



**Senior Sergeant Karen Robinson, APM
South Australia Police**

LIVING SKILLS PROGRAMME

How did the programme come into being?

In 1994, as a police officer working in the Elizabeth Local Service Area, Young Offender Unit, my duties involved the administration of the then new juvenile justice system which saw police as the gatekeepers determining potential diversions from court for young offenders. I was also required to implement programmes for young people that would help keep them in school and away from offending. I had been involved with Blue Light discos and camps since I commenced with South Australia Police in 1982 and had more recently to this been involved in running camps for street kids frequenting Hindley Street – which is one of our ‘night life’ city streets with a lot of hotels, bars and licensed adult entertainment venues. There was always a mix of Aboriginal and Caucasian kids who were certainly street smart but were also highly at risk. Most were in the 14-16 year age bracket, although sadly a number were significantly younger. Our main focus was to keep the young people safe and attempt to breakdown barriers between these kids and police. This whetted my interest in positive programs for improving police/youth relations.

So, in continuing my support for Blue light camps as a potential for engaging disadvantaged young people, at Elizabeth I continued to run Blue Light camps, but now with a focus on younger primary school aged kids who were truanting from school and exhibiting signs of potential disengaging from school altogether.

I began to work closely with Ms Barb Pinson, Student Attendance Counselor (from the then Dept. of Education and Children's Services, now Dept. for Children's Services). I managed to co-opt her into running Blue Light Camps for ‘high risk’ students with me. The camps were of four days duration, usually held at Echunga Police Reserve for about a dozen same sex students. In August 1996 we ran one such camp for twelve 13-14 year old girls. Although the camp was successful in regard to some positive outcomes for the girls, I firmed up my realization that the camps are often limited by the lack of follow-up for the youth; they can be expensive to run; where guest speakers are utilized those guest speakers may have long distances to travel to get to the camp site; the cost of wages for after hours work of the camp supervisors is usually an issue to be overcome; a lack of

suitable available supervisors is problematic; and being a supervisor on such camps is extremely emotionally and physically draining. I continued to question whether the positives we offered the young people by the end of the camp became a millstone for the young person when all we were doing was returning them to the same school, family and situation with nothing more than a vague 'see you later' from the supervisors and no effective case management follow-up. Were we in fact setting them up for greater disappointment?

I have to admit that after this particular camp I was ready to hang up my camp supervisor hat, as I truly doubted whether I was the right person to keep trying to impact in a positive way into these young peoples' lives. Dealing with bulimia, sexual abuse, assault, Munchausen's by proxy, self-harm, binge-drinking and promiscuity were way beyond my expertise. But with much encouragement and badgering from Barb Pinson, rather than put these issues in the 'too hard basket', she *guilted* me into pursuing an alternative programme for 'at risk' youth which did not involve an actual camp. What resulted relies heavily on the 'at risk' issues covered on the August 1996 Blue Light camp, but has addressed all my preceding concerns in relation to cost, supervisors and most importantly, follow-up.

What underpins the programme?

On this point, I have 'borrowed' many excellent resources from various sources. Where that source information is known, I have included acknowledgement throughout the manual.

The Living Skills Programme adopts the following list of ten needs for young people to lead crime free lives. They need:

1. Opportunities and responsibilities to go along with rights;
2. Meaningful things to do;
3. Fair, clear, consistent and meaningful consequences for their actions;
4. A life free from abuse;
5. Both physical and emotional support;
6. Freedom from other types of harm;
7. Accurate, complete information;
8. Positive role models;
9. A voice in what happens to them;
10. A chance, to be part of the solution.

(National Crime Prevention Council of Canada)

The 'Living Skills programme' was initially developed for 12-14 year olds (generally in Years 7 and 8); however the targeted age group has varied dependent upon local needs. It was designed to be conducted one day a week for four hours during nine weeks of a school term although we are currently running it at Holden Hill, my current police posting, as a six-session programme for Year 7s. It can be conducted at a central school, with satellite schools sending their students along to the programme or at a single school.

The process is that a school invites local police to run a Living Skills programme. When that has been agreed upon, the participants are then nominated by the school. The general criteria used includes that the young person truants; displays behavioural problems at school; is victimized by other youth or is the bully; lacks self-confidence; does not appear to have positive role models in their social circumstances; does not mix in a

positive way with peers; or any other mix of behaviour which the school identifies as a problem. The programme is culturally inclusive and is very mindful of 'total inclusiveness' for each participant. Some programmes have been offered specifically for Aboriginal youth and we are currently considering a shortened version of the programme for African youth which will culminate in a camp.

