

Let it Go: Building Children’s Emotional Competencies

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Abstract:

“Let it go, let it go! And I’ll rise like the break of dawn!” This popular tune from Frozen sings about the imagery of empowerment despite setbacks. Just like how Elsa learnt to acknowledge and regulate her feelings of fear, and began to overcome them; a resilient individual will have to draw upon one’s internal resources to achieve positive adjustment despite the harsh conditions they encounter (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005: 399). It is important for the individual to ensure that one is not overwhelmed with emotions and is able to direct their attention towards problem solving, or making positive adjustments to function adaptively (Kumpfer, 1999; 189; Zeman, Cassano, Perr-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006; 155). Through groupwork interventions, a social service organization in Singapore, AMKFSC Community Services Ltd, aims to enhance resilience in children by equipping them with strategies that will build emotional competence. This publication will share and consolidate AMKFSC Community Services Ltd’s practice wisdom and its essence.

(Keywords: Emotional competency, resilience framework, groupwork, child-centric, multidisciplinary)

Introduction

The life of a Singapore child is often described to be stressful and fast paced with great emphasis given to achieving academic success. A typical Singapore child goes through the rigorous education system and critical milestone examinations put in place by the Ministry of Education (MOE), Singapore (MOE 2018). After gaining its independence in 1965, Singapore faced multiple challenges e.g. small country, lacks natural resources, and the government strategized to tap on its human resources to ensure the prosperity of the country. In order to build human resource capabilities, Singapore’s national policies are shaped towards education and developing generations who are highly skilled, self-sufficient and highly capable of contributing to the country’s economic prosperity. According to an article by National Security Coordination Secretariat (NSCS), Singapore’s educational setting must fulfil the economic objectives of the nation, where the government implements national education policies that can create a workforce

who can meet global demands (Anwar 2017). Her education system must pre-empt and satisfy the intellectual, content and skills needs of the economy and workforce (Anwar 2017).

Keeping in mind this educational landscape and its impact on families, the social service sector aims to adequately meet the needs of the families in the community through the setup of Family Service Centres (FSCs) island wide (MSF 2018). AMKFSC Community Services Ltd. ("AMKFSC") is one such initiative, a community-based social service agency founded in 1978, which provides a holistic range of services to support children, youths, families and seniors at multiple touchpoints across Singapore (AMKFSC 2018) Over the years, the four FSCs under AMKFSC has been focusing on child-centric practice to enhance resilience in children. To deepen the skills of Social Work Practitioners (SWPs), the management encourages learning by doing and by doing, it creates learning experiences and develop curiosities and critiques over current working models and practices. In this journal article, our team from AMKFSC will be sharing on our rationale, groupwork intervention and reflections from running groupwork activities with children and their families who experience the transitions and challenges in going through the rigorous education system of Singapore. As SWPs, we believe that our services will be complementary in meeting the emotional needs of the families, choosing to build on emotion regulation as a key intervention strategy.

The SONG

“The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside

Couldn't keep it in, heaven knows I've tried

Don't let them in, don't let them see

Be the good girl you always have to be

Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know

Well, now they know...”

“Let it go, let it go, that perfect girl is gone. Here I stand in the light of day. Let the storm rage on...”



Act 1: The Story

The movie “Frozen” portrays the emotional development of Elsa, from how she suppressed her feelings during childhood to hide her special powers, to acting out in the form of throwing ice shards and creating snow storms, and eventually isolating herself by building an ice palace (Frozen, 2013). Using the story of Elsa, we will narrate some common challenges faced by the children in Singapore.

‘Elsa is a 9-year-old girl living in a public purchased housing flat in Singapore. Elsa has a sister, Anna, who is 6-year-old. Elsa’s parents are both working, and Elsa spends most of her time in an after-school care. Elsa has average grades but is often expected to get better results. Elsa feels that she has to do better at school because she needs to be a role model for Anna and because she worries that her grades would lead to her parents’ conflict and disappointment.

Elsa has been keeping a secret lately. Her parents had been fighting a lot lately when they were home at night over money, but she could not share this with anyone. “We need to show that we are a happy family to others.” her parents said. “If they know my family is unhappy, others will laugh at us.” Elsa thought. Elsa isolated herself in her room, not being able to cry and withdrawing

from playtime with Anna. She felt miserable and Anna noticed Elsa's irritability. What would Elsa do? She simply had to hide it all.'

