



Australian Centre for
Child Protection

Evaluation of *'My Kids and Me'*

Final Report

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CatholicCare

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AUTHORS

Christine Gibson, Community Research Liaison Coordinator

Samantha Parkinson, Research Assistant

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CatholicCare hope the voices of the clients have been captured and their stories told in a way that respects them and their children. The clients remind them every day that “every human being has infinite worth” (Frank Kimber).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Delivered by CatholicCare in Sydney and Wollongong, My Kids and Me is a seven week course for parents whose children have been removed from their care. These parents have not only lost their children but also their identity as a parent. These parents are frequently advised to go to parenting courses to improve themselves yet many such courses are not tailored to the particular needs of parents whose children are in statutory care. Parents who are not living with their children are only able to enact and practice their parent roles during access visits. My Kids and Me is specifically tailored to parents who have had their children removed.

Intense feelings of anger, loss, grief and more which these parents express need to be acknowledged; it appears that My Kids and Me allows this to happen in a safe and contained way. The skills that the group facilitators use are highly valued by the participants. The participating parents comment positively on being part of a group in which others share the same experience of having their children removed. It is obvious from the data analysed in this report that the parents who participated in this research not only gained insight into their behaviour but also gained the strength to make significant changes to the way they lead their lives.

The parents participating in My Kids and Me are struggling with multiple and complex issues such as substance misuse, domestic violence, lack of support, stigma and mental illness. Feelings of distress, hurt and anger are prominent in their daily lives. Through attendance in a My Kids and Me program for two and a half hours a week for seven weeks these people strive to acquire useful information, increased confidence and helpful insights. The extent to which they are successful in achieving these is attributable to the support and guidance they experience during their participation.

It is imperative that parents receive positive external support to initiate the process of self-recovery. The My Kids and Me course provides a springboard from which parents can confidently move forward on the path of self-improvement and identity reconstruction to achieve the best possible outcome for themselves and ultimately better care for their children.

BACKGROUND

This report presents the results of an evaluation conducted by the Australian Centre for Child Protection of the *My Kids and Me* course offered by CatholicCare in Sydney and Wollongong.

My Kids and Me is a seven week course for parents whose children have been removed and placed in out of home care. These parents have not only lost their children but also their identity as a parent. Removal of children severely interrupts the identity confirmation process and parents experience identity trauma (marked by negative emotions and behaviours; Salveron, 2012). Parent identity plays a role not only in contact between parents and their children in care, but also in their engagement and involvement with the child protection process (Salveron, 2012).

Parents whose children are in statutory care are frequently advised to go to parenting courses to improve themselves yet many such courses are not tailored to the particular needs of these parents. Parents who are not living with their children are only able to enact and practice their parent roles during access visits. Previous research found that mainstream parenting programs are not suitable for parents involved with child protection systems due to several factors. Factors include not having children in their care; the stigma surrounding the removal of children; the complexity of parents' lives; and the reduced opportunities to practice the skills learnt (Salveron, Lewig, & Arney, 2009).

My Kids and Me is one of a few rare attempts to assist parents who have children involved in the statutory child protection systems. CatholicCare initially piloted My Kids and Me for the Department of Community Services in 2006. The manual was re-written in 2009. A facilitator's manual, drafted in July 2011, outlines the aims and activities for each two hour session held across seven weeks. The manual's introduction states that *'the course is not designed to give participants practical parenting help; rather its aim is to give participants an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and give an opportunity to change'*.

The titles of the weekly sessions of the My Kids and Me course are:

1. How Did We Get Here?
2. What's it Like for You?
3. Looking After Yourself
4. Talking and Listening
5. The Legal System
6. What's it Like for Your Kids?
7. Where to Now?

The initial session involves introductions, housekeeping and establishing group rules. A number of different activities are conducted in each session (e.g. Seeds of Wisdom, Quote of the Week, House of Love and Kindness) and some are repeated in following sessions. Participants' input to activities conducted during early sessions is contrasted to their input in later sessions to highlight to individuals any change in their feelings or understanding. The course is conducted with very small numbers in each group as the emotional content is intense for many of the participants. For this reason highly skilful facilitation is required.

CatholicCare Sydney and CatholicCare Wollongong have a team of parent educators, both Social Workers and Psychologists, who offer courses across an extensive area of Greater Sydney and the Illawarra. These educators are required to successfully complete one or two days of training before they facilitate My Kids and Me. As the manual states *'it is the warmth, acceptance and respect demonstrated by the facilitators which will allow the participants to trust the process and effect change'*.

The aim of My Kids and Me is to improve parents' relationships with their children, their children's carers and relevant Department of Community Services and other workers. Involvement in My Kids and Me may be a precursor to engagement in other parenting programs.

The program logic underpinning My Kids and Me is outlined in Appendix 1. Two outcomes of the My Kids and Me course are identified: (1) Improved relationships between parent/s and children, parent/s and children's carers, and parent/s and case workers; and (2) Increase in parent preparedness and capacity to engage in other skill-based parenting programs. The program logic maps out the steps (a series of inputs and outputs) used in order to reach these outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The Australian Centre for Child Protection was engaged to assess the impact of My Kids and Me on the participants. Data from consenting parents who were participants in groups held in four terms across 2012 and 2013 was collected by CatholicCare staff under the guidance of researchers from the Australian Centre for Child Protection.

The researchers met with the group facilitators during a training session in Sydney on 24th April 2012 prior to commencement of the first term of data collection. The facilitators were provided with information about the research and their role in data gathering was explained. Any questions they had were answered and their input was sought about the data collection process.

