



TOWARDS
EMPLOYMENT:
MEETING THE
COMPLEX LITERACY
NEEDS OF ADULTS
WITH FASD

OVERCOMING THE HURDLES

Regina Community Clinic 2010

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Forward and Acknowledgements

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Purpose of this Document

The purpose of this document is to share the challenges, solutions, and technical knowledge gained through the development and delivery of this project so that other organizations who wish to deliver similar programs will learn from our experiences. This manual was developed with the input of participants, the program staff and project coordinator. The narrative on the right side of the page describes some of the challenges faced throughout the project while the sidebars on the left side of the page are solution-focused tips that we anticipate will assist others who undertake such a program. The intended audience of this report is the community at large, community organizations, medical and other professionals providing services for adults with FASD. It is our hope that individuals affected by FASD will have the opportunity to benefit from similar programs implemented all across Canada.

Overcoming the Hurdles: Classroom and Teaching Methods

- The classroom environment must be quiet, uncluttered, and have low-lighting. It must be spacious enough to allow each participant both visual and auditory isolation from others in the room.
- The pace of the program must be adjusted to each participant's individual ability and style and allow for repetition as necessary.
- Learning activities must be practical and concrete.

Overcoming the Hurdles

Client-Identified Hurdles

Clients enrolled in the Regina Community Clinic FASD Literacy program were asked to share their own perspectives and experiences with this program. Data were collected through private interviews with the program participants with the guarantee of anonymity. Participants identified the challenges and successes from their own perspectives as summarized around the themes below.

1. Classroom and Teaching Methods

Participants identified the classroom and teaching approach as very positive. All had identified previous difficulties in traditional school and program settings due to noisy and over-stimulating conditions, teachers who relied on traditional methods, and the non-individualized pace of other educational programs.

Voices from Participants

They're very patient. The program allows for repetition until you learn it.

Other programs are too structured, move too fast. Here they work with you. Smaller groups of people means more help, not so much just a big group.

This makes me feel good about myself. I got all my stuff right – I felt smart.

It's a different kind of teaching. These techniques work for me – like for spelling. I've never had that before.

We do activities together. They make you feel at ease, respected. Nothing bothers me in there. It's nice and quiet and I get right to my work. I'd look dumb there (in regular school).

I struggled so hard before – even helping my kids with their homework. Now I feel like I am better – better for them and for me.

I like the program because you go at your own pace. If you get stuck, they help you. You don't feel like you're holding anyone back. It's just good, I know that. Pretty good teachers too. They explain everything to you if you're having a hard time trying to understand.

Overcoming the Hurdles: Life Challenges

- Participants' complex lives must be considered to meet their needs effectively.
- Supporting / partnering agencies already working with participants should be engaged from the beginning with clear roles and responsibilities negotiated and agreed upon.
- Additional resource people and agencies should be engaged to assist with participants' challenges as they arise.

2. Life Challenges

Adults with FASD typically face multiple challenges related to their disability. Problems range from legal issues – often related to poor judgment and misplaced trust – to daily living skills related to time, financial management, and planning. The clients who participated in this program all came into it with life-long existing challenges and issues and additional issues erupted over the duration of the course.

Despite using a screening process to increase the likelihood that participants had supports in place to ensure successful participation, often these arrangements were inadequate. Because of the multiple challenges faced by people with FASD and the shortage of community services, agencies often expected the Literacy program to take over this role. The program staff were flexible in their approach, responding on a case-by-case basis. Challenges were varied, ranging from simple (a lost bus pass,) to highly complex (child care, meeting conditions for parole, family break-down, and housing, all faced by one participant concurrently). Of course, participants were unable to focus on classroom literacy skills and activities when faced with such issues. Having staff members available to do outreach and problem-solving with participants and their families and supporting agencies was critical to the success of the participants.

Overcoming the Hurdles: Life Challenges

- Flexibility and open-mindedness are key elements for success.
- The project team should be non-judgmental and prepared for almost anything as participants' needs are complex and atypical.