'And then one day, Elsa burst. Her meltdown shocked many! Her teachers found her hiding under the staircase, crying. Elsa could not be consoled. She was brought to speak with her school counsellor and she finally shared on her family's stressors.'

Her parents had a huge quarrel the night before over Elsa's school results and blamed each other for the lack of time they spent with Elsa. Mummy felt that Daddy could have taught Elsa Mathematics. Daddy felt that Mummy should have coached Elsa more in her languages. Elsa blamed herself for not being good enough and for causing her family's unhappiness.'

This story is increasingly familiar to many children within the local community. The pressures that children and families experience daily with the constant evolving demands, leave many increasingly overwhelmed and affect their ability to cope adaptively.

The SONG

*" Let it go, let it go
Can't hold it back anymore
Let it go, let it go
Turn away and slam the door
I don't care what they're going to say
Let the storm rage on
The cold never bothered me anyway"*



Act 2: The Guiding Framework

A Resiliency Framework

Children who are exposed to familial issues at home are at risk of developing psychosocial and emotional dysfunction. While not all children's developments will be impacted by their prevailing environmental factors such as poverty and their parent's marital issues, groupwork aims to mitigate these risks through the introduction of protective factors (skills, knowledge and external resources) for children to ensure positive psychosocial and emotional development (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005: 399). While being faced with stressors and challenging events, it is normal for individuals to experience negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, hopelessness, confusion, etc. One possible method for children to cope with such distressing emotions is to be like Elsa who suppressed and withdrew into her ice castle; lashing out with a destructive outburst when it became too hard to keep it all within! However, it is important for the individual to ensure that one is not overwhelmed with the emotions. To be able to successfully tide through tough times, the individual must be able to alleviate the impact of the stressors, cope with one's emotions and direct one's attention towards solving the problem, or make positive adjustment to function adaptively (Kumpfer, 1999; 189; Zeman, Cassano, Perr-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006; 155).

Such a process is commonly known as resiliency. Emotional resilience is a building block of the resilience framework and findings show adaptive emotion regulation abilities are a key protective factor underlying emotional resilience. Research has shown that children who are able to regulate their emotions, are better able to build positive social relationships, a crucial task of social competence for children (Alvord & Grados, 2005; 240; Zeman, Cassano, Perr-Parrish, & Stegall,

2006; 162). In the long run, emotional competence has been found to be a central predictor of one's mental well-being (Joyce, Shand, Tighe, Laurent, Bryant, Harvey, 2018:2; Zeman, Cassano, Perr-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006; 161). Unlike personality traits, resilience and emotional regulation skills can be learnt and developed through experiences and teaching (Joyce, Shand, Tighe, Laurent, Bryant, Harvey, 2018:7; Kumpfer, 1999; 208). An individual's social behaviors and interpersonal relationships are also closely linked with one's emotional regulation abilities (Alvord & Grados, 2005: 240). For instance, if the child can adaptively cope with their distressing emotions, and carry out appropriate help-seeking behaviors, healthy social relationships are more likely to be created and maintained (Alvord & Grados, 2005; 240; Blair, Denham, Kochanoff, Whipple, 2004:420). With social support being part of the individual's environmental context, which can influence the impact of a stressor or challenge (Kumpfer, 1999; 196), there is even greater pertinence for an individual to develop strong emotion regulation skills.

Person-in-Environment Approach

In *Frozen*, Elsa's sister, Anna repeatedly tried to reach out to Elsa. However due to her fears, Elsa became cold and distanced herself from everybody, including Anna. When she felt accepted by Anna, Elsa calmed down and realized that Anna cared and wanted to help her. In the form of Anna, family support became a protective factor for Elsa, to gain control of her special powers and eventually learning to be more emotionally regulated.

