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## Rock & Water and the South Australian congregate system

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### Introduction

The Rock & Water program was first delivered within the South Australian congregate care system in 2002. Since this time, the delivery of the program has undergone continuous evolution and refinement as it has sought to match both the learning and therapeutic needs of a complex client group. Rock & Water is currently the primary self-development program delivered to male and female clients residing in congregate care. This aim of this paper is to summarise (1) this process of evolution, (2) how the program is currently being delivered, (3) previous evaluation processes, and (4) the current challenges and future directions of program delivery.

This paper also draws extensively from a previous article written by the author titled: 'The Rock & Water program: empowering youth workers and clients' (published in *Youth Studies Australia*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2005).

### Background

The South Australian congregate care system, which is run by the Department of Families and Communities (Families SA), provides housing and support for children and young people who are unable to live with their family of origin. Many of these children come from backgrounds of abuse, neglect and significant disadvantage. Currently, the program is centrally delivered and managed, and recruits single-sex groups of young people, aged from nine to 17 years of age, from six residential care facilities and a number of group homes (up to three children per home).

These placements provide both short- and long-term accommodation. Children and young people residing within the congregate care system have extremely high and complex needs, and exhibit a range of emotional, behavioural and conduct-related problems. The young people are intensively supported by a rotating team of youth workers. The Rock & Water program would appear advantageous for young people residing within the congregate care system for the following two reasons:

- 1. It targets a range of developmental and therapeutic needs exhibited by young people in care. These include impulse control, emotional regulation, self-concept, self-esteem, interpersonal and social skills, and self-protective skills.
- 2. The program is delivered in a manner and style that makes it conducive to young people who find it difficult to cope within traditional learning methodologies. The psycho-physical framework is better adept at maintaining the interest and attention of youth presenting with high energy, inattention, emotional deregulation, and poor verbal and written ability.

### ***Evolution of the Rock & Water program***

In 2002, a number of youth workers working within the South Australian alternative care system were sponsored to complete the three-day Rock & Water training. These youth workers initially delivered the program to single-sex groups of male and female clients residing within their allocated congregate care facility. Preliminary attempts were also made to deliver the program to young people recruited across a number of facilities. While a number of positive outcomes were achieved at this time, barriers to successful program completion included: the need for a high staff-client ratio; high participant dropout; and a lack of universal staff commitment and resolve.

In 2004, coinciding with renewed staff interest in the program, camps (two nights in duration) were introduced to intensively deliver the program and overcome the noted barriers related to participant dropout and staff-client ratio. While this delivery format provided a means to intensively complete large aspects of the program, program integrity was compromised as a number of lessons were hastily completed. Furthermore, 'one-off' camps were found to limit the generalisability of the program, as the learning objectives were not consolidated between lessons.

In April and May 2005, after receiving financial support from Rotary, Rock & Water was delivered in a systematic and structured manner to a group of boys. Completed over a six-week period, and involving four full-day sessions, two camps and a presentation session, this delivery method was seen as overcoming the aforementioned barriers. Through the systematic evaluation of the program, combined with an audio-visual reproduction of a program that was provided to all participants and stakeholders, Rock & Water was consolidated within the South Australian congregate care system. Utilising a similar delivery framework, the program achieved similar success for a female group later that year, and further successful program delivery has occurred for both male and female client groups in 2006.

### ***Elements of current program delivery***

The following elements would appear central to successfully deliver Rock & Water to young people residing within congregate care:

- Systematic completion of Rock & Water lessons 1 to 8 (lessons 9 to 13 are too advanced for this client group).
- Supplementary activities and experiences that support the generalisability of the program's goals as well as provide opportunities to continually engage the participants.
- The completion of written booklets that consolidate and extend the learning objectives.
- The program is completed over a six- to eight-week period.
- Participant groups of between six and 12 young people.
- A ratio of not less than one youth worker to two participants.
- The facilitation role being shared between two to three youth workers.
- Youth workers having primary responsibility for program delivery.
- A dedicated, hands-on and enthusiastic staff team that are excellent role models. It is not uncommon for there to be up to 15 different youth workers involved with the program over the six-week period. The majority of these workers have completed the one-day introductory training, while over a third have completed the three-day training.