Professional Staff-Identified Hurdles

The professional staff involved in this project include:

- Program Coordinator
- Teacher
- Learning Resource Developer
- Teacher Assistant/Community Liaison
- Community Employment Coordinator
- Psychologist
- Occupational Therapist

In addition to the professional staff, the program is well-situated within the Regina Community Clinic, benefitting from the strength of an active and engaged board and team of professionals.

3. Literacy Skills Component

Because of the unique learning needs of individuals with FASD, appropriate resources for this program (referred to in this document as

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the learning guide framework) were challenging to assemble and therefore were developed and adapted from various sources. Resources suitable to the reading and comprehension level of adults with FASD often have content that is aimed at children's interests, making it inappropriate and offensive to adult learners. One example was the search for a suitable dictionary that provides simple definitions and some illustrations, that does not simply use children's vocabulary.

Another example was the challenge of developing a suitable assessment tool to determine the participants' levels of literacy and numeracy skills. Existing assessment tools are based on assumptions of typical learners' sequential development and retention of skills. Individuals with FASD, however, do not follow typical patterns and often have "holes" in the sequential development of skills. For example, one participant was able to solve division problems but unable to solve simple addition problems, an incomprehensible situation to a typical teacher. Existing assessment tools are not designed to capture this type of learning disability.

The assessment tool was developed to identify these holes in learning to allow skill development targeted specifically to learners' needs. Following the assessment, the teacher created a matrix outlining scores in particular areas of learning, allowing a specific and

Overcoming the Hurdles: Classroom and Teaching Methods

- The teaching team must be prepared for a wide range of abilities and have alternate activities available to enhance the learning of those who work at a faster pace.
- Classroom and group activities should be generated as much as possible by the specific interests of the participants.
- Create a safe, respectful, and fun environment for learning.

individualized approach to support each participants' progress. The assessment tool provided accountability and allowed the teaching team, including the Community Employment Coordinator, to monitor and evaluate the progress of learners throughout the duration of the program.

The development of lesson plans also required an alternative approach. Participants ranged in age from late teens to senior citizens. Despite this diversity, the group members blended very successfully and functioned well as a unit. A small group - maximum six to eight participants - is critical to the success of the program since participants' needs are typically so complex, the teaching team can easily become overtaxed. Without sufficient support there is significant risk of participants dropping out.

Learners' needs were so diverse that one lesson might be completed by one participant in ten minutes, while another would struggle throughout the day without success. The teacher and assistant found approaches to address this by being creative, flexible, and tuned in to the interests and abilities of each participant. The learning guide framework became generative; concepts were introduced and then teaching staff followed the interests that emerged from the participants. The team worked

Overcoming the Hurdles: Classroom and Teaching Methods

- Invest time and effort in building positive group dynamics where each participant feels they have an important place in the group.
- Learning activities must be practical and concrete.
- A non-hierarchical partnership between the teacher, assistant teacher, and other members of the team is important to support the flexibility and individualized approach to the lessons.

individually with learners to enhance their understanding and development of the concept, and when possible, built on and connected it with other concepts and skills. For example, one participant was keenly interested in a new superhero movie that was loosely based on Greek mythology. The teaching team built on this interest by developing a project on Greek mythology, building in many of the concepts and skills that were covered in other lessons. This individualized approach accomplished several goals: first, making learning material relevant to the needs and interests of adult learners and second; successfully engaged learners to work on many complex concepts and skills that might otherwise have taken many lessons or not been addressed at all.