This evaluation is an assessment of course impact i.e. how well did it achieve what was intended? Data was collected from several sources at different times so that an analysis could be conducted to assess whether there were any discernible change in parents' confidence, knowledge, behaviour and attitudes following their participation in the My Kids and Me course. Clinical data were examined to identify whether there were any noticeable changes over the seven weeks of each course and also used to illustrate parents' input during the course. A brief description of the data collected from parents who consented to participate in the research follows:

- At the initial pre-group interview (intake)
 - De-identified (the client's name was blacked out and replaced by an ID code) individual pre-group interview data collected by the interviewer
- At initial group session
 - A client-completed or facilitator-administered pre-group questionnaire regarding parental confidence, knowledge, behaviour and attitudes was collected by the group facilitator
- Post-course assessment
 - At the end of the final session parents self-completed or facilitator-administered a post-group questionnaire was collected by the group facilitator
 - General course evaluation forms were also completed by participants and collected by the group facilitator
- Additional clinical data collected by facilitators
 - Paper records and/or photos from each group of *seeds of wisdom tree, the house of love and kindness, Why Am I Here?* , participants' de-identified worksheets and *Reflections*.
 - A record of the number of parents attending each week at each group (no names)
- Record of a focus group discussion with My Kids and Me group facilitators
- Follow-up telephone interviews with consenting participants who completed the course no less than 6 months prior

ANALYSIS

Intake Interview

Prior to undertaking the My Kids and Me course, CatholicCare staff conduct an Intake Interview to assess potential participants' circumstances and suitability for entering the course (see Appendix 2). Responses given to questions asked at the intake interview were reviewed and the proportions of similar responses were noted to build a picture of those participating in the research.

Questionnaires (Pre/Post)

At the beginning of the course, group participants were asked to answer two questions (*Why are you taking part? What do you hope to get out of this course?*) and rank their level of agreement with twelve statements regarding parental confidence, knowledge, behaviour and attitudes. At the end of the course, group participants were asked to answer three questions (*What was most helpful? What was least helpful? Any improvements needed?*), give additional comments, and rank their level of agreement with the same twelve statements provided at the beginning of the course (see Appendix 3).

A thematic analysis was conducted on the responses to all five questions so similarities and differences could be identified. The levels of agreement with the twelve statements at the beginning of the course were contrasted with those provided upon conclusion of the course. Statistical analyses (T-tests) were conducted where possible to determine if there was any statistically significant change.

Clinical Activities

During the weekly group sessions different techniques are used to instigate discussion and promote learning. Some exercises in the first and last sessions involved recording the answers given to direct questions such as: *What do you want to get out of the group? What do you want to be different at the end of the group? How did you decide to come to the group? What would my children say about me if they knew I had done this group? What advice would you give other parents whose children are in care? What am I doing differently? What have I learnt from the past 6 weeks?* Other exercises are:

- Seeds of Wisdom (weekly) – participants write what they have learnt from that week and stick the seeds to a tree for discussion.
- Myths and Myth Busting – a list of myths surrounding parents who have had their children removed is developed and contrasted to corresponding realities.
- My Strengths; Warning Signs of Stress – positive personal characteristics are identified; how to identify warning signs of stress and deal with the triggers are taught.
- Building a House with Love and Kindness – the elements needed to create an ideal home are listed, drawn and discussed using the metaphor of a house (boundaries, foundation, 'coping' bricks)
- The Butterfly – explanations of grief and loss (the Black Hole); that coping is circular as triggers send you back into that black hole. Identifying and addressing these triggers is discussed.

Visual records of some exercises are developed from participants' input to maintain engagement and focus (e.g. tree to which Seeds of Wisdom are added). Whilst the Butterfly activity did not produce collectable data this appeared to be an important activity for participants as it seemed to help them understand their experiences of grief and loss. The data from these clinical activities was examined.

Anonymous Feedback

CatholicCare staff collect feedback from participants attending any of the group programs offered. At present there are two generic feedback forms in use that both ask for additional comments but utilise different statements when asking *“How has your situation changed since you started using the service? For each of the following statements, please mark if you agree or disagree (or don’t know)”* (see below). The responses were collated and presented in the report.

CatholicCare Sydney used the following statements:

- a. I know more about how to help and support my child/ren to develop
- b. I would recommend this service to others
- c. I am more confident about finding and going to family services
- d. My relationship with my children has improved

CatholicCare Wollongong used the following statements:

- a. I have new skills and knowledge to use in my family relationships
- b. I am satisfied with the service I receive
- c. I am more confident about finding and going to family services
- d. I feel better able to cope or deal with my issues

Facilitator Focus Group

A focus group discussion was conducted by the researchers with ten group facilitators after completion of the final group from which data was collected (29 April 2013). The discussion was recorded and notes of the key points were also taken by the researchers. The recording was then listened to and the notes were amended to ensure all key points were documented to create an accurate record. The topics were:

- How many MKM groups have each of you facilitated?
- What do you believe participants get out of attending the program?
- What, if any, change do you notice in attendees from the first session to the last session?
- How do you know if participants benefit from attending?
- Anything else you wish to discuss?

Follow-up Telephone Interviews

The names of participants who had attended My Kids and Me at least six months previously were placed into a hat from which six were drawn. Each of the names drawn was contacted by CatholicCare staff and asked if they consented to be interviewed by a researcher. Three were not able to be reached so three more names were drawn. The researcher then rang these six consenting participants at their preferred time and day to conduct a brief interview. Five were able to be contacted and interviewed. The discussion points were:

- What do you remember most about My Kids and Me?
- Can you recall what ‘thing’ you chose to change? Have you changed?
- Please tell me what impact the program has had on you?
- What, if anything, is different for you since completing the program?
- Would you recommend others to attend? Why or Why not?
- Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about?