## Bringing it together

- A separation of roles between workers who facilitate the program and those who organise the logistical arrangements.
- Camps (from one to two nights in duration) that provide opportunities for intensive learning and role modelling.
- A final extended camp (up to three nights in duration) that occurs at the end of program delivery and within a novel/engaging setting. This provides a further opportunity to generalise the program's learning objectives as well as reward the participants for their commitment.
- Consultative support by psychologists.
- Managerial support and commitment to the program.
- Keeping the program as action-orientated or experiential as possible.
- A presentation session that affords the opportunity for the participants to celebrate their sense of completion.
- Audio-visual presentation, involving still and movie images, set to a background of captions and inspirational music, is presented during the final session and given to the participants. This provides the opportunity for all young people to reflect upon and consolidate their experiences.

## Evaluation

Within the congregate care setting, the Rock & Water program was first evaluated in 2005. A descriptive or qualitative methodology, assessing the broad construct of 'empowerment', was chosen as the evaluation framework. This included an analysis of key performance indicators, observational data, a client-completed questionnaire, and open interviews conducted with all youth workers and stakeholders. Indicators of program effectiveness included: minimal client drop out; no critical incidents; strong anecdotal support for both improved staff-client and inter-client relations; and completion of the work booklets. All participants also completed an evaluation questionnaire; Appendix 1 provides a summary of these responses.

The 2005 evaluation also highlighted that the Rock & Water program offered a range of positive outcomes for staff members involved with the program. Common themes reported by youth workers centred on the opportunities the program provided, including: to receive both positive verbal and observational feedback regarding their interventions; to take 'time-out' from workplace stresses; to work within a proactive, as opposed to a reactive or crisis management framework; to self-reflect upon their own work practices; and galvanise their commitment and interest to work with young people.

Later in 2005, a robust quantitative evaluation, based upon a pre-test/post-test psychological framework, was conducted on a subsequent program. This evaluation examined the constructs of self-esteem, anger and violence-based cognitions. The evaluation showed no significant improvements on these measures. While this would initially appear contraindicative to program effectiveness, this finding can also be explained by the fact that the constructs examined were measuring outcomes not achieved with this program, or that the written questionnaires were unreliable measures for young people with low verbal ability (observations strongly supported this later conclusion).

## Summary and future directions

Within the South Australian congregate care system, the Rock & Water program is seen as a tool that can mutually engage both young people and youth workers in a manner that is conducive to the delivery of a range of positive outcomes. For young people, Rock & Water provides an opportunity to develop self-management and personal control. The program also galvanises youth worker interest and abilities in a manner that has transferable benefits to the young people they service. The opportunity exists for youth workers to work with young people within a 'proactive', as opposed to a crisis driven or 'reactive' framework. This has important flow-on effects for improving job satisfaction and staff-client relationships, and reducing stress and burnout. The current challenges (and future directions) of Rock & Water delivery within the South Australian congregate care system include:

- The need to develop an evaluative framework to assess the type, breadth and length of program outcomes. Consideration is currently being given to conducting an in-depth case study analysis of program outcomes. This is regarded as the most valid way to examine program outcomes for a diverse, complex and heterogeneous client group.
- The generalisability of the program's learning objectives beyond the immediate learning context. Consideration is being given to developing a 'whole-of-unit' approach to the delivery of the program. The specific nature of this proposal is yet to be identified.
- To integrate the Rock & Water program into the current continuum of therapeutic care on offer within the South Australian congregate care system. Consideration is being given to the following:
  - increasing psychological consultation on program development, implementation and training of staff
  - developing specific role-plays and activities that target specific therapeutic needs (e.g., self-protective behaviour)
  - utilising Rock & Water as a 'window of opportunity' or 'engagement tool' for appropriately trained individuals to engage young people in more systematic and evidence-based therapeutic provision.

## Appendix 1

Table 1: Male participant attitudes towards the Rock & Water program (April–May 2005)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree
I have really enjoyed the Rock and Water program	–	–	–	30%	70%
The Rock and Water program has been one of the best experiences of my life	–	–	40%	10%	50%
The Rock and Water program has taught me a lot about myself	–	10%	–	40%	50%
The Rock and Water program has helped me deal with the unit staff (carers) better	–	–	30%	30%	40%
The Rock and Water program has helped me deal with my peers (other unit kids) better	–	–	40%	30%	30%
The Rock and Water program has helped me deal with school better	10%	10%	10%	50%	20%
I feel I can deal with bullies better since doing the Rock and Water program	–	–	10%	60%	30%
I really enjoyed the program with other young men	–	–	–	–	100%
I am a more confident person since doing the Rock and Water program	–	10%	–	30%	60%
The adult staff that participated in the Rock and Water program did a good job	–	–	–	20%	80%
I would do the Rock and Water program again	–	–	10%	–	90%