



Boys Town Engadine

A Family Preservation Programme

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview and analysis of the Boys' Town programme, a family preservation service in Sydney, Australia. The programme is designed to provide sustainable, strengths based and solutions focussed interventions for families in crisis. The service provides both educational programmes (as a registered school) and welfare programmes (accommodation, counselling, behavioural support, social and emotional support), with the aim of positively re-engaging young people with their family and with education. This paper explores the key principles on which the programme is founded and analyses preliminary data on program effectiveness. This data indicates that the programme is very successful in improving social, emotional, psychological and educational outcomes for young people. The paper then concludes with some principles for effective work with young people, based on an examination of what works in the Boys' Town model.

Key Words: Child protection, Family Services, Welfare, Adolescent Wellbeing

Introduction

Boys' Town is a unique family restoration and preservation programme for families in crisis. The service provides both educational programmes (as a registered school) and welfare programmes (accommodation, counselling, behavioural support, social and emotional support), with the aim of positively re-engaging young people with their family and with education. Importantly, the programme also focuses on helping young people (and their parents/carers) to develop critical life and social skills that will ensure long term sustainability of school and family placements.

Young people are placed in a structured, small group environment of eight students with a core and consistent group of 5 staff who are aware of issues that are affecting the child (and therefore his/her education, social and emotional wellbeing and behaviour); one teacher, a life skills and social educator, a family services worker (counsellor) and two residential workers who support boys in their residential units. The programme is designed as a short term intervention rather than a long term placement, with the majority of students staying 6-12 months before moving on, through a planned and supported transition process.

Boys' Town is a registered and accredited school for students in years 7-10 (ages 12 to 16) and, as such, Boys' Town can provide students with their Year 10 NSW School Certificate. Education

is seen as the best form of welfare for the at-risk students who attend Boys' Town, with value being placed on education that stimulates enquiry, focuses on real learning gains, facilitates access and participation and is relevant to all. The programme incorporates a variety of activities and experiences alongside the traditional school curriculum, including fishing, abseiling, sewing, wheelchair basketball, city discovery walks, bush walks, woodwork, 'Streamwatch' (a water quality monitoring programme), surfing, film making, cooking, gardening, circus skills, football clinics with professional football teams and hip hop dancing.

Staff work hard to provide young people with a positive experience of education, given that the vast majority of young people at Boys' Town have had extremely negative experiences at mainstream schools. Subjects are taught in varied and creative ways and teachers cater to the individual learning needs and styles of each student in their unit. A critical part of this is building young people's confidence in their abilities, most of whom have had few experiences of success in the classroom. By teaching at students' individual levels, exposing young people to new experiences and providing opportunities to demonstrate different forms of intelligence and mastery, programme staff creates opportunities for young people to experience success and broaden their skills and thinking.

Young people who take part in the programme spend week nights at Boys' Town, in a residential unit comprised of the same boys they share classes with. Students are allocated chores and complete these daily, giving them a sense of shared responsibility in the unit and developing important life skills they can transfer to the home environment. Young people also participate in cultural and recreational activities to allow them time to relax and have fun. The residential environment simulates the home environment as much as possible and boys have access to a phone to call home whenever needed. The residential programme is fully integrated with the day programme, with staff working together to help young people achieve their goals. The residential programme is currently only open to boys, however Boys' Town is launching a pilot residential family preservation program for girls and their families. Having traditionally, and successfully, been working with boys in a residential setting, Boys' Town has recognised that there is also a vital need for such a program for girls. This view has been reinforced by the numerous enquiries we receive about placements for girls from both members of the public and our community referral partners. Like the boys' residential program, the girls' program will assist 'at risk' young girls whose families are at risk of break down and who are also experiencing difficulties in education. Boys' Town also has a day programme that is open to both boys and girls.

Client Group

Boys' Town's target client group is 12-15 year old young people who are at risk of disengagement from their family and from education or at risk of entry into statutory care through the Out-of-Home Care or Juvenile Justice systems. This includes young people in foster placements, usually long term placements, which are at risk of breaking down. Seventy-five per cent (75%) of the young people who begin at Boys' Town are non school attendees, most have mental health diagnoses and all present with behavioural, social and/or emotional difficulties. The programme works with the whole family, meaning parents and carers, and not only the young person, who are actively involved. Critically, both the young person and their principal carers must want to see changes and need to be committed to working on making those positive changes throughout the programme.