A content analysis was conducted utilising the researcher’s notes from the interviews to identify similarities and differences in parent responses.

RESULTS

Participants (Intake Interview)

Data was gathered from 38 participants who attended a total of seven courses: four in Sydney and three in Wollongong. As several participants did not attend all group sessions, it is important to note that some data is missing; therefore findings should be interpreted with caution. The majority of participants were female who had one or more children in out of home care. Their children were aged between less than 12 months and 16 years old. The length of time they had been in out of home care ranged from less than six months up to 16 years. Two parents had unsupervised access with their children while twenty-four had supervised access and one had no contact.

Participants reported dealing with multiple and complex issues. While some data was missing; adult substance abuse (13), domestic violence (11) and mental illness (9) were most commonly recorded as the reasons why children were removed from the care of the parents participating in the My Kids and Me course. Interestingly child abuse and/or neglect were only mentioned four times.

At intake four parents identified having trouble with reading/writing in English (two had learning disabilities), nine mentioned mental health difficulties and seven mentioned drug and alcohol issues. Four parents reported domestic violence and two reported having current family court matters. Five parents were separated or said the father was not involved.

Sixteen had children in short term care, nine had children in long term care and six were still involved in court processes and proceedings. Eleven had children in kinship care. One parent had children who were moving to their 11th placement. At the time their parent(s) attended the My Kids and Me course, ten children had been in care for less than six months, eight for between 7 and 12 months, seven for between 13 and 24 months and five for between 25 months and 16 years.

During the intake interview, potential participants are asked questions to assess whether they are 'group-ready'. To clarify any unrealistic or unfounded expectations parents are asked what they understand that My Kids and Me is about. At intake, 12 parents mentioned that the group had been recommended to them and 20 had some idea of the content. The fact that ten mentioned that they had been directly referred to the group (or had it recommended to them) and that two mentioned an indirect recommendation suggests the My Kids and Me course is known about and thought enough of to recommend it to parents who have had their children removed.

The main reasons these parents gave for participating were to:

- improve parenting
- understand their children's feelings
- manage their children better
- improve themselves
- get their children back

Below are some of the responses provided when asked 'What is your understanding of this group?'

- *Understand about myself and my child and understand my children more.*
- *Provide me with better coping skills with the overall situation for my kids and for myself.*
- *Doing everything I can so children can come home. Learn to deal with what's happened and what my children are going through. Want to be a better mother.*

- *Will be able to relate to it more than to other parenting courses.*
- *Want to learn as much as I can to be a better parent because I've never had any parenting - in and out of foster care so raised myself and have picked things up along the way.*

Expectations and Feedback (Pre/Post Questionnaires)

Once parents were accepted as participants in My Kids and Me they were asked to answer some further questions at the initial group session and at the end of the program. In response to the question 'Why are you taking part?' only nine mentioned the Department of Community Services or DoCS (now Family and Community Services) or getting their children back. The majority wanted to increase their understanding, knowledge and skills in relation to their children, their parenting and their particular situation.

Some responses include:

- *Better understanding of what has happened and hopefully learn something that I can use in the future.*
- *Support, education and development.*
- *For more understanding and communication skills with the emotional and mental side of being removed for my children and me.*
- *To better myself for my daughter so I can be a better parent.*

When asked 'What do you hope to get out of the course?' responses include:

- *Learn new techniques.*
- *Support, direction and the skills to be a good parent.*
- *An understanding with my children and an understanding within myself*
- *A good understanding of the situation I'm in. Hope for the future.*

At the end of the course, participants were asked to identify what was most helpful and least helpful and what could be improved. There were more responses to most helpful than to least helpful. For many the most helpful aspects matched what they had hoped to get out of attending. The responses about what was most helpful could be grouped into those that demonstrated increased awareness and those that appreciated the practical support gained - many cited both. The tangible legal information provided was considered helpful, as was the group format, the encouragement from the facilitators, the understanding gained and the skills and strategies learnt.

Some responses about what was most helpful include:

- *Realising how important we are to our children whether they are coming home or not*
- *Legal advice, finding out more about myself*
- *Getting a better understanding of what I need to change about me so that so that I can be more assertive and empowering for those around me especially for my kids*
- *The relevance of what I'm going through. Bonding with the other parents - great group! The structure and the trained, efficient facilitators.*

Not many had other than positive responses to a question about what was least helpful? Some examples include *nothing, it was all good and it was too short.* Other responses that may be of interest include: *'People missing some weeks was a bit distracting because they would be lost and ask questions'* and *'Cause I haven't seen my step kids, I can't apply some of the work I learnt.'*

Most participants did not feel that My Kids and Me needed improvement. The few parents who made suggestions were most often requesting more of certain aspects of the course e.g. more time to share your story, more fun activities, a booklet to keep papers together, offered in more locations and for an extended period. Additional comments include:

- *My view for these statements has changed since seven weeks ago a lot of things I now have more insight too it has been very helpful for me I really enjoyed it.*
- *I am hopeful*
- *This was an insightful course that parents should do in our situation to understand a lot more*

Analysis of the anonymous feedback sheets collected by CatholicCare staff identified that at the end of the courses conducted in Sydney, all participants in each group agreed that as a result of the help they received, they:

- *know more about how to help and support [their] child/ren to develop;*
- *would recommend this service to others; and*
- *[are] more confident about finding and going to family services.*

All but seven agreed that their relationship with their child/ren has improved.