This programme is not specifically designed for offending youth – those who are already recorded in the juvenile justice system. SAPOL offers Category 'C' and 'D' Blue Light camps which are generally more appropriate for such youth; however components of this programme can be used wherever deemed appropriate. In other words, this programme is designed to be flexible for whoever the target group is. It is a continual work in progress. A number of programmes still choose to incorporate a camp component as part of the programme (extra funding must be sourced for camps).

It is likely that schools will nominate more than 12 youth for the programme. The police officer supervisor and Education Department member need to prioritize the youth for inclusion. Twelve participants has proven the optimum number for a group – with one police officer running the programme and a Student Attendance Officer, school counselor or teacher assisting. Not every youth who is invited will accept, so a stand-by list will be needed. Not every parent will sign the consent forms for the young person to be involved. (On this point, we offer a parent information session a few days prior to the programme where we will go through the programme contents with parents/caregivers, and make ourselves available to answer any questions they have as to why police are running a programme for their child! We do not get a very high take up rate on this offer to parents.)

Most of the youth whom this programme was developed for are from highly dysfunctional family backgrounds. Many of them come to school without having had breakfast, nor do they have any provisions for lunch. Some of them have extremely poor hygiene. There is likely to be chronic unemployment in their household so unless someone in that household specifically goes to the effort of setting an alarm in the morning to get these young people up for school, their attendance may be spasmodic. A lack of an established work ethic in the household is reflected in poor school attendance. Many of these young people are victims of abuse, often from within their own family unit. Quite simply, some parents do not have effective parenting skills. This may mean that some youth are literally left to bring themselves up. Some children are used as baby sitters for younger siblings. Some parents keep their children home to keep them company during the day. There are some youth who have learning difficulties and may have no confidence in themselves, especially if everyone around them is telling them that they are 'stupid' and 'good for nothing' or 'will never amount to any thing'. Many children are suffering such damage daily. This programme seeks to break that cycle.

What does the programme look like?

Week 1 *Rules for Respecting Each Other*

We provide an overview of what the programme will include.

Goal - to help create a supportive group environment; to accept responsibility; and to identify key skills for healthy development and growth.

Set parameters for the group (group norms and rules) along with consequences for stepping over those boundaries. We help the participants to make their own rules and consequences for breaking them. Participants to complete a pre-course survey.

Begin some exercises on how to control strong emotions. 'Will it lead to trouble...'

Week 2 Budgeting/Shopping/Cooking

Youth to realize the need to work within a budget; to prepare a shopping list for items required; and to organize themselves to ensure all required tasks are carried out effectively. Team work required to make mutually rewarding outcomes possible. Personal hygiene and nutrition issues are discussed.

Week 3 Skills for Adolescence

Discussion on rights and responsibilities; most particularly how they impact on school and home. How best to deal with peer pressure. (We find out what 'peer pressure' means to each young person.) Accepting responsibility - avoiding the 'blame game'. Identifying harassment and bullying; and how to avoid being victimized. Ways to build each other up, rather than put-downs. Role plays.

Week 4 Police Academy visit

Youth to consider police as people first and being a police officer as an occupation. Aim for youth to treat police with respect and vice versa. Policing involves being part of a team – requirement on youth to be a valuable and valued member of a team. We talk about stereotyping and the potential to become what we are called.

Week 5 Making Positive Decisions

Health and safety issues. Determine the difference between non-assertive, assertive and aggressive traits. Provide tools to deal with various negative situations that young people may find themselves in. Conflict resolution/anger management role plays.

Youth to be involved in some type of community service project. The concept is based on studies that young people learn more and gain a greater degree of personal maturity when they apply their developing skills to meaningful and real life situations. The more important they believe their service work to be, the more they learn.

Opportunity to discover new interest and abilities; to work cooperatively and take leadership roles; and to appreciate the value of caring about and helping others.

Week 6 Thebarton Barracks visit

Youth to be given the opportunity to observe different units within policing, in an effort to further improve police/youth relations. On our trip to the venue, we play 'spotto' keeping watch for police vehicles.

Week 7 Saying 'No' to Drugs

As much as we corporately support 'harm minimization' we also want young people to consider choosing to say 'no' to drugs. Youth to understand that they are at risk of harmful physical and psychological effects from drug/substance abuse, quite apart from legal consequences.

To know and understand the reasons for school rules and community laws about drug/substance abuse. Youth to identify reasons why some people abuse drugs; then to identify ways of overcoming those reasons/pressures.

Week 8 Recreation

Youth to represent their group on a recreational outing (bowling, movies, swimming etc.). Youth to continue to work together and support each other, taking pride in themselves and the group.