It is important to note that the assessment and learning guide framework of lesson plans is only one tool for the program. The individualized and structured lessons were an important component of the program, but just as important were group development and learning. Many adults with FASD have significant social and interpersonal deficiencies that contribute to life challenges. As reported by the participants as well as the entire team, the group development was possibly the most significant aspect of the program. Feeling like an important member of the

Overcoming the Hurdles: Classroom and Teaching Methods

- Recognition of the unique and unpredictable learning challenges of people with FASD is imperative to the success of the program.
- Complementary styles, as well as team members of both genders, allows for greater connections as well as support for some of the more personal issues that arise.

group was one reason that participants reported their continued participation in the program. As part of a social network with others with FASD, participants improved their abilities to share personal experiences, improved their use of appropriate boundaries, and many showed improvement in impulse control. To accomplish this, the team created a safe, respectful, and fun environment, based on their knowledge of the individuals and typical behaviours and challenges associated with FASD. Team members reported they were concerned that outsiders might judge the program as not serious or effective because the participants enjoyed it so much and there was joy and laughter heard from the group. However, this is a group of learners who have had little success in the traditional or typical education system so the project-based, interactive, and fun program was clearly a more successful approach.

Overcoming the Hurdles: Providing Workplace Experiences

- Investing significant time and effort engaging with potential employers provides a foundation on which to build potential partnerships.
- A friendly, accommodating approach and offering to meet at the employers' convenience built good will.

4. Employment Skills Component

A primary responsibility for the Community Employment Coordinator was to educate and raise awareness about individuals with FASD with businesses and employers and to seek out support for participants' employment experiences. The Employment Coordinator collaborated with other members of the team and the clinic staff to develop resources and created an information kit for community and potential employers. The coordinator spent significant time on the telephone and in person, building relationships with businesses, community organizations, and potential employers. This was an exceptionally time-consuming task, but the time investment was critical to build awareness of issues faced by potential employees with FASD, as well as helping potential employers understand simple accommodations to overcome those issues. One very successful and innovative practice was a "meet and greet", making personal connections with participants and potential employers.

Approximately sixty potential employment partners were contacted to participate in the program. Fifteen employers (25%) were willing to provide tours and job shadow opportunities, with two employers committed to providing work placements. Those who agreed to participate were employers who were committed to doing something positive for the

Overcoming the Hurdles: Enhancing Employability Skills

- Provide as much advance notice as possible to allow employers to make arrangements to be available for information sessions.
- Plan the timing of the program so that employment experiences can be arranged during slower times in the service and hospitality industry.

community and were open to learning about FASD. Several employers identified the opportunity to “give someone a break” or “giving someone a chance” as reasons for participating. Employers were more open to participating when they learned it was a non-paid work placement and would therefore pose no cost to the employer. One employer had personal experience with a family member with FASD which made him quite interested and committed to the program.

Community-minded businesses with existing track records (some with existing programs for hiring individuals with diverse abilities) were most interested in participating in the program. Generally the automotive, service and hospitality industries – hotels and restaurants – responded positively to the program when contacted, but were simply too busy to participate in the information sessions or to commit to supporting and training a participant. Several suggested that if the program were to operate during their slower season (fall and winter), they would commit. Other reasons potential employment partners gave for declining participation in the program were:

- Occupational health and safety and liability concerns
- Ten identified the program as a poor fit with their organizations
- Small businesses and the self-employed had difficulty being available for information sessions due to lack of staff to cover business

Overcoming the Hurdles: Enhancing Employability Skills

- Provide employers with both theoretical and practical knowledge of what to expect from individuals with FASD.
- Be realistic with employers about the expectations and limitations of participants.

responsibilities

- One large organization was involved in a labour dispute
- Several employers had only general and somewhat inaccurate information about people with FASD
- One employer would only participate with a guarantee that the participant would commit to full-time employment at the end, an unrealistic expectation for this program and that particular individual
- The program was in competition with other agencies and programs that were looking for work or school placements

Overcoming the Hurdles: Employability Skills

- Provide effective transition planning. Work collaboratively with family, educators, social workers and other professionals. Ensure the participant is aware that everyone is working together.
- Anticipate possible misunderstandings with participants and provide plenty of opportunities to discuss questions and assumptions about employment experiences.