Upon conclusion of the courses in Wollongong, all participants in each group agreed that they:

- *have new skills and knowledge to use in [their] family relationships;*
- *[are] satisfied with the service [they] receive;*
- *[are] more confident about finding and going to family services; and*
- *feel better able to cope or deal with [their] issues.*

Parents' Confidence, Knowledge, Behaviour, and Attitudes

At both the first and last session of the My Kids and Me course, parents were asked to rate their level of agreement to 12 statements regarding their confidence, knowledge, behaviour and attitudes (Table 1). When responses to these statements were combined to produce an overall scale, a statistically significant positive change was evident¹.

Further investigation of the individual statements yielded a statistically significant positive change in responses to statement seven (*I know what I must to do get on better with my child/children's carer*).

When assessing the statements individually, small shifts in the positive direction can be seen. Parents continued to agree that being a parent is important to them and stronger levels of agreement that their *child is being looked after well* and that they *have the necessary skills to be able to relate well to [their] child/children* (statements 6 and 12).

More parents wanted to *improve how [they] relate to departmental workers* (statement 2) after completing the My Kids and Me course than at the beginning. A growth in understanding that the *departmental worker is trying to help [their] child/children* (statement 10) can also be seen. After completing the course, fewer parents had a strong feeling that the *departmental worker is not on [their] side* (statement 8) and more felt like their *side of the story is heard when [they] tell it* (statement 5).

¹ Statement 3 (*Caring for children is difficult*) was not included in this overall scale as the direction of the response sought was not the same as for the other statements. The looked for change in direction was for responses to move from either extreme of the scale towards the middle.

As depicted in Table 1 there appears to be some increase in parents' understanding that their *behaviour affects [their] child/children* (statement 9). Interestingly, some parents who originally agreed that they *need to make some changes in [their] life to improve [their] relationship with [their] child/children* (statement 4) shifted towards a more neutral position after completing the course. This could mean parents feel they have made those changes since the start of the course. Parents also shifted their responses away from the extremes of the scale (strongly agree or disagree) when answering *caring for children is difficult* (statement 3).

Although responses vary, more parents strongly agreed that they *know what [they] must do to get on with [their] child/children's carer* (statement 7) and wanted to *improve how [they] relate to their child/children's carer* (statement 11).

It should be remembered that any change in levels of agreement with these statements could indicate a self-described shift in thinking that has occurred with the seven weeks of the My Kids and Me course (MKM).

Table 1. Parent's confidence, knowledge, behaviour and attitudes before and after attending MKM (%)

Statements	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neither		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2
1. Being a parent is important to me	0	0	0	0	0	0	5.4	3.6	94.6	96.4
2. I want to improve how I relate to departmental workers ^a	0	0	0	0	16.7	7.1	44.4	53.5	38.9	39.3
3. Caring for children is difficult	16.2	7.1	8.1	25	37.8	35.7	35.1	25	2.7	7.1
4. I need to make some changes in my life to improve my relationship with my child/children ^b	2.9	0	0	7.1	28.6	25	34.3	46.4	34.3	21.4
5. I feel like my side of the story is heard when I tell it	8.1	0	27	21.4	27	46.4	24.3	21.4	13.5	10.7
6. My child is being looked after well ^c	2.7	7.4	16.2	0	16.2	33.3	46	25.9	18.9	33.3
7. I know what I must do to get on better with my child/children's carer ^b	0	3.6	8.6	0	37.1	35.7	37.1	28.6	17.1	32.1
8. The departmental worker is not on my side	5.4	21.4	8.1	14.3	40.5	39.3	29.7	10.7	16.2	14.3
9. I understand that my behaviour affects my child/children ^a	2.8	0	2.8	0	5.6	3.6	27.8	25	61.1	71.4
10. I understand that the departmental worker is trying to help my child/children ^a	0	10.7	16.7	0	22.2	21.4	38.9	35.7	22.2	32.1
11. I want to improve how I relate to my child/children's carer ^c	0	0	2.7	0	27	29.6	43.2	37	27	33.3
12. I have the necessary skills to be able to relate well to my child/ children	0	0	2.7	0	13.5	0	27	39.3	56.8	60.7

Note: T1 N=37; T2 N=28

^a T1 N=36; ^b T1 N=35; ^c T2 N=27

Facilitator Focus Group Discussion

There were ten facilitators present at a discussion that lasted a little over two hours. Seven had facilitated between one and eight groups, one had only observed and two had both co-facilitated and observed.

When discussing what they thought the participants get from attending the course, the facilitators mentioned:

- Acceptance (*Allows barriers to break down so information can get in and the learning process can occur*)
- Valued (*Given a voice; parents pleased to be involved in the evaluation*)
- Not alone (*Shared experience was comforting; others' experience was often worse than theirs*)
- Take on more responsibility (*Ownership of what's happened and why they're where they are*)
- Openness (*Can be challenged by facilitators and peers*)
- Sense of safety (*Group members feel safe to engage by challenging each other. Facilitators are in a position to challenge after earning the parents' confidence*)

All the things mentioned by the facilitators were reinforced by the statements and feedback from participants.

What characteristics/qualities/skills do facilitators need?

Facilitators felt that conducting pre-assessment interviews is a very important skill as parents need to be 'group-ready' to be able to benefit from attendance.

