

Program overview

The program is divided into eight modules. Each module focuses on a specific concept, which is developed using several activities. Each activity contains step-by-step instructions for facilitators and provides background information on the concept and clearly stated objectives. Material lists are provided with each activity. In addition, facilitators can pick and choose the activities for each module that they feel would be best suited for their needs.

In addition to the regular modules, a sample list of energizers and relaxation exercises is provided. Providing practice in calming techniques is believed to be one way that children can be taught to be more resilient.² Therefore, it is recommended that some type of relaxation exercise be offered in each session.

Children of parents who have a substance abuse or gambling problem may be profoundly affected by disharmony and unpredictability in their home lives. The presence of addiction can diminish their physical, emotional, and spiritual health, and ability to trust. The nurturing environment of this program addresses these issues by providing children with consistent routines, caring and empathetic adult facilitators, optimistic thinking, and sincere feedback about their personal strengths.

Children may think that the addiction is their fault and that they should try to "fix" the problem. Some children try to deal with their family's problems by keeping the addiction a secret. In order to protect the family, children may be reluctant to talk about their problems or to acknowledge their feelings. These feelings build up and create stress and anxiety. The program gives children opportunities to learn about addiction and its effect on families, encourages children to talk about their feelings, and gives them a chance to find out what other children and adults think and feel in similar situations.

Many children develop coping methods, or defences, to help them stay safe in their world. One common defence is to act out with aggressive behaviour, seemingly angry at everything and everyone. Another common defence is to withdraw from life and keep a low profile, hoping to be overlooked and forgotten. Alternatively, the child might assume the role of the "good child," trying hard to be perfect and working hard at school while taking on many responsibilities for the household. Another coping technique is to become a clown, distracting outsiders by being funny and silly so as to prevent potentially embarrassing lines of questioning. The program talks about these different roles and validates the struggles that children may experience while trying to cope with addiction in their families.

Sometimes, children in the presence of substance abuse or gambling are in danger. Situations may arise where the adults taking care of the children are unable or unwilling to do so. This program encourages children to identify the safe people in their lives and provides contact information for the children to keep in case they need help.

Above all, the program aims to provide hope to children. It helps them understand that they are not alone, that they are not to blame for the addiction in their family, and that they cannot make the addiction disappear. Having supportive and caring adults in their lives can help children be successful and healthy, and can help brighten their future.

Issues of special consideration for the facilitator

Promoting resiliency in children

Most children who experience parental alcohol, drug, or gambling problems in their homes do not grow up "damaged" or addicted themselves. As program developers and facilitators, it is important to recognize that children from homes affected by addiction do not automatically develop functional problems. While some children may experience depression, anxiety, bed-wetting, social isolation, fears, nightmares, and substance abuse, a majority of children will be happy and successful in their choices to live a healthy life. In fact, children in these situations often grow up to be strong and resilient.³ However, for those children negatively affected, access to a program designed to assist and support children in these circumstances can make a difference.

"Resilience is an individual's capacity to bounce back; to withstand hardship and repair self".⁴

"Resiliency is a concept that is a refreshing change from the usual preoccupation with what's wrong with everybody. Resiliency assumes that everyone has abilities, attitudes, and tendencies that can help them survive, even thrive in stressful or adverse situations. While some of these abilities are innate, many are developed or enhanced by exposure to supportive people and environments. These positive personal tendencies and environmental conditions are called protective factors."⁵

Wolin and Wolin⁶ identified seven resiliencies in the personalities of people who came from families where addiction and/or abuse were present. They described these seven resiliencies as follows:

INSIGHT | The mental habit of asking searching questions and giving honest answers; being curious; observing, sensing, thinking and interpreting; counteracting distorted reflections or thoughts; a conviction to be different.

MORALITY | The activity of an informed conscience; children feel hurt, want to know why, and begin to judge the rights and wrongs of their daily lot; they value principles such as decency, compassion, honesty, and fair play.

INDEPENDENCE | Drawing boundaries between yourself and troubled parents; keeping emotional and physical distance while satisfying the demands of your conscience; testing one's abilities and limits; regarding alienation as a positive thing; maintaining calm; staying realistic; and orienting towards the future.