

Challenging our responses to children: The creative arts in groupwork with children who have experienced family violence

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Acknowledgement of Country

GenWest recognises that the land on which we work and provide our services always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.



We proudly acknowledge the First Nations communities across Naarm / Melbourne's west – the Wurundjeri and Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge their rich diversity, cultures, histories and knowledges, and the deep contribution they make to the life of this region.

We acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonisation, as well as the strength and resilience of First Nations people, and express solidarity with the ongoing struggle for land rights, self-determination, sovereignty, and recognition of past injustices.

The SPLASH Group

GenWest

'Safe Place for Laughter, Arts and Sharing'

One of the programs offered by the Child & Youth Counselling team at GenWest

- 8 weeks (closed group – offered twice a year)
- Ages 8 – 12 (recognising an important time developmentally in a child's life, emerging from childhood and preceding adolescence)
- 6 – 10 participants
- Locations rotate across Melbourne's West
 - Melton, Footscray & Wyndham)



The political context of our work

- The context of trauma informed practice, psychopathology, and the urge to diagnose, fix, and regulate children.
- Where "trauma informed practice" approaches trauma as an individual health issue, and the ways in which the language of medicine, psychology, and neurobiology are used to obscure the realities of structural violence (Clark, 2016; Reynolds, 2020).
- Highlighting children's dignity and resistance, favouring agency, and relational resource building over individualised intervention and clinical goals (Halliwell & Shannahan, 2024).
- Context of dominant psychological paradigm – self regulation, boundary setting/discarding of others.

"This ensures an unlimited flow of "at risk" clients as these families are investigated, medicalized, and criminalized into attending programs. We measure and track their progress and capacity, rewarding them when they demonstrate resilience and, when they fail to measure up, penalizing them by cutting their funding, extending their programs, managing how and when they can see their children, and making them jump through endless administrative and bureaucratic loops."
(de Finney et al., 2018)



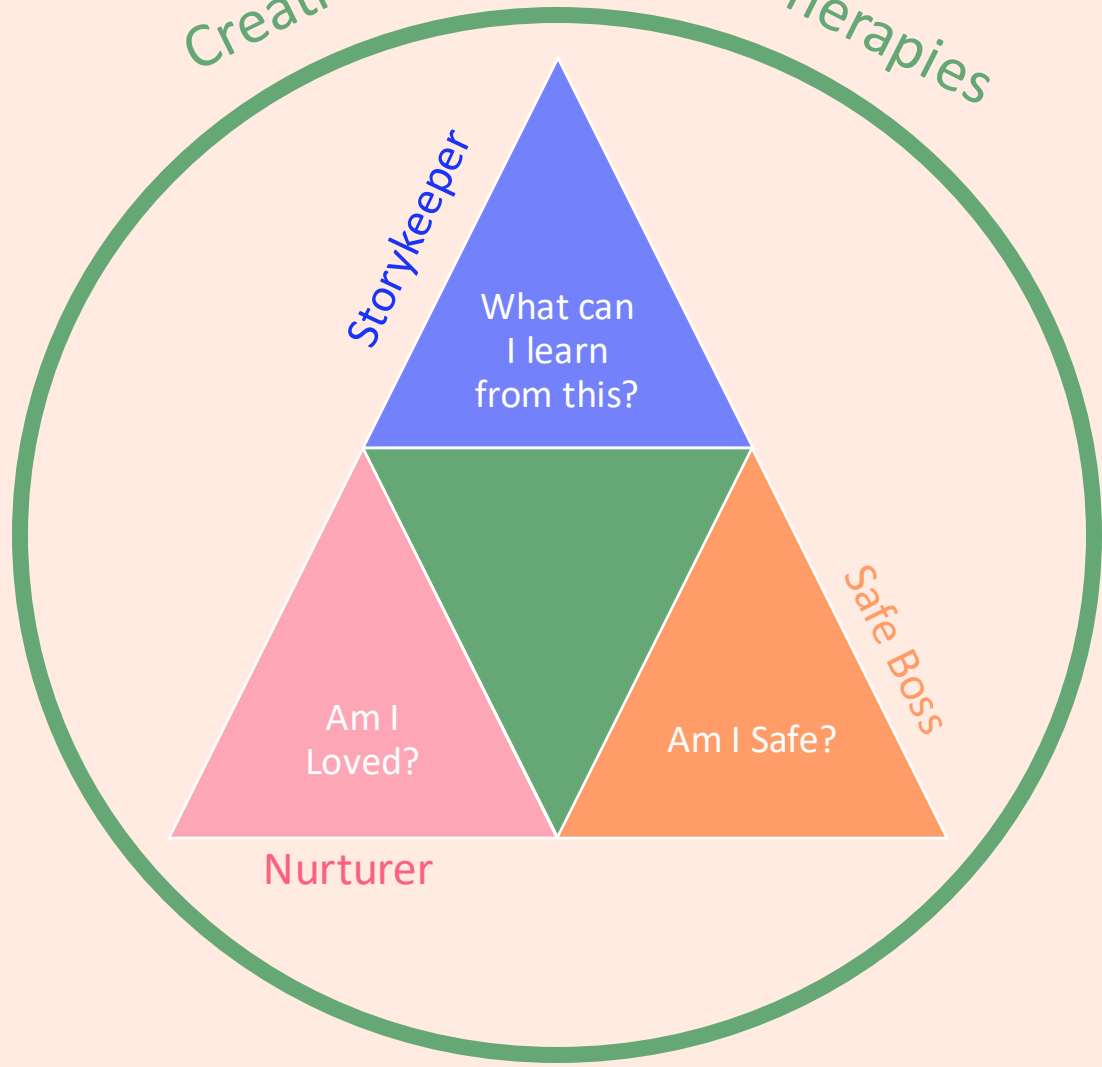
Responding to this context with group work and the creative arts