The mindset of the facilitator is considered to be very important. The desired qualities included the ability to be comfortable in discomfort, prepared, brave, have exceptional communication skills, able to build healthy relationships, a good role model (e.g. how to be assertive without being aggressive), able to co-facilitate, non-defensive, open, humble, kind and caring, able to repair broken trust. They must feel safe, go at the same pace as the participants, able to absorb emotions slowly, have the patience to wait, be calm, flexible, balanced, have a sense of humour and not be precious. They should be outraged by the parents' situations and their treatment by other professionals. They need to be able to hold conflicting drives, be a capable educator and be assertive with time-scheduling to bring parents back to the point. Facilitators must use an adult education approach to reflect dignity, self-care and self-worth and they must be passionate about My Kids and Me.

Supervision is necessary to 'hold' them so facilitators are supported when they are 'hanging over edge' with the participants. Energy and renewal is very important as is their use of 'we' not 'you'.

Are participants told that they won't necessarily get their children back?

Participants are informed about the purpose of the group so they know that they may not get their kids back. It is explored during intake and first week. They are supported to maintain their relationships regardless of the outcome with DoCS. *We don't want to crush hope at the same time we are careful not to promise what we can't deliver.* During the course parents learn that they are significant to their children and have a role to play whether they get them back or not.

Restoration is not the focus of My Kids and Me however parenting identity is important

Why are they told to go to parenting groups? What underpins that? Why do people do that?

The facilitators felt that workers don't have anything else they can do with them as there are no services for parents whose children have been removed so they are told to go to parenting groups. They don't know where else to go, they don't know what's available or suitable. *People are punitive to parents whose children are removed.*

Information is sent back to DoCS with parent permission only when there is a healthy relationship with the DoCS worker.

What other changes do you notice in the parents?

Facilitators noticed that parents take little steps e.g. dressing in the way that the facilitator is dressed. They also refer to group activities and how they are relevant in their lives; e.g. the 'butterfly' moments are discussed outside the group during coffee break. The parents seem to move from dreading the future to 'what's next?' The impact of AOD/DV on parenting gets recognised and retained e.g. a woman linked her learning about this to her second child although that child had not been removed. It was felt that this growth of insight occurs over time as the learning is multi-dimensional and participant communication improves.

The facilitators felt that parents worry about their children forgetting about them. *When your kids have been removed there's nowhere you can go to brag about them without being judged.* It was thought that showing photos of their children in session six allows them to brag even though the kids aren't with them.

Couples who are participating in the course together can grasp concepts in different ways. Facilitators had to manage this as they felt it can affect group dynamics.

In one couple the father came out of a black depression and the mother learnt to keep her thoughts to herself during the course. When they got their kids back from permanent care they told the other participants. This reinforced the hope message.

Facilitators particularly noticed the following in the participants over the duration of the course:

- Help to pack up
- Confidence grows
- Homework gets done
- Improved punctuality (e.g. return from smoko on time)
- Friendships are built and sustained
- Participants are willing to stay longer
- Became respectful of the group process
- Take away their work to show and learn from it
- Take-away memory joggers to remind them of learning
- Demonstrate insight about the change in their behaviour
- Able to challenge behaviour outside the group as insight has grown
- Show hopefulness (e.g. they can think of things to do differently)
- Dress up for last session
- Ring facilitators/thank them
- Gave facilitators individualised gifts
- Ask permission to recommend the course (e.g. can I tell my friend?)
- One angry participant seemed less angry once DV issue was clarified

- Swear less/moderate language (changed language through practice and obeying the standards set)
- Participants feed-back each week about their learning (e.g. about having positive/assertive conversations)
- Discuss possibility of counselling (recognition of the need for support may be linked to the nurture experienced from My Kids and Me)
- Have better relationships with DoCS (e.g. Facilitator told by one participant how they didn't abuse DoCS but talked assertively and asked questions)

These indicate themes around self-growth/confidence, socialisation and roles and responsibilities.

Follow-up telephone interviews

Five parents who completed the My Kids and Me course more than six months ago were interviewed by the researcher. They all had extremely positive things to say both about their experiences of the course and the facilitators. Many common themes were evident in the conversations which reflect those mentioned above. They:

- felt supported (*...it helped knowing that people cared. Many who attend lack support*)
- felt that My Kids and Me was motivating, educational and that the legal information was useful (*It wasn't confusing and the people were nice*)
- didn't feel embarrassed to ask, they felt comfortable in a supportive environment which was *not pressured but calm*.
- found the facilitators to be knowledgeable and understanding (*They don't judge but treat everyone equally. Instructors were wonderful*)
- learnt self-control, to stay positive and to believe in themselves (*Be confident as your children are still there and there's always a chance they will come back*).
- Learnt to be assertive and became able to move away from anger (*I don't start with a negative view now, am more open*)
- became able to acknowledge that help was needed and were able to get it
- learnt that it is necessary to look after themselves (*Things happened which you can't undo so make a new start*)

These parents had learnt a lot from My Kids and Me. They remembered and used things such as *myths about kids in care no longer being your responsibility, the three paths: revenge/feel sorry for self/fight back and building a happy home and the things needed to build one*. The butterfly symbol was recalled as they found it very useful.

They gained a better understanding about how to communicate with their children, about their feelings and the importance of maintaining a bond with them (*No matter what, you are their mum*).

I am different since completing MKM. My child returned and I am being straight, dealing with my own feelings, I was taught to be kind to myself. Learnt about paths so my decisions are clearer; I can choose to change direction and know what's going to happen.

For these parents, being in a group with others in similar circumstances was a great environment. It was comfortable, easier for sharing feelings, hearing problems and successes. They were able to listen to others' stories and learn from them.

