The Use of Protective Behaviours when Dealing with Child Witnesses

DISCUSSION GROUP C

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Protective Behaviours is a program designed to empower children to protect themselves in difficult situations.

Being a witness in a courtroom is a very difficult situation for children to cope with. Whether or not the child is a victim of abuse, the experience is not easy. If they are a victim of abuse then the ordeal can be even more traumatic.

Protective Behaviours teaches children that they have a right to feel safe at all times and that nothing is so awful that they cannot talk to someone about it.

Three Key Concepts

The Program is based on three key concepts:

Safety

The child is taught to differentiate between situations when it is appropriate to feel scared (for example watching a horror movie) and those when it is not.

Early warning signs

The child is taught to recognise how they feel through their 'early warning signs' (that is their body's reactions to feeling unsafe) for example rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms or 'jelly legs'. Once the child has learnt to recognise their 'early warning signs' they can then identify when they are in an unsafe situation.
Networking

The concept of networking is used to encourage victims to prevent abuse actively and to seek the help they require effectively. The child is encouraged to identify and establish a network of adult contacts to whom they can confide or ask for assistance or help when they are feeling unsafe. These adults have to be the choice of the child.

If a child is going to be a witness in court they need to have an established network, mainly of professionals who are involved with the case. If the child has these adults then they will feel safer knowing that they are understood. The child will be told that if they have their early warning signs about the court hearing, they can contact their network people at any time.

To implement the core concepts of the program, five strategies are implemented:

Theme reinforcement: The two themes of the program: 'We all have a right to be safe all the time', and 'Nothing is so awful we can't talk about it' are continually reinforced throughout the teaching of the program.

Network review: The personal network list of adults selected by the child must be regularly reviewed to ensure that these persons are still available and suitable to assist the child.

It is particularly important to do this when the child has finished going through the court system, as the professionals who were involved with the case are no longer involved, and the child now needs to look for other people to whom they can turn for assistance.

One step removed: This strategy makes use of hypothetical questioning, in teaching the concepts, such as 'What could you do if . . . ' or 'My friend has a problem . . . what should they do?' It can be of use in preparing the child for the actual court procedure by brainstorming and exploring options and resources with the child for example 'Suppose you get asked a question that you do not understand - what can you do?' The child should explore the options.

Protective interrupting: This strategy is mainly used in group sessions rather than just with a child witness alone. It is the process of preventing the child self-disclosing in an inappropriate context. Although the child has been protected in one instance by interruption, it is important that the issues are followed up at a later stage.

Persistence expectation: This final strategy is used to encourage children who have talked to someone on their network list but still feel unsafe (perhaps due to inaction on the part of their network contact), to keep trying other people on their network until they feel safe again.

Conclusion and Resolutions

The Protective Behaviours Program can be adapted to prevent children from becoming victims of abuse and also to empower them to come forward if they are in an abusive situation. It is also of use for children who are witnesses in a court of law.

To assist child witnesses overcoming a child's automatic responses to authority through the use of protective behaviours program, the group resolved:

- that children should be educated about their rights and how to exercise them;
- that children should be empowered to protect themselves both in and out of court;
• that prevention programs should be introduced to children through the education system or other professional organisations;
• that all children need a network of people to whom they can go if they are not feeling safe.

Reference