Young people who attend Boys' Town typically have a history of failure, rejection and disappointment and it is imperative that they experience Boys' Town as a positive, respectful and hos-

pitiable agency. By providing a clear and consistent environment, where choices are monitored, analysed and discussed, the Boys' Town model enables young people to experience success, establish new patterns of behaviour, improve their relationships and develop their social skills. Where poor choices result in negative consequences, guidance is offered and alternative choices are encouraged, while positive consequences and encouragement follow appropriate choices.

The Boys Town Model

The programme is informed, on a theoretical level, by the 'Preventive' approach of Don Bosco (Morrison, 1979) (never harsh or punitive, always positive, kind and forgiving) and the work of Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2001). Importantly, staff work from the belief that all young people can change for the better and promote an atmosphere of tolerance, acceptance, forgiveness and change.

The Boys' Town model can be conceptualised as an Australian Sandalwood tree, commonly known as the Quandong or native peach. This tree adapts and thrives in arid environments; not being fussy about different soil conditions and climates, nor about water quality. The Sandalwood has proved hard to domesticate; undamaged kernels find it hard to germinate while damaged kernels are vulnerable to infection. Yet, the tree is a rich source of nutrients; the fruit holds more vitamin C than an orange, the kernel contains valuable proteins and is rich in oils and Aboriginal Australians are familiar with its medicinal properties. Unfortunately, however, the plant can easily be confused with the Australian Wild Apricot, which is poisonous.

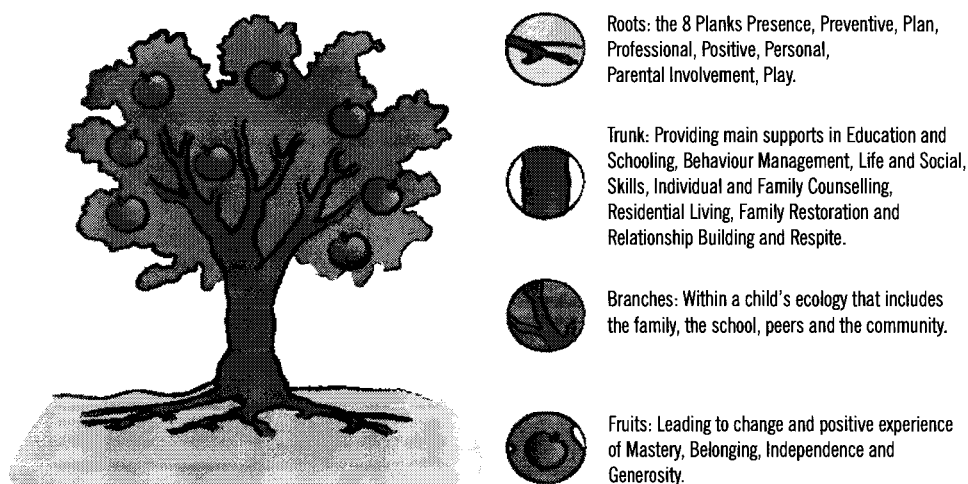


Figure 1
The Sandalwood Conception of the Boys' Town Model

The Sandalwood image reflects the ecological environment of most Boys' Town clients; one which is often harsh and arid, yet holds enormous potential for growth and fulfilment. Most of our clients have not experienced a rich and nourishing soil but have instead adapted to the situation in which they find themselves. There is damage, which can be used for growth and danger of infection because the circumstances of their families need to change. Too often, they have

tried other programmes with the poisonous outcome of the native apricot. And, they themselves are often incorrectly labelled as 'bad' kids. Yet, when treated with the apposite care and placed in the right environment, the fruit is amazingly nutritious and healing.