Human devotion as the discipline and hard work of relationships, of understanding and listening to another person (Herman, 1992)

- Favouring an approach that is relational, embodied and participatory
- Recognising that this work is slower, less replicable and efficient
- Drawing upon the creative arts to:
 - Highlight children's dignity and resistance
 - Emphasise children's political agency
 - Build relational resources



Creative Arts Therapies



Therapist Roles Triad

Adapted from Paris Goodyear-Brown's
'TraumaPlay' model of the three roles
of the Trauma Play therapist.

*How do we answer these questions
and take up these roles with the
creative arts?*

The role of the creative arts

Documented affordances of creative arts:

- Music enhances mood, motivation, and concentration in classrooms (Vigl et al., 2023)
- Reduces of trauma symptoms (Landis-Shack et al., 2017; Beck et al., 2018)
- Engagement of the senses in art making contributes to co-regulation (Nolan & Mumton, 2024)

Moving beyond creativity as an objective variable:

- Music creates opportunities for externalisation, internalisation and re-establishes a capacity for relatedness (Bensimon, 2020)
- Community arts therapy participation values voice, experience, and capacity to learn from one another (Nolan & Mumton, 2024)



6 Part Story

(Lahad, 1992)

- 1) Character
- 2) Character's mission or quest
- 3) Character's helper
- 4) The challenge
- 5) How they cope with the challenge
- 6) What happens next