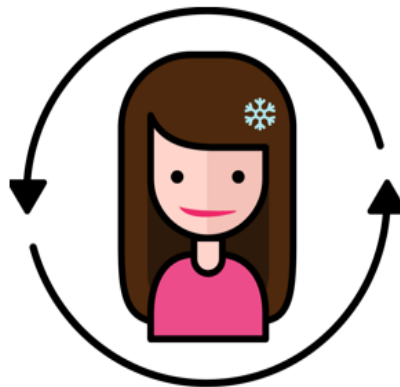
Children's ability to regulate emotions are highly dependent on their immediate environmental factors in particular, parents (Zeman, Cassano, Perr-Parrish, & Stegall, 2006; 159). According to the person-in-environment (PIE) approach where an individual and his (or her) multiple

environments function together as a dynamic and interactive ecosystem; each component concurrently affects and is also affected by the other components (Hare as cited in Weiss-Gal, 2008: 65).

Therefore, the PIE approach highlights that building the child's emotional competence cannot solely depend on the child's learning. Thus, using a PIE-lens, SWPs recognized that they cannot be the only agents of emotional resilience all the time and need to conduct train-the-trainer work with the parents, siblings and caregivers of the groupwork children. With their help, children's learning would be reinforced within their natural environment and this became a strategic collaboration between SWP and the families. With the families' involvement, support and awareness, it will undoubtedly increase the likelihood that children would be able to learn and effectively apply emotional regulation skills when stressors arise in their natural environments such as home and school.

The SONG

*"It's funny how some distance makes
everything seem small
And the fears that once controlled me
can't get to me at all
It's time to see what I can do
To test the limits and break through
No right, no wrong, no rules for me
I'm free~"*



Act 3: The GROUPWORK

In AMKFSC, group work programmes are commonly offered by SWPs to support individual casework and counselling practices. Here, we have two such group work which are attended by Elsa and her sister, Anna respectively. This is part of their journey towards increasing their emotional competence despite the challenges they faced.

Nurturing Emotionally Strong Tomorrow (NEST) is a groupwork to empower children and parents to navigate through their life challenges. NEST had two concurrent group components; Little Brave Hearts (LBH) which comprised of the child participants and Big Brave Hearts (BBH), which involved their parents and/or main caregivers in parenting group sessions. LBH was designed as a 9-session therapeutic group intervention to enhance the emotional competence of children aged 9 to 11 years old. BBH was designed as 6-session psychoeducational groupwork that equips parents and caregivers with knowledge and skills in emotional regulation. Through the psychoeducational groupwork, parents can learn skills to regulate self and help children regulate themselves better. There were 2 joint sessions where all children and parents participated together to practice the skills learnt.

SPARKLE was designed as a psychoeducational groupwork to foster emotional competence in children aged 4 to 6 years from families who face multiple stressors, through the promotion of emotion understanding and emotion regulation. There were 6 groupwork sessions for children to enhance their emotion understanding and emotion regulation skills for their primary emotions - Happy, Sad, Scared and Angry. Caregivers also learnt the importance of emotional competence and how they could identify the child's primary emotions over 2 groupwork sessions to

complement SPARKLE's goal. In addition, there were 2 joint sessions for children and parents to learn and practice emotion regulation strategies together.

Act 4: The Inquisitive Conversations

“Why do we do what we do?” This was one of the very first questions we asked each other when we started this demanding journey of consolidating and documenting group work practices with children and families in our organization. It is the organization's central belief to strengthen the emotional resilience of the families with multi-stressors within the community. At first glance, NEST and SPARKLE were different programmes (targeted at different age groups and with different groupwork approaches) but the beliefs in the need for child-centric work centering around emotion competencies was undisputed and unified SWPs within the organization.

The experiences of groupwork interventions prompted the team to start dialogues about processes and experiences. The team coined the term “inquisitive conversations” for these dialogues that consolidated the reflections and takeaways that we would like to share and have continued conversations with other stakeholders and professionals. With our experiences from the inquisitive conversations, the chance to be curious opened space for discussions that were value-adding and gave the work we do essence and significance. We have gained new appreciation towards child-centric groupwork for children. The differences we experienced created a unique learning playground in expanding our paradigm. The next few paragraphs consolidates our key learnings.