All these interviewees said they *most definitely would recommend it*.

Rather than think you can never win, you can! Be positive; makes you feel not alone.

Things are much better; there is hope out there and help.

Clinical data

The activities employed throughout the My Kids and Me course engage parents in ways that build on parents' sequential learning from each weekly session. Reflection and repetition are used to embed learning. Seeds of Wisdom are useful written reminders of things that have been covered in discussion which can become tangible evidence of growing insight that accumulates over the seven weeks.

The butterfly symbol struck a chord for many participants some of whom mentioned it in the follow-up telephone interview many months after they had completed the course. The strength of the symbol seems to stem from its ability to go through stages of development from unattractive to beautiful without being violent or angry. Such transformation highlights the potential for change to be not only positive but also to be within reach. Hope for a better future grows from this and is continually reinforced within the group. Participants feel supported to make a new start.

Responses to the Seeds of Wisdom activity reflect the content of each week's session. In week one the comments were about dispelling myths, releasing negative thoughts, the journey of change parents are going on and that they are not alone – others are going through the same thing. Hope is evident in these responses. Week two responses included ones about addressing grief, reflection, regulating emotions, being emotionally available for and interacting well with their children, accepting the past and moving forward. The Butterfly task was a feature in a few of these responses.

In week three, parents expressed feelings of hope and belief, learning relaxation techniques and letting go of guilt, shame, resentment, anger, stress, identifying signs of stress and being on the Hope Pathway. Week four was all about improving communication skills, being flexible, assertive and learning self-control. *Information is power* in week five which was all about legal aid, record keeping and understanding the legal issues they are facing.

In weeks five and six, responses reflected emotion coaching and being aware of their children's feelings and how this situation is impacting on them, being positive, confident, and committed to change. Self-care was also evident throughout responses in all weeks (e.g. *love yourself to be able to love others, do things to help stay relaxed, there are things I can do to help me cope*).

In the final week of the group, participants are asked a series of questions about what they have learnt, what they are doing differently and what advice they would give to other parents in a similar situation.

Parents noted positive changes in their own behaviour such as being more assertive, putting what they've learnt into action, looking at the situation from different perspectives, being polite and managing their emotions, improving their communication, thinking positively and about what their children are going through. Some key responses include:

- *Think, look, listen; communicating with others better, showing less emotion, remembering good things, looking from a different perspective*
- *Being kinder to myself and putting into practice what I have learnt in the group. Not just to my son, in general everyday life*
- *I've changed the way I think about DoCS and I also realise that my decisions impact my children*

- *Stressing less about my current situation. Thinking before what I say*
- *Letting go of the things I can't change and accepting the past and forgiving myself*

One participant didn't think they were doing anything differently, however they stated *I have found the support and information I have received amazing – great group.*

Parents reported that within the previous six weeks of the course they had learnt positive communication, parenting and coping skills, how to manage their emotions, to set small goals and manage one day at a time.

I have learnt to take time to reflect and appreciate all the good/positive goals you have achieved during the time your baby's been in care, also I've learnt more communication skills, how to deal with sad emotions before turning angry and erupting and also emotions, especially with young kids/babies

Key responses include:

- *How to control my anger when speaking to DoCS. Learned to listen, to stop, think and act.*
- *Negativity will get you nowhere, think positively. Take care of yourself so you can give your kids 100%*
- *Learned how to speak/talk to people with confidence/ learned to listen to them without being angry*
- *No matter what, I will always be very important to my children*
- *Learned how to talk to my son so he understands me*

One participant expressed their appreciation for the activities they participated in during the course:

I appreciate the Tree of Life, The House of Love and Kindness, and also Listen, Stop and Act and doing something for myself.

I can't change the past. Everyone makes mistakes it's what you do in the present to not make the same mistake in the future.

When asked what advice they would give to other parents whose children are in care, participants left messages of support, courage, hope, determination and persistence as well as practical tips about record-keeping, communication, emotion regulation, personal improvement and self-care. Key responses included:

- *Get on the hope pathway ASAP and do all the positive things and more; possible to prove you are the great parent that you are. Show you truly have insight*
- *Get help, work on your faults, take care of yourself, get informed and well prepared, keep records and don't give up*
- *Do parenting courses, be positive, clean your act up, stop thinking about yourself and start changing your life for your kids*
- *Help others gain the confidence you have gained, approach a parenting program if they can. How important it is to keep your kids*
- *To stay positive and remember every day is a new day and take one step at a time*
- *Acting angry towards DoCS won't change anything, if anything it makes it worse*
- *Be patient and assertive as this will help you achieve your short and long term goals*
- *Don't give up, there's always hope, if you don't succeed first time try again and again*

Do this course! It's very good. It will give you more tools to deal with everything (your kids)

CONCLUSION

The My Kids and Me course offered by CatholicCare in Sydney and Wollongong is a seven week course for parents whose children have been removed from their care. These parents have not only lost their children but also their identity as a parent. These parents are frequently advised to go to parenting courses to improve themselves yet many are not tailored to the particular needs of parents whose children are in statutory care. Previous research revealed that mainstream parenting programs are not suitable for parents involved in child protection systems for a myriad of reasons including reduced opportunities to practice the skills learnt (Salveron, Lewig, & Arney, 2009). My Kids and Me is specifically tailored to parents who have had their children removed.