The Boys' Town programme is founded on eight planks (the 'roots' of the model). These planks are

1. *Presence*: While young people are participating in the programme, there is always a staff member present, participating in programme activities, role modelling appropriate behaviour, relating and building rapport, directing, teaching and, most importantly, listening. Abilities, skills and needs are recognised in an accepting and non-judgemental environment.
2. *Preventive*: The preventive approach is founded on the belief that all young people can change. This means working with young people in a way that is gentle, patient, kind and forgiving and which values the skills of listening, relating and directing. Under this system, staff are to avoid harsh punishments and instead stand beside students and encourage them, have empathy with them and help them to grow.
3. *Plan*: Staff, young people and their families work on agreed goals and from individual education plans that are developed through initial assessment meetings, case plan meetings and re-entry meetings (following incidents at Boys' Town which required a 'send-home'). Strengths cards are an important tool at these meetings, to ensure that there is still a focus on what a young person does well and how they can use their strengths to achieve their goals, rather than simply a focus on what needs to change.¹ Staff also keep each other informed and develop strategies through 'changeover' meetings twice daily, where the residential staff update the day time staff on each child's progress throughout the evening and vice versa. In a similar fashion, staff meet one on one with young people in the morning and afternoons to talk about how they are progressing and to identify areas and strategies for change.
4. *Professional*: Staff work in multi-disciplinary teams covering the therapeutic, educational and welfare domains. Teams work and plan together, share information and expertise and collaborate on strategies.
5. *Positive*: A positive behaviour management model encourages appropriate behaviour, outlines a set of clear behavioural expectations and responsibilities and respectfully addresses inappropriate behaviour. This includes a system of monitoring and recording children's behaviour, with an associated incentive based system and a clear, consistent and graded method of dealing with inappropriate behaviours. This is designed to help the young person become aware of, and responsible for, their own choices. Each unit works to create a positive environment, where students are encouraged to see their own and each others' strengths, to support each other and to understand and accept each others' differences. As a general rule, staff use a ratio of five genuine, positive comments for every negative.
6. *Personal*: The Boys' Town model focuses on individual needs and the goals and trajectory of each young person's time in the programme are unique to them. Young people must voluntarily apply for a placement at Boys Town and individual plans are then formulated which target their specific needs. Young people participate in all decision making processes and meetings which concern them and their views and needs are primary considerations. Young people have weekly individual counselling sessions and also participate in family counselling.
7. *Parental Involvement*: The Boys' Town programme identifies, promotes and facilitates the development of whole-family strengths, including the parents' skills and relationship with the young person. Parent/carer involvement is an essential part of the programme because it ensures that changes made extend to the home and, therefore, that they are more sustainable. Parents participate in fortnightly counselling, quarterly case plans, re-entry meetings as required and family night celebrations at the end of each school term. Through these meetings and counselling sessions, parents can notice the successes and development of skills of their child, learn new ways of interacting with their child and develop more positive family relationships.

8. *Play*: It is critical that young people get a chance to relax and have fun during their time at Boys' Town and staff provide a range of recreational, sporting and leisure activities to fulfil this need. Through these activities, young people also develop important social and team work skills, communication skills, and develop a sense of mastery through learning new things and developing new skills.

These planks inform and shape service delivery, from individual interactions with students to curricula development.

Building on these roots are the wraparound elements of the programme – the tree trunk. These elements are education and schooling support, life and social skills development programmes, individual and family counselling and psychological services, family restoration and respite. Crosscutting all of these elements are behaviour management systems that ensure the safety and sustainability of school placements and family relationships. This is the day to day ‘work’ of the programme, the mechanism for growth and change, underpinned by the philosophy and way of working embodied in the eight planks.

The branches represent the ecology of the child; his or her home and school environments, peers and community. A child must be situated and understood in all of these contexts to work with them effectively and in a way that achieves sustainable results. Programme staff, for example, ensure that young people maintain links with their community, continue to work on their goals at home, are supported in their transition back to mainstream (or other) education and are able to establish and function well in their peer group. The multi-disciplinary approach offered by Boys' Town allows access to more aspects of the child's ecology than a purely educational, welfare or accommodation support service can do alone. It is, thus, a truly wraparound model of service delivery.

