESIGN

The Cool Kids and Rainbows program provides a safe, comfortable environment where participants are encouraged to discuss their feelings and experiences. The children have opportunities to develop and improve their social skills in a safe environment. The program, which runs weekly over either one or two school terms, uses role-plays, games, discussion, sports and art & craft activities to develop appropriate coping strategies and ways to identify and deal with different feelings and emotions.

The program is structured to be both informative and exploratory as well as fun, with facilitators ensuring that play and games are included each week, to encourage participants to have fun and make new friends.

For some participants, the program provides respite for children who have adopted adult responsibilities at home, such as caring for younger siblings and undertaking household chores.

Each Cool Kids and Rainbows program is structured to cover different emotions and feelings, whereby facilitators choose when to cover each topic throughout the duration of the program and the activities to be undertaken to best meet the needs of participants.

The weekly sessions focus on the following topics:

- Introduction - Getting to know us
- I'm a special and unique person
- Emotions I'm feeling
- Feeling sad
- Feeling worried
- Feeling angry
- Feeling happy
- Personal space
- Bullying
- Friendship
- Grief and loss

Each program is carefully and specifically designed to meet the needs of its participants. Group facilitators regularly consult and meet with support workers who are assisting the families or parents of participants and plan activities to meet the needs of the children accordingly. The two group facilitators also meet weekly to discuss arising issues for participants and reflect on the previous week's session. This allows for activities to be planned around a topic that facilitators deem most appropriate for participants during the following session.

PROGRAM EVALAUTION & OUTCOMES

The referral process for children participating in the program requires a briefing on the issues and needs the young person is presenting. Facilitators may also contact teachers, parents and support workers to gain an assessment of the child. This provides a baseline assessment of which progress can be determined against. During final Cool Kids and Rainbows program sessions, facilitators usually ask participants to identify what they have enjoyed most about participating in the program and aspects that they would like to change. This assists in determining how children experienced the program and what they had learnt through it. Evaluations are also conducted with parents and teachers to assess any changes and outcomes they had observed in the children. A final report is compiled at the end of each program where facilitators collate all the feedback and report back on their own challenges and lessons learnt in order to build upon and improve for future programs.