It is evident in the data gathered from My Kids and Me participants that these parents are not only damaged but are often angry and distrustful. For many their identity as parents has been significantly challenged and they struggle with how to deal with the loss. The intense feelings these parents express need to be acknowledged. It seems that My Kids and Me allows this to happen in a safe and contained way. The skills that the group facilitators use are recognised and highly valued by the participants. Being part of a group in which others share the same experience of having their children removed was positively commented on by many.

The significant transformation which many of these parents undergo is an unexpected result from what is after all only a very limited amount of time spent in a group program. The results appear to stem from a combination of skilled facilitators, powerful motivation, being with others in a similar situation and a willingness to apply what has been learnt. The five parents who were contacted for follow-up interviews all highly recommended the course.

Evidence of individual change in parental confidence, knowledge, behaviour and attitude was provided by both the parents and the facilitators. Facilitators noticed that parents demonstrated insight about change in their behaviour; they challenged behaviour outside the group; became more confident; built friendships that are sustained long after the course finishes; and developed better relationships with DoCS.

Small increases in knowledge and confidence were observed in parents' changed responses to 12 statements upon completing the course. Small improvements in behaviour and attitudes were also evident. Increased insight and understanding about the changes made or still need to make are obvious in the comments provided. Clinical data from activities undertaken each week also provide evidence of change in awareness. Parents who were interviewed indicated that the My Kids and Me course afforded a comfortable and supportive environment that was motivating and educational. They mentioned that they learnt self-control; to stay positive and believe in themselves; to be assertive; and to acknowledge that help is needed and know where to get it.

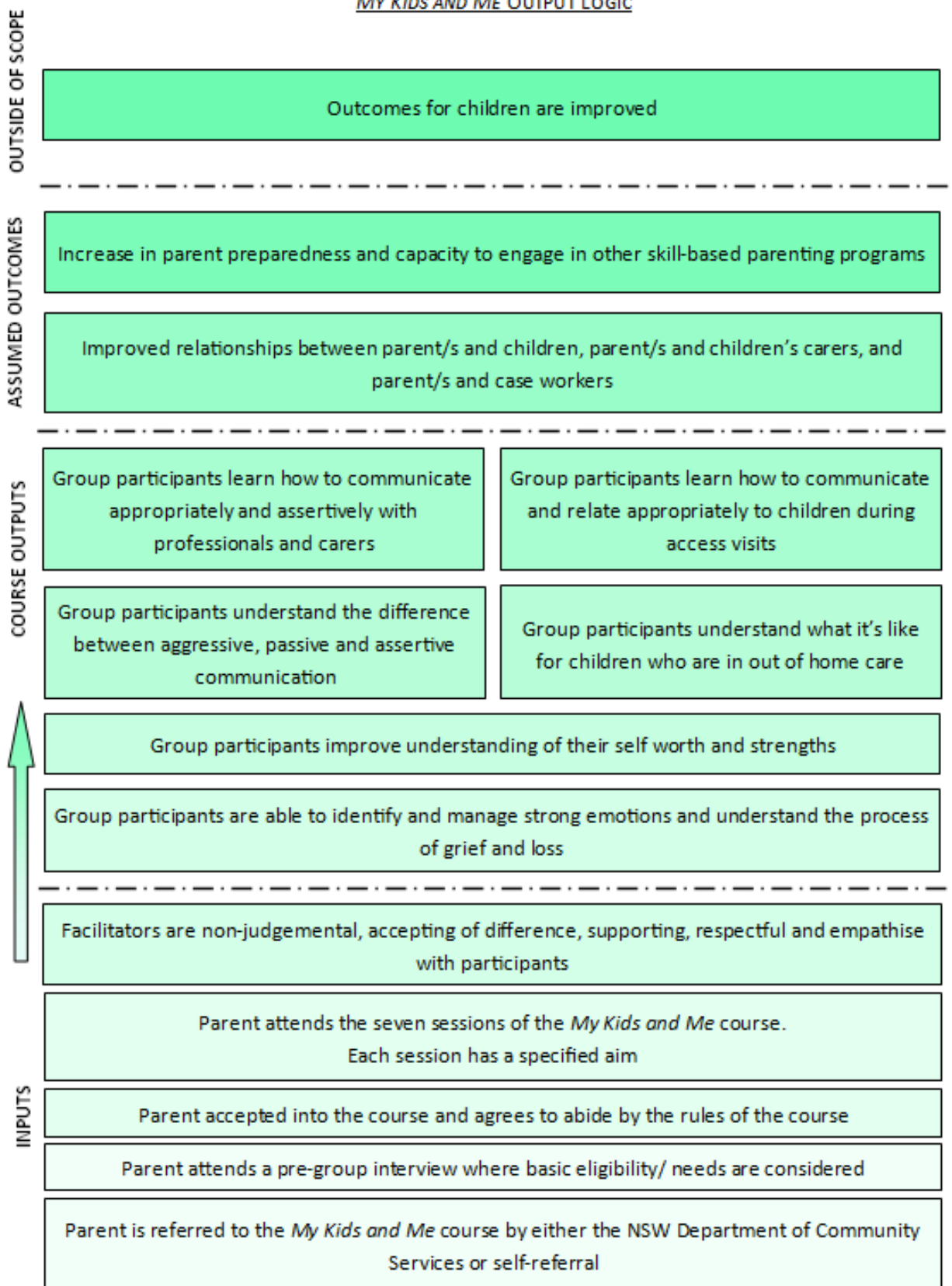
Whilst the changes observed appear small, they are major steps these parents have made in a short amount of time. The process of self-recovery requires internal drive which involves parents thinking positively, accepting their responsibility in the removal of their children, learning to manage and control their emotions and reviving their will while holding onto the hope of having their children returned (Salveron, 2012). It is imperative that parents receive positive external support to initiate this process of self-recovery.

