

Festival of Healthy Living: promoting community resilience in the face of natural disaster

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The Festival of Healthy Living (FHL) is a mental health promotion strategy auspiced by the Royal Children's Hospital Integrated Mental Health Program (RCH IMHP) in Victoria. The strategy works with schools and community agencies to promote emotional wellbeing in the community. The FHL, an arts based program, program has a ten year history having worked with thousands of students, staff, parents and community members in metropolitan, rural and remote regions of Victoria. The program has particularly focused on rural areas that have been affected by different forms of natural disaster such as drought and bushfires.

Evidence base

Research indicates that mental health issues in children correlate with higher risk and lower protective factors. Building resilience in children involves improving wellbeing through addressing risk factors and strengthening protective factors. In order to address risk and protective factors a population health approach is required.

Early referral and response to difficulties is more achievable where:

- teachers, students and parents have an understanding and acceptance of mental health and mental illness in an environment which values and promotes connectedness, safety and respect for all
- there is a relationship of co-operation and trust between the schools and the health and welfare services in their community.

Using performing and visual arts as a tool for exploring mental health is consistent with research which has demonstrated its efficacy in promoting resilience, reducing risk factors, and enhancing protective factors. The Festival for Healthy Living provides avenues for children and young people to connect, and to explore life in different ways.

Key features

There are a number of key features of the FHL Program.

- The program promotes a universal approach to wellbeing. Rather than focusing on a particular vulnerable group within the community, and risking increasing the stigma that may be attached to the group, the FHL adopts a population approach knowing that the model is inclusive of and effective with vulnerable groups.
- The program acts as a bridge to build or strengthen the links between schools and the community sector. It is at times when communities are most under threat, because of adversity, that they need support in uniting together.

- The FHL Program enables students to explore issues associated with their emotional health and wellbeing using the performing and visual arts. Students can delve and explore their issues safely in a spirit of creative problem solving, optimism and fun. One key aspect of this work is that students develop solution focused performance pieces, artwork and written work supported by professional community artists and their teachers.
- The program has a model that engages communities for a three year period. This is critical in allowing enough time to develop meaningful partnerships between health, education and the community sector and to promote local sustainability. Over a three year period, through the professional development aspects of the program, knowledge and skills in promoting resilience through the arts are integrated into the work of teachers and health professionals which can then be utilised once the program moves away from the community.

Working in the context of natural disasters

Fundamental to the success of the program has been its ability to successfully engage with the community. The engagement strategy has been informed by a number of key principles.

Firstly, it is critical that engagement phase takes place in a way that is sensitive and respectful to the local context. This means, understanding the local culture and listening carefully to local stakeholders in relation to what the established ways of working in the community are.

Related to this, any engagement process needs to build on existing processes and structures that are meaningful to the community. Creation of new structures can often lead to unnecessary anxiety and be seen as disrespectful.

Thirdly, communities that are affected by natural disaster will often be seen in a negative context in terms of the losses the community may have experienced. In view of this, the FHL engagement process focuses on a strengths based framework. This includes asking questions as to what are the positive aspects of community life and who has particular talents. Such an approach can be an important marker to begin the process of community rebuilding.

Moreover, the process of relationship building needs to be undertaken in such a way that it facilitates community ownership of the program. The FHL strives for this through creation of local steering committees, appointment of local leaders in overseeing the program and recruitment of local personnel to implement the program.

Evaluation outcomes

The FHL Program has been evaluated over a number of years and clear outcomes have been identified. In relation to its impact on children and young people, evaluation has highlighted feedback in relation to a more positive attitude to mental health, to increased self confidence and enhanced relationships with peers, teachers and parents. Teachers have commented on its impact in engaging and building confidence in children with both physical and psychological difficulties.

Feedback from parents have also highlighted how the FHL Program had a positive affect on their children as well as valuing the opportunity for participation in the program. Parents have also commented on the FHL process uniting the whole community. Many commented how participation in the program acted as a mechanism to forget about the drought the community was experiencing.

Moreover, parents were reassured to know that through participating in the program, their children have learned strategies for identifying and relieving some of their stress in their lives.

The FHL Program has enhanced relationships between community organisations and schools and fostered an atmosphere of celebration inclusive of all in the community.

Resources

The development of the FHL across Victoria is supported by a team based at the Royal Children's Hospital. This team has developed a number of resources including a video about the program, publications and evaluation tools.

Publications

Festival for Healthy Living: Creative arts for mental health and connecting communities is a three-part guide to implementing the Festival for Healthy Living Program in schools. This guide contains the theoretical background to the Festival for Healthy Living; a step-by-step guide to implementing the FHL Program in schools; and school stories and resources as well as a CD of further resources for use by schools and their communities.

Festival for Healthy Living: Guidelines for Professional Learning is a seven-part resource to support teachers, artists and mental health professionals to implement the Professional Learning Program of the Festival for Healthy Living. The Guidelines describe the process for implementing professional learning as part of a mental health promoting performing and visual arts program, and provide the resources to support whole school community improvement.

These resources are available on the FHL website www.rch.org.au/fhl.