Week 9 Celebration

One of the main aims of the programme was to help these young people gain a sense of self-worth. Activities carried out which will assist the participants realize how important they are and how much they have to contribute in a positive way.

Complete a self-inventory.

Shared meal, speeches, presentation of programme certificates.

Administration

Where time/transport and funding are an issue, the programme can effectively run over 6 sessions by removing the visits to the two police sites and by combining the recreation and celebration sessions.

The programme is deliberately run as a single sex programme as we have learnt the hard way that when boys and girls are in a group together, the dynamics of that group are altered and the young people's responses are affected by the opposite sex being present. Because many of the issues addressed on the programme can be particularly personal and address many feelings and emotions, this programme does not support both sexes together.

A full year follow-up is maintained for each youth. This is achieved by holding at least one 'reunion' of the group over the next 2-3 school terms. Telephone contact by supervisors with each youth is also encouraged, as is the sending of positive support notes to each youth throughout the follow-up period. We monitor the youth for a year in an attempt to evaluate whether the programme has been effective in keeping a young person out of the juvenile justice system. The vast majority of young people do NOT enter the JJS up to a year after completing the programme.

The programme can be run equally effectively in the metropolitan area or the country. If running the full programme where visits to the city and police establishments are included, alternative local sites can be utilized (for example the police station, Country Fire Service headquarters; Council offices, local Court houses; local hospitals; Families SA offices, local shopping area, etc.).

The budget for each programme is set at \$250. Once the initial purchases of art, craft and activity resources have been obtained, these can be maintained at minimal cost for future programmes. Schools are generally prepared to provide necessary supplementary stationery. As each programme is likely to come in under budget, the remaining funds are used towards reunions.

In relation to the funding of these programmes, State Blue Light took a big step in faith in Barb and me, and agreed to fund the first two programmes. Sponsorship for the next two programmes was provided by Elizabeth Rotary. Elizabeth Blue Light kindly sponsored the first two programmes for 1998, while Elizabeth Rotary once again provided sponsorship of the northern suburbs programme for terms 3 and 4. Elizabeth Rotary were so impressed by the positive outcomes that the programme provided for many local youth that through their nomination, I was made a Paul Harris Fellow in Rotary International.

Sponsorship continues to be an issue, but I have been very fortunate in sourcing funding from Neighbourhood Watch groups, the Premier's Community Fund, Blue Light branches and more recently corporate industry. As the participants are from

disadvantaged backgrounds and more often than not from high risk schools, I don't ask the school or the participants to contribute financially to the running of the programme. I wouldn't want to know where the young person came up with the money to pay for their attendance if they were expected to financially contribute! However, if there is a camp component, the school will generally need to contribute. Many schools deliberately fund-raise towards such a camp.

I tell all police officers who are interested in running a programme to not under-estimate the generosity and support of local service and community groups. By being prepared to go out into the community and speaking to different groups this will go a long way towards obtaining financial and practical support for the programmes.

A major soft drink manufacturer very generously sponsored the publication of the initial 100 manuals. The manual was designed to provide the Living Skills police officer programme coordinator with sufficient information, activities and ideas to meet the objectives for each session. It was in no way presented as the only way to achieve these objectives, but it was always intended to be used as a consistent base to work from for all such programmes.

I currently have funding from State Blue Light to re-write the manual and present it in CD form. As soon as I get 5 spare minutes, I will get the re-write of the programme underway. (I expect the revised manual to be available next year.) It has certainly come a long way in 12 years and although many new activities have been included, its focus has remained constant. Living Skills is a behaviour management programme that seeks to raise each participant's self-esteem and grow them into positive-contributing junior members of our society.

The programme has now been offered throughout metropolitan and country South Australia. Since 2006, it is now being offered by Western Australia Police and was showcased by them at the International Blue Light conference in New Zealand that same year.

I provide a rider to any one involved in running the programme that even though the going will be tough with some of the kids who will test your patience and sanity to the limit; by the end of the programme these same youth are likely to be the ones who have benefited the most from your endeavors. These are the youth who will have developed a sense of self-worth. They will have learnt positive and effective ways of dealing with conflict and anger management. They will have found out the hard way that there are consequences for their actions, but they will also have benefited from being in a safe environment where they are treated with respect, honesty and friendship.

Police/youth barriers can be totally broken down and these young people are given positive experiences in their life that may otherwise never have presented themselves. It is a win/win situation for all who are prepared to get in there and give of themselves, do the hard work, and have a go. And that's what the programme is all about!

The youth we develop and spend time with today will in time, determine our future.

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