Client-centered

AMKFSC adopted a client-led and client centric approach. This was both an organic and ground-up approach in involving and understanding the needs of the clients from the start. This approach was aligned with the nature of our set up being a community-based agency serving residents within neighboring towns. This was done through needs assessment and orientation discussions in order to understand and meet the client's needs. This remains an ongoing process of tailoring the sessions in accordance to clients' needs, while ensuring that the main objectives of the groupwork are being met.

Intentional and Flexible

There is recognition that SWPs in groupwork need to be both intentional in their approach, yet be flexible and ready for changes in plans. Such dynamic and fluid processes of the groupwork development, help to build a supportive and safe space for the clients as the sessions progress. NEST and SPARKLE are groupwork in progress that had received many rounds of constructions and reconstructions following feedback, which showed the team's commitment to becoming masters in leading the groupwork we had pioneered.

Multidisciplinary

Macgowan (2008:4) mentioned that groupwork is a "process and not a product" as it requires SWPs to review evidence and engage in a "systemic process that expands research to include additional sources that might yield more rigorous and applicable evidences" (Macgowan, 2008:4). Having a multidisciplinary team (MDT) of psychologists, counsellors and social workers meant that our expertise was different yet complementary. Different perspectives of groupwork

interventions, specialties and therapeutic relationships were considered from the MDT in ensuring a holistic experience when working with children and families.

Being able to recognize the important therapeutic elements of groupwork such as safe space, concepts of universality and cathartic effects also strengthened the credence to want to do beneficial groupwork for the families we serve.

Spectrum of Interventions

Because of different expertise, SWPs could challenge ourselves beyond doing what we already know to explore new groupwork platforms such as therapeutic groups and support groups. This spectrum of interventions requires SWPs to look into theoretical modalities and frameworks and explore other evidence-based practices during the construction of the groupwork to form the basis of our programme. Taking into account the PIE approach, there was a need to recognize that spectrum of interventions such as casework, research, group work and community needs assessment were all “interdependent aspects of social work that should come together on the behalf of clients to contextualize individual, direct action within the framework of the environment and the multiple functions of the social worker” (Cornell, 2006: 50).

Importance of Parental Involvement

The collaborative alliance between the SWPs and the caregivers increases parents’ faith in the SWPs and the effectiveness of the groupwork intervention. Needs of both parents and children were taken into account so we could gather from them what was important and according to their agenda. Thus, participants were invested in the groupwork, and practitioners remain committed to

providing good service. Parents are thus, more willing to be motivated in practicing the skills taught in sessions, and allow themselves to be open to change (e.g. parenting styles) and better attune to their children's emotions. Hands-on practices also eased parents' struggles and challenges as they gave each other encouragement and support. It was observed that parents' retention level of the skills learnt were reported to be higher with practice.

Child-centric Community Practices & Use of Experiential Activities

The conviction to venture out to explore new ways of running child-centric community practices like groupwork through an experiential and creative approach is a key start. Experiential activities allowed children to practice the knowledge in a safe environment, and the groupwork facilitator could act as role models to facilitate the learning. Creative approaches in children's groupwork interventions are attractive and can allow children to stretch their imagination and enjoy the process. It is also quintessential good practice that SWPs remain open to the dynamicity of new practices and research, and flexible to implement changes to groupwork.

Despite the uniqueness of each groupwork, we believed that there is universality in conducting the groupwork that can be applied for other similar programmes. For instance, teamwork among the different SWPs is an essential ingredient. Without teamwork, there can be no success. Finally, incorporating a strengths-based approach also allows for children and their parents to have increased hope for a better tomorrow, despite their current multi-stressors.

Beyond Social Work, Education and Social Development 2018 (SWSD 2018)

Through the cross-borders inquisitive conversations and exchanges we have had with global practitioners during the conference, the team collated positive feedback. The affirmations received included their admiration of the cohesiveness of the multidisciplinary team. This was a challenge by many in their home countries due to differences in viewpoints, lack of collaborative opportunities and/or varied agendas.

Such conversations also validate AMKFSC practices and inspire us to expand upon child-centric practices through documentation and sharing. Beyond SWSD 2018, we hope to have continued dialogues of the practices we do in order to create a sustained learning environment where SWPs are not limited by their own visions but are empowered to expand beyond what we already know.

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