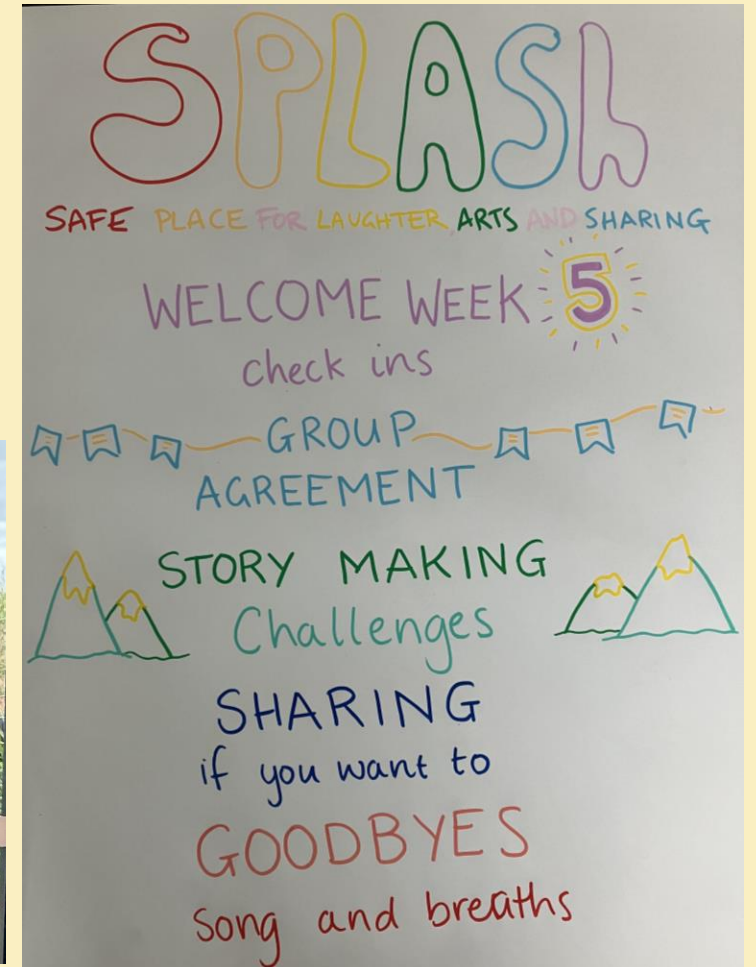
Safety / Safe Boss role: Am I Safe?

Consistency & Predictability

“Regulation” & Regulating activities

Decision making

Rather than harnessing the affordances of the arts to manage or regulate behaviour, instead we were interested in understanding what arts practices we had available that enabled children to stay.





The difficulties that clients bring to therapy often occur in the context of relationships (with self, environment or others). Their resolution must be equally practiced in connection to a relational context, rather than as a retreat away from it. The creative group does not need to be a "tranquil sanctuary", but a response to the vibrant or chaotic environment in which it is situated (Hyland-Moon, 2001; 2015).

Connection / Nurturer role: Am I Loved?

Resonance (Foulkes, 1984)

Therapeutic witnessing

Materials, quality and aesthetics

Resonance: "...how an actual bi-directional mode of relation can develop between people and the outside world, including others, when people are touched by those others and how they subsequently become changed by these so-called resonance relationships. In a bi-directional mode of relation the influence is reciprocal, i.e., one is influenced by other actors and vice versa."

(Weeseman et al., 2024)





Storykeeper role: What can I learn from this?

Externalisation

The arts are storykeepers!