These 3 elements; the roots, the trunk and the branches, produce the ‘fruits’ of the model – the nourishing product of each of these elements working together as a whole. The fruits, which the programme aims to develop in young people, are mastery (a sense of competence), belonging (a sense of significance), independence (a sense of personal power) and generosity (a feeling of virtue). These are borne out the ‘Circles of Courage’ model, which posits the above four domains as being critical in the development of a balanced sense of self worth (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2001).

By applying the ecological ‘whole of life’ view to a young person’s experience of these four domains (fruits), a matrix can be developed as follows.

Table 1
The Ecological View Across the Four Domains

	Home	School	Peers	Community
Mastery (Competence)				
Belonging (Significance)				
Independence (Power)				
Generosity (Virtue)				

This matrix can guide the identification of needs, goals and areas to work on. It is useful because it offers a broad and multifaceted view of change, with workers supporting young people to make real change and progress across each of the four domains, in each of the four central spheres of their life. Importantly, Boys' Town values a strengths rather than deficits-focussed approach, meaning within each of these domains there is a focus on what is working, no matter how small it may be. The programme then supports individuals and families to build upwards and outwards from those points.

Method

Boys' Town uses Friedman's (2005) evaluation framework to assess our practise, asking questions of quantity, quality, inputs and outcomes of services delivery. The framework can be represented as follows:

Table 2
Adaptation of Friedman's Evaluation Framework



The most important of these questions is; is anyone better off? Boys' Town monitors and evaluates student outcomes throughout the program in several ways in an effort to answer this question. Students' attendance and educational attainment, particularly in the area of literacy, are closely monitored. And, on entry, at 6 months and on exit, students undertake two psychological scales to provide a quantitative, standardised measure to assess psychosocial change. These are the *Achenbach* (Achenbach, 2004), an overall measure of behavioural and emotional functioning and the *Resiliency Scale for Children and Adolescents* (Prince-Embury, 2007) an assessment of the core characteristics of personal resiliency in children and adolescents. Parent and student evaluations of the program are also completed on exit. This paper drew together and analysed this data to gain an overall picture of program performance.

Results

Data from 2008 shows that, immediately following their placement, 75% of students returned to school (others found alternative education pathways or began work). In a more long term follow up survey of former students, 80% reported that they were in full time work or attending a Technical and Further Education facility (TAFE) two years after the completion of their placement at Boys' Town. Further, during 2008, the average attendance rate exceeded 90% and, on average, students advanced their comprehension level by more than 2 years (age standardised), their spelling by 2 years and their reading age by 4 years (after 6 months in the programme). These are great outcomes for young people who were disengaged with education, largely not attending school and who were behind in the majority of school disciplines.

Table 3

Improvements on the Achenbach Scale for students in the Clinical/Borderline Range

Sub-scale	Improvement (Percentage)
Anxious	50%
Withdrawn/Anxious	78%
Somatic Complaints	56%
Social Problems	63%
Thought Problems	38%
Attention Problems	67%
Rule Breaking	74%
Aggressive Behaviour	52%

On the Achenbach scale, we have seen a reduction in anxiety, attention, social problems and aggression and improvements in adherence to rules. These are important quality of life changes that better equip young people to succeed in the school environment, in employment and with their families and peers.

The resiliency scale measures resilience based on three distinct domains; mastery, relatedness and reactivity. Based on 2009 data, measuring entry and exit performance on the resiliency scale, young people show improvements of 15% or greater in the areas of optimism, self efficacy, adaptability, trust, support, comfort, tolerance and recovery. This means, having finished the programme, young people see themselves as more supported, more capable, more optimistic about their future and able to recover more effectively when emotionally aroused. Further, they feel they can adapt more easily to new situations and are more confident in their ability to form relationships with others. These are significant changes for young people who, on entry to the programme, placed very little trust in adults, did not see themselves as having many skills and who did not hold much hope for their future.