The Employment Coordinator, in consultation with employers, identified the types of supports that the participants needed for successful experiences. This included more than just general information to overcome myths, but rather very specific strategies for communication and completing tasks. The goal was not necessarily for participants to gain employment as a short-term goal, but rather to develop awareness of possible employment opportunities and skills to serve them in the long-term.

The Employment Coordinator worked with the Literacy Project team with the intent of providing consistency and skill transfer between the two components. The skill transfer, however, was an ongoing challenge. Participants had difficulty with concepts surrounding the transfer of what they were learning in the classroom to the employment tours and environments. In both the literacy and employment components of the program, participants struggled with the same issues: difficulties linking concepts, problem processing, transfer of information, and similar cognitive deficits. Participants lacked self-confidence and demonstrated difficulty recognizing their own strengths and weaknesses, even with support. Related to the cognitive deficiencies were the ongoing life issues including health, housing, addictions, legal, transportation, as

well as family responsibilities and complexities.

A focus of the Employment Coordinator was to create job tours, job-shadowing, and work experiences for program participants. The coordinator, teacher and teacher assistant also assisted participants to build their resumes, assisted them to identify their strengths and weaknesses, how to complete a job search, to examine application forms and provided instruction in how to effectively complete them. The Coordinator facilitated workshops and educational sessions on FASD for employers and other interested parties and attended meetings with the Employment Counsellors Support Network through the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) to gather information about the local community and to create awareness about the project.

Summary

Working with individuals with FASD presents numerous challenges. The most critical aspect of providing a program requires setting aside typical assumptions about learning and comprehension, recognizing that learners with FASD function very differently than typical learners. The level of function can be misleading. One participant could read orally at a grade eleven level but had almost no comprehension of what was read out loud and writing ability was almost non-existent. Once concepts or skills appear to be mastered, learners may not retain the information which can create frustration with both the learners and the teachers.

Participants' body language is important to tune into. Becoming withdrawn or aggressive are sometimes signs that learners have stress or frustration that they don't understand and are not able to articulate. Sometimes, participants reported being ill with a sore stomach or other symptoms, without understanding that the source of the physical symptoms was stress or anxiety. Program staff followed up with participants to investigate the real reasons for absence and to check if there were misunderstandings or assumptions that needed correcting. One participant had assumed after visiting several employers that he would be required to work in all of those jobs, an illogical and impossible assumption to others, but a very real worry for someone with cognitive deficiencies.

Project staff had no way of knowing the multiple health and life challenges faced by participants. Despite taking advantage of all available information, participants often had conditions which were unknown to staff. Undiagnosed but suspected mental health conditions or other medical issues such as diabetes complicated the work of the team. Staff would ask about medications, not knowing if a

participant was having difficulty with blood sugars for example, or other complications from health issues. Because the program was offered through the Regina Community Clinic, staff could refer participants for medical care and check-ups, a significant benefit to the program.

The role of the teacher assistant was initially focused on classroom work but evolved into increased responsibility as a community liaison. Attendance was an ongoing issue for the program due to the life complexities and medical issues outlined so the teacher assistant spent a significant portion of her time following up with participants who were absent and assisting with problem-solving to reduce the barriers preventing their attendance. The importance and magnitude of this work should not be underestimated by those implementing similar programs. The philosophy of the Regina Community Clinic's FASD program is to support clients rather than controlling them. This was evident in the approach of the staff working with program participants. Low-pressure techniques were implemented so that participants were less likely to feel judged or put on the spot. A welcoming, supportive, and respectful approach was found to be far more effective for working with participants.

Participants, particularly the younger ones, identified the lack of recognition for formal credit for this program as a deficiency. Future work with the Ministries of Education and Social Services is warranted to explore the possibility of students receiving credit and funding for their attendance.

Despite the challenges, the success of the FASD Literacy and Employment Program is largely due to the expertise of the staff, supported through the collective wisdom and experience of the team at the Regina Community Clinic and the passion and commitment of the team involved in delivering the program.