The My Kids and Me course offers positive external support tailored to the needs of parents whose children have been removed from their care. It provides a springboard from which parents can confidently move forward on the path of self-improvement and identity reconstruction to achieve the best possible outcome for themselves and ultimately better care for their children.

REFERENCES

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MY KIDS AND ME OUTPUT LOGIC



APPENDIX 2. PARTICIPANT INTAKE FORM

My Kids and Me: Pre-group interview. Client Name:

Name of interviewer:	Sign:
	Date:

Preamble - We need to get some further information from you which will assist our group facilitators to best meet your needs. The personal information you provide will be regarded as confidential and will only be shared with relevant group facilitators. However for evaluation purposes some of the information gathered will be collated as statistical data but will not identify you in any way.

Who is the referral for?	<input type="checkbox"/> self <input type="checkbox"/> partner
Are there any relationship issues between you that we should be aware of?	<input type="checkbox"/> Notes:
What is your understanding of this group?	Notes:
What are your reasons for attending / your motivation?	Notes:
How long have your children been in care?	
Type of care?	ST <input type="checkbox"/> LT <input type="checkbox"/> Kinship <input type="checkbox"/>
Tell me your understanding of why you children were placed in OOHC	DV <input type="checkbox"/> Is there an AVO? <input type="checkbox"/> CA & or neglect <input type="checkbox"/> Substance abuse issues <input type="checkbox"/> Mental health Issues <input type="checkbox"/> Homelessness <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Notes:
What are the current contact arrangements between you and your children?	Days Times: Supervised <input type="checkbox"/> Unsupervised <input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have any health issues that may impact on your participation?	D&A issues <input type="checkbox"/> Mental Health issues <input type="checkbox"/> Physical health constraints <input type="checkbox"/> Learning Disability <input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have other commitments that may impact on your participation?	Medical <input type="checkbox"/> TAFE / Study <input type="checkbox"/> Counselling <input type="checkbox"/> Work <input type="checkbox"/>
Will you require assistance with reading and or writing?	<input type="checkbox"/> Notes:
Referral Outcome	Accepted <input type="checkbox"/> Accepted but on waiting list <input type="checkbox"/> Declined <input type="checkbox"/> Reason (Notes)
You will be attending this group at (site),(date commencing),(Time)	Confirmation letter sent <input type="checkbox"/>



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An Evaluation of 'My Kids and Me'

Pre-Group Questionnaire

Note:

Participation is voluntary.

*You do **NOT** have to complete this questionnaire if you do not wish to.*

Date: _____

Participant ID: _____ (e.g. for Ms Parker, born May 1990: ID = PA0590)
(First two letters of your last name, month (mm) and year (yy) of birth)

NB: *This keeps your answers anonymous and helps us to compare information provided before the course with information provided after completing the course.*

PLEASE TURN OVER

Your answers to the following questions will assist us to evaluate the impact of the 'My Kids and Me' course.

1. *Why are you taking part in the 'My Kids and Me' course?*

2. *What do you hope to get out of this course?*

3. *Please circle how strongly you agree with the following statements:*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Being a parent is important to me	1	2	3	4	5
I want to improve how I relate to departmental workers.	1	2	3	4	5
Caring for children is difficult.	1	2	3	4	5
I need to make some changes in my life to improve my relationship with my child/children.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel like my side of the story is heard when I tell it.	1	2	3	4	5
My child is being looked after well.	1	2	3	4	5
I know what I must do to get on better with my child/children's carer.	1	2	3	4	5
The departmental worker is not on my side.	1	2	3	4	5
I understand that my behaviour affects my child/children.	1	2	3	4	5
I understand that the departmental worker is trying to help my child/children.	1	2	3	4	5
I want to improve how I relate to my child/children's carer.	1	2	3	4	5
I have the necessary skills to be able to relate well to my child/children.	1	2	3	4	5

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE

An Evaluation of 'My Kids and Me'

Post-Group Questionnaire

Date: _____

Participant ID: _____ (e.g. for Ms Parker, born May 1990: ID = PA0590)
(First two letters of your last name, month (mm) and year (yy) of birth)

NB: This keeps your answers anonymous and helps us to compare information provided before the course with information provided after completing the course.

Your answers to the following questions will help show the impact of the 'My Kids and Me' course.

1. What was the most helpful/ useful part of the 'My Kids and Me' course?

2. What was the least helpful/ useful part of the 'My Kids and Me' course?

3. What could be done to improve the 'My Kids and Me' course?

PLEASE TURN OVER

4. Please circle how strongly you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Being a parent is important to me	1	2	3	4	5
I want to improve how I relate to departmental workers.	1	2	3	4	5
Caring for children is difficult.	1	2	3	4	5
I need to make some changes in my life to improve my relationship with my child/children.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel like my side of the story is heard when I tell it.	1	2	3	4	5
My child is being looked after well.	1	2	3	4	5
I know what I must do to get on better with my child/children's carer.	1	2	3	4	5
The departmental worker is not on my side.	1	2	3	4	5
I understand that my behaviour affects my child/children.	1	2	3	4	5
I understand that the departmental worker is trying to help my child/children.	1	2	3	4	5
I want to improve how I relate to my child/children's carer.	1	2	3	4	5
I have the necessary skills to be able to relate well to my child/children.	1	2	3	4	5

5. Any other comments?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS EVALUATION OF 'MY KIDS AND ME'.