Table 4

Improvements in Resiliency Scale Results from Entry to Exit

Domain	Sub scale	Improvement (Percentage)
Mastery	Optimism	36%
	Self Efficacy	15%
	Adaptability	15%
Relatedness	Trust	41%
	Support	29%
	Comfort	27%
	Tolerance	32%
Reactivity	Recovery	16%

Boys Town also asks young people and their families to evaluate the service at the end of their placement. These evaluations have been overwhelmingly positive. Based on ratings out of 10,

parents/carers and young people rated their top three aspects and least valued aspect of the programme as follows:

Table 5
Parent Evaluations on Exit

Ranking	Programme Aspects	Average Score (rating out of 10)
1	Goals established on entry	9.8
2	Regular counselling	9.7
3	Family's own participation in the programme	9.7
Least Valued	Re-entry processes	7.7

Table 6
Young Person Evaluations

Ranking	Programme Aspects	Average Score (rating out of 10)
1	Clear behaviour consequences	8.7
2	Assistance with transition	8.7
3	Family's own involvement in the programme	8.6
Least Valued	Small groups	6.3

Discussion

“Working with volatile and aggressive kids is like toasting a marshmallow over a fire. If you are too aggressive in your interactions they will burst and you have a sticky situation to manage” – (Long, 2001).

Working with small groups and maintaining a core group of staff who only work with one unit means that workers at Boys’ Town thoroughly know the needs and background of the young people they work with. They understand the issues affecting them and know the most effective strategies to address their behaviour. Each team talks through situations, learns from each others’ experience and develops new ideas to respond to complex situations. This flexibility is important in working with young people whose experience of mainstream education is often extremely negative and for whom a more creative approach may be needed to engage them.

Staff teams use a consistent approach in working with the young people in the programme, ensuring that expectations are high enough to challenge students but are also achievable. This consistency in expectations provides the best context for young people to learn to make better choices. It gives them clear boundaries, allows them to know clearly what behaviours are expected of them and helps them to better understand the consequences of their behaviour (which they rated as the most valuable part of the programme). In turn, this allows them to develop and maintain proper boundaries themselves, and to learn appropriate behaviour.

As workers, we can often become caught up in situations and react to our own emotions that are triggered in our interactions with young people. A key principle for staff working with

Boys' Town is to respond to the emotion of young people rather than react to it; akin to being a thermostat which monitors and controls temperature, rather than a thermometer, which rises as things get hot. To this end, it is important that staff know their own and each other's way of working and their vulnerabilities as workers. They are advised to monitor and challenge their own and their colleagues' reactions to situations and remove themselves where they feel another staff member could handle the situation more effectively. Staff are encouraged to be open with each other when their 'buttons' are pushed and support colleagues to make the best choices for the young people involved.

The 8 planks described earlier also provide an effective framework for guiding interactions with young people. They cultivate an atmosphere of safety and respect, through which workers can develop strong relationships with the young people they work with. Some of the principles drawn from these 8 planks are listed below.

- Respectfully challenge thinking and action.
- Share power and decision making.
- Respect personal space and time.
- Discover and uncover potential.
- Establish structure, routine and expectations.
- Listen and respond with respect.
- Engage them – if you build it they will come. Build rapport and relationships.
- Hold young people accountable – develop a sense of responsibility.
- Maintain high expectations.
- Use solution focussed thinking and strategies.
- Build on clients' strengths.
- Notice small changes and make a fuss (to both the boys and their families).
- Avoid raised voices.
- See families as allies and part of the solution.
- Develop a calm atmosphere to help kids stay calm.
- Only do it if you enjoy it.
- Challenge the normalisation of crises.

Figure 2

Principles for effective work with 'at risk' young people

Most importantly, we advise our staff;

1. Remember, it's not about you – it's about them.
- 2.. Do not engage in emotion.
3. De-escalating young people is the primary goal in volatile situations.

Putting these principles in action facilitates the growth and change of young people who are in need of specialised support. As described above, when young people leave the Boys' Town programme, they are equipped with more social and life skills, show more self belief, exhibit reduced anxiety and behavioural difficulties, engage better with others, are able to follow rules more consistently, show improved attention and are better placed to handle challenges and find support. The Boys' Town model works and should find use beyond Engadine.

Note

1. Strengths cards are a resource developed by St Luke's, where each card portrays a quality that is considered a strength (such as kindness or courage). Staff and families start each case plan meeting by choosing a range of cards that represent the young person's strengths. A more detailed description of these cards can be found online at www.innovativeresources.com.au.

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- For further information on Don Bosco's approach see www.sdb.org.au/resources.

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