

The “Who’s in Charge?” Group

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The Who’s in Charge? Group is a 9 session educational/therapeutic program for parents of a child who is either acting abusively towards them or is beyond their control. In 2010 it was given an Australian Crime & Violence Prevention Award.

The program uses group exercises, discussion, facilitator input and handouts to take parents through an experiential process of attitude change and behaviour change. The main goal is to empower parents, reducing stress and guilt and giving them concrete strategies. There is no guarantee that changes in parents attitudes or behaviours will produce behaviour change in their difficult adolescents (at least in the short term) but our hope (and experience) is that there will be a reduction in children’s violent and abusive behaviours and an improvement in relationships with parents and other family members.

The program can be considered to be in four parts. The first part (sessions 1 to 3 or 4) aims primarily to reduce parents sense of guilt and isolation while making them more determined not to accept abuse and disrespect and clearer about boundaries. Topics covered include: causes of abusive or beyond-control behaviour (deconstructing some of the common myths and simplistic explanations); how much influence do parents really have; feelings of entitlement in children; what is abuse; what is “power” within families and why does acting irresponsibly give people power?

Once parents have made some changes in their attitudes they are ready to absorb some concrete ideas aimed at changing the child’s behaviour. The core of the program is the use of consequences, adapted to apply to uncooperative young people who may not care about very much (sessions 3 or 4 to 5 or 6).

The third part of the course includes coverage of anger (both the young person’s and the parents), assertiveness, and self-care. Although important topics, parents often need to make some progress before they can openly discuss their own anger, before they can apply assertiveness or consider self-care.

The main part of the program is on eight consecutive weeks. The ninth session is a follow-up two months later. This is both a consolidation and allows for a more meaningful assessment of the groups effectiveness.

Although it is against the philosophy of the group to imply that parent’s changing their behaviour will inevitably result in a change in the children’s behaviour this is found in the majority of the parents who complete the course – about three quarters report a reduction in their child’s abusive behaviour on follow-up. Parents also consistently report reductions in their own level of stress,

depression, guilt and improvements in feeling supported and their belief that things are getting better.

For those considering running a WIC? group

The “manual” for the group consists of a data CD and video DVD. The CD has all the relevant documents and (several hundred pages of original material) handouts for each week. The DVD has videos of interviews with parents, a young person and a role-played family scenario. The videos are an optional resource helpful to those new to running these groups or for staff training.

Ideally facilitators will have either attended a two-day training workshop (one day general exploration of violence to parents, the second day a train the trainer for potential facilitators), observed an 8-week group program or will co-facilitate with an experienced worker. However, (rather than have people re-invent the wheel) if none of these are possible I have sent the group materials interstate and to the UK, New Zealand and Canada. I am not trying to start a franchise and do not insist that agencies run my groups in any particular way. I strongly prefer that the name “*Who’s in Charge?*” is used but do not insist on this.

I charge a small fee for these materials (only one set is required per workplace as further copies can be made). I also keep facilitators up to date with new materials by e-mail at no extra cost and can be available for consultation of supervision for reasonable fees.

The advantage of the materials being on CD is that it can be continually updated (so feedback greatly appreciated) and materials can be easily adapted to suit local needs.

About the author

I am qualified as a psychologist, social worker and family therapist and have over 35 years experience working with families and young people. I have worked with 350 families where there is parent abuse over the past 20 years and have researched the topic of violence to parents and given numerous professional workshop on the subject. My individual clinical sample (350 at time of writing) is almost certainly the largest in the world and I have been referred to in the media as “Australia’s leading expert on violence to parents”. I have been running therapeutic groups of various kinds for over 30 years and have personally run over 22 *WIC?* Groups. On-going *WIC?* groups are running in Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and England. This is despite the lack of any advertising or organisational backing.

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