

# Feeling Safe Being Strong

## Helping children build safe, happy and healthy relationships

“Feeling Safe Being Strong” (FSBS) is a (family) violence primary prevention and early intervention program that targets primary school students in years 3 and 4. The 10 session program is conducted within the host school and works with the entire grade rather than simply identifying and isolating those students who have been identified as having experienced family violence. The intention is to promote and encourage the development of positive strategies and safe responses to violence, and to create an environment that maximises the development, health and resilience of all children. FSBS is innovative in its approach, flexible in its delivery and able to cater for a wide range of primary school curriculum requirements.

This program is a direct participation program that involves the whole class rather than simply working with children who have been identified as living with family violence. In addition, there is a teacher training component run prior to the program entering the classroom and a parent education program to inform parents of the concepts and to offer support and information around parenting issues of concern.

Currently being run in Barwon South West region, the program has also worked out of region, and is currently developing a “Train the Trainer” format in response to workers and organisations who have expressed interest in running the program in their own regions/schools.

**Setting:** Primary Schools.

**Population group target:** Years 3 and 4 (8-11)

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### Background:

The program commenced as a pilot in 2004 following a request from a local school for assistance with students living with family violence. Its origins came from a UK family violence prevention project that targeted primary schools around the greater London area. Feeling Safe Being Strong has further developed this original concept to the current package, which has been localised and had a mascot introduced – the echidna. It is currently funded philanthropically via United Way in Geelong until December 2008. Bethany is exploring further funding options with a view to securing a long term future for the program. It has undergone two evaluations, both of which have shown the program to be a useful strategy for assisting children in this age group develop and consolidate skills for healthy relationships both now and in the future. In addition, the children work through a process which culminates in their own

safety plans being developed which they can use should they experience episodes of family violence in their lives.

Bethany Community Support has a variety of program responses to violence against women including (but not limited to) a men's behaviour change program, family violence after hours service, housing, Child First, parent education and family support.

### **Project outcomes:**

The program sequentially progresses through several themes. It commences with emotional aspects, aimed to connect children with their feelings. This is followed with sessions around diversity and friendship and what it means to be a good friend. The subject of violence is tackled from the perspective of the students, who contribute their understanding of what it means to be violent and options are discussed about what they can do if they see people using violence towards each other, in particular members of their family (safety planning). The program culminates with the development of a giant echidna that represents the strengths the students want in their relationships and a celebration of the work they have done.

### [How has this been evaluated?](#)

The program has undertaken a preliminary evaluation during the initial pilot phase and an external evaluation, which was completed in December 2007. Both evaluations have shown the value of the program as a strategy for addressing violence and its versatility as a support for the work already being done in schools around violence prevention, bullying etc.

### [How has the project developed over time?](#)

The original UK model was designed to run over a school year. Feeling Safe Being Strong's initial pilot development was for a period of 17 weeks, however, it has been further refined to run over 10 weeks in order to fit within a school term. FSBS has also developed the echidna theme for the program which is used throughout as a metaphor for assertive behaviour and to connect themes. In addition the program operates from a reflective position to encapsulate the information gathered from each program undertaken. This information then allows for any necessary modifications or required flexibility to ensure that it meets each individual classroom's needs.

### [What has been learnt?](#)

We have learned many things from our experiences in running Feeling Safe Being Strong in classrooms and schools. Some of the things we consider extremely important for any specialist program entering a primary school setting are:

**It is important to know the classroom culture prior to entering:** Behaviour management strategies used in the classroom, gender issues that may exist, and relationships between the students are all important factors in working in a classroom. It is important to incorporate the student's understanding into discussion, listen to their viewpoints and let them know they have a voice. Knowing the culture of the classroom allows you to work within this and enables you to gently challenge those beliefs based on discriminatory thinking (the "isms").

**Keep variety and movement happening to counter concentration difficulties:** Ensure that the activities are interesting and varied to counter concentration

difficulties. Keep them moving and not sitting for long periods of time without some level of engagement and participation.

**Be aware of the student's level of literacy:** If written or reading tasks are to be undertaken, it is important to be aware of any students that may have difficulties in this area. We need to be aware that some behavioural problems can also be an attempt to disguise low literacy skills or learning difficulties.

**Maintain interest in the program and connection with the message you are intending to impart:** The students need to understand or need to want to understand the material in order to successfully make connection to the concepts you are trying to impart. Stories, activities, discussion groups are just some of the strategies used in the program

**Protect the students via protective interrupting:** Something also borrowed from the protective behaviours model that is very important, particularly when working in the area of violence. The student needs to be stopped from revealing to the whole class any information that has the potential to make them vulnerable to stigmatisation in any form.

**Work in partnership with the school:** A collaborative approach helps to break down any barriers or concerns the school might have and support a team approach. If the classroom teacher embraces the program, it has a much higher success rate overall.

**Be adaptable and flexible:** Always be prepared for the unexpected and need for adaptation, the important messages can still get across as long as you are suitably responsive to the needs of the individual students and the classroom environment.