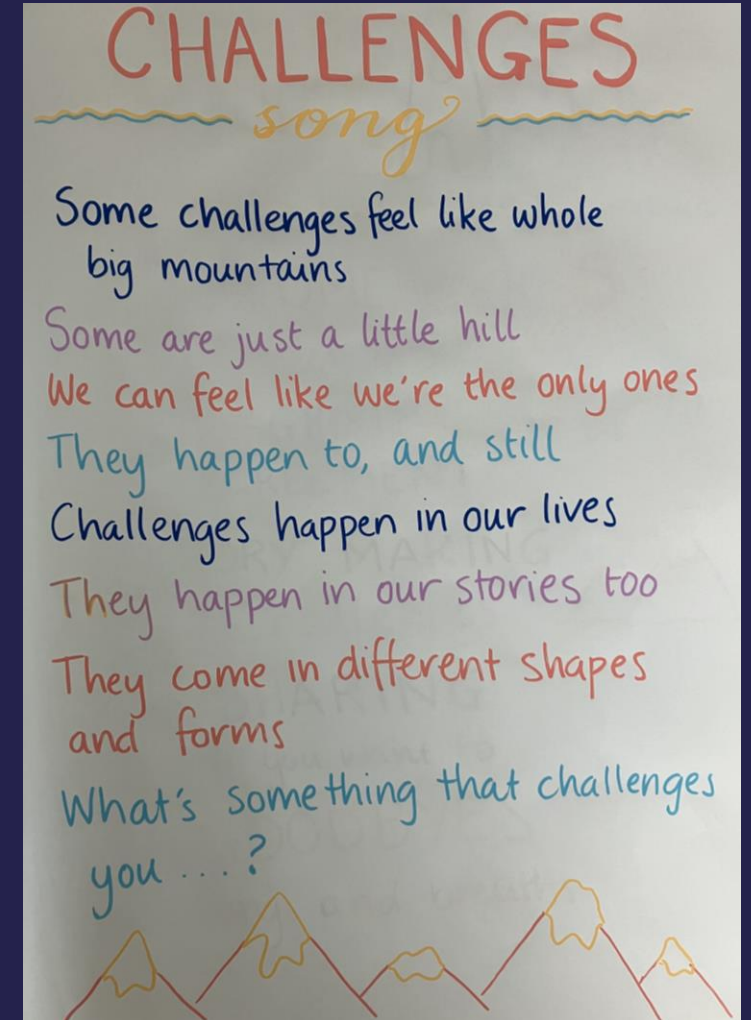
Therapeutic containers

Songwriting as a therapeutic container (Baker et al., 2009; Baker, 2013, 2015)

Response art

Art created in response to the content and themes of a group (Fish, 2012)

“Art is a way of saying, ‘I was here’, and that makes a difference” – (Byrne, 2016)



Challenges Song



When the instruments are too loud for others, but you just want to play
When you're making something really cool, but Michelle says "pack it away!"
When you're trying to relax at home and the creaks sound not quite right
When adults get loud and scary, and you know there'll be a fight
When you're making something really cool, and it doesn't look the way it did in your head
When you're squeezing your favourite fidget toy, and it bursts on you instead!
When it is an important day, and your parent isn't there
When you didn't get a choice, and it feels like they don't care

Some challenges feel like whole big mountains
And some are just a little hill
We can feel like we're the only ones
They happen to and still,
Challenges happen in our lives
They happen in our stories too
They come in different shapes and forms
What's something that challenges you?





2025 Carer Feedback

"I liked how you observed him so closely. Everything he told me about each week reflected what you then communicated to me in the weekly emails. You really saw him."

"It did bring up conflicting feelings for [my child] about his Dad (you did make me aware of how counselling might do this at the beginning). But it helped me to see and understand it more and to see the way that the black and white system of family law court does not support this internal conflict for kids making sense of this stuff".

"The fact that she participated was a big deal for me. She almost made it. I would have liked her to finish it, but it's not a perfect world, it is what it is... She learned a lot and took a lot away, but at the moment she is still feeling the rejection and that is her focus at the moment, that everyone is terrible [...] I think everything you did was fantastic. You always told her she was welcome. The problem is when you've got kids coming from different backgrounds and experiences and diagnoses, you just don't know. There's no way to prepare for it, there are good days and bad days. You did really well at handling it, and that's just where we're at. All those kids in the one room, it's a tricky one. You were nice and tender and understanding, and that's what makes it work."



Goodbye Song



SPLASh week _____ is coming to an end

We all have our own stories

We all arrive exactly as we are

What's one thing to share as you go?

[Each share a word, gesture or sound]

Something together before we leave,

Take one big breath in ...

And out ...

That's it for now, goodbye!



2024 Carer Feedback



"She opens up more about how she is feeling about her Dad (it used to be a meltdown, she can now pinpoint the feeling and communicate that)"

"She enjoyed it more than I was expecting. She asked to find an arts and crafts class after school. She has been reading more and her routine has been better. We are also painting together now, and she is more creative... It prompted me to change some things at home... We were just going through the motions before".

"I loved that it didn't feel like we were sending her to 'get fixed'"

"It was more and better than I was expecting. It helped the kids and reassured them – made it less of a problem within themselves. I liked the emphasis on hearing the kids and giving them the platform to speak"

"I think it brought up a lot of stuff. But I do think she felt safe... She learned that her feelings matter"

Thank you

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Website: <https://www.genwest.org.au/what-we-do/fv-info-for-professionals/services-we-provide/>

Referrals

Email: counselling@genwest.org.au

Services Offered

Counselling is available for children aged 0 to 17 years and 11 months, who reside in the western region of Melbourne and have experienced family violence. This is a Free service.

- Individual counselling (long and short term)
- Single Session counselling
- SPLASh group

Counselling is offered in Maribyrnong, Hoppers Crossing and Melton

GenWest

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