

The *Tree of Life* exercise was developed by David Denborough from the Dulwich Centre Foundation in Adelaide Australia and Ncazelo Ncube (REPSSI) in 2005. It is based on the practices of narrative therapy. If you are interested in learning about narrative therapy please visit www.dulwichcentre.com.au www.narrativetherapycentre.com

If you are interested in finding out more about the TREE OF LIFE group process or narrative therapy in Toronto please contact Angel Yuen (Toronto District School Board social worker) at (647) 229-2660 or angel.yuen@tdsb.on.ca

Tree of Life Groups Winter & Spring 2009



Getting Through The Storms

**Sharing our knowledge about how children get
through hard times**

This booklet was created by two groups of children in schools
in Toronto, Canada.

*Tree of Life Groups Winter & Spring 2009



This booklet was created together with the TREE OF LIFE group members*: **Justin ,Susy, Shelly, Miriam, Jessakah, Mason, Maury, Ciara, John, Lilly, Kevin, Anna, Zoey, Carl, Robin, Tyrese, DARIAN, Zucka, Ali, and Ricky**

Group Facilitators: Hannah Fowlie, Barb McCluskey, Kim Sheehan, Lindsay Williams, Theresa and Angel Yuen

A bit about this booklet:

The group facilitators took notes during the *Tree of Life* sessions. Angel Yuen (TDSB school social worker) collected all of the notes and wrote them up into this booklet. A draft was read to both groups of children in the two schools. They agreed that it was an accurate description of their many skills and knowledges of 'Getting Through Storms'. Many of the students were also keen to add further skills and stories which have now been included.

*Some of the group members chose to use their real names and others chose to use pseudonyms.

The TREE OF LIFE members hope that this booklet will be helpful to other children who are going through hard times.

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Conclusion

We hope you have enjoyed our "Getting Through the Storms" booklet. We have shared our booklet with our teachers and principals at our schools and parents and family members. We also hope that you will share this with any children who might find it helpful.

Sincerely,

Justin ,Susy, Shelly, Miriam, Jessakah, Mason, Maury, Ciara, John, Lilly, Kevin, Anna, Zoey, Carl, Robin, Tyrese, DARIAN, Zucka, Ali, and Ricky

P.S. We also received *Tree of Life* certificates at the end of our groups and this was fun!



- Have fun
- When my parents are drinking too much I empty the bottles and I tell them to stop
- At night I talk to my sister about how the day was and the bad things that happened and this helps with my next day at school
- If you don't know where a family member is you can phone-email-write a letter-ask other family members if they might know where they are. You can also try to find pictures and try to remember conversations and time you spent together
- Hitting my pillow or screaming at it calms me down
- Having good and understanding friends that you can talk to.
- Be closer to friends who don't tell others about your problems...someone you can trust and who cares
- Make smores
- Talk to a counselor
- Having a nice teacher
- *Share the stories that you have on your heart*

Introduction

We are a group of children ages 10 to 14 years old from two different schools in Toronto, Canada. We participated in a *TREE OF LIFE* group and met every other week for a few months. We learned a lot in our groups. We hope that this booklet can be shared with other kids who are going through storms - not only in Toronto...but around the world.



In the beginning groups we each drew and coloured trees to represent our life:

The Roots represent *where do you come from?* (birth place, your family history, and ancestry, significance of your name)

The Ground represents the present - where the child lives and goes to school and some of the activities that he/she is engaged in during their regular daily life.

The Trunk represent skills, abilities, values and talents. *What are you good at? What do others like about you?*

The Branches represent the hopes, wishes, dreams and direction that the child wants their life to go in.

The Leaves represent people who are important to the child. These important figures may be alive or dead.

The Fruits represent gifts that the child has been given (not necessarily material gifts, but things such as friendship, acts of kindness or care)



OUR FOREST OF LIFE



like he would make funny faces to make me laugh. If he could talk I think he would want to say to me *'They're just a waste of time...just ignore them.'* *'He would know that it's not right for kids to say racist things'*.

Other things that help us to get through the Storms of Life....

- Hugs really help when you are scared - sad - worried
- Talk to people "my mom", "my friend" ' my grandma'
- Write in a diary
- Crying helps you fall asleep and get out of the pain
- After the fighting stops I write a mean letter and then I throw it away to get rid of the angry feeling
- Find a hobby to keep you busy when you are feeling disappointed
- Make other plans when a parent doesn't show up to pick you up
- Playing a favourite video game
- Playing sports
- Read a book

Dealing with mean words and harassing things...

We all agreed that being called 'Gay' and racism happens a lot. We hear mean comments everyday. This is not o.k.!



Building Lego

When I was sad and lonely and being called 'Gay' all the time I started to play with and build Lego. I could play with it at recess and then not care so much that no one wanted to play with me. It kept me distracted and busy. I would build with hundreds of Lego pieces. It helps me with my mental ability and hands-on activity. And soon I realized that *'Playing Lego attracts friends!!'* I think other kids realized my mental ability and that I *did* have some talent.

Ignore mean comments and walk away

When I was 9 years old I remember these kids telling me that I looked like poo because I am black and from southern Africa. This made me cry and feel really bad about myself. The way I get through the storm of racism is to try to ignore it and walk away. I also think to myself *'They're just wasting their breath talking about you.'* I remember a principal saying to me *'They have no reason to make fun of you.'* This helped me to stop thinking that I was the one that was bad.

I also had a huge big brown bear called Cheer who wore a jacket and shirt. Every time I'd cry ...he would hug me. It's



Storms of Life

In our groups we learned that there are many different *Storms of Life* for children.

The storms in our lives include:

- Violence in the family - our moms being abused or people hurting us
- One of our parents being in prison
- A parent coming out of prison and looking for us
- Being confused about how to have a relationship with parents who have hurt us or others
- Losing a best friend
- When a friend turns on you
- Conflict about religion
- Bad fights with brothers and sisters
- Our house being flooded
- Living in a country where there was war, destruction and death
- People swearing at you
- Moving from your friends and land
- 'Personal parent secrets' such as gender change. *'My dad became a woman. But it only became a storm when others found out about it. I guess it just doesn't seem normal to have a father that's a woman.'*



Listening to music

Listening to music helps a few of us during storms. For example ...losing a best friend is like a really big storm. It feels terrible to not be able to talk with that person or laugh a

lot with them and can make kids feel sad. Music can help to keep your mind off of the hurt. Some people don't like to listen to anything that's too sad ...while others of us do. The words in the music can be soothing. With my cousin I listen to a machine that plays relaxing sounds like waves which helps us to calm down and go to sleep.



Animals

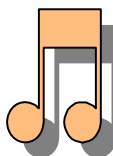
Many of us love our pets. We have fun with them and they can help us through hard times. *'My cats and dog help to calm me down and to stay calm especially at the times when people have tried to hurt me. They can tell when I am sad. My cat protects me because I am the one who takes care of her.'*

'I go in the dogs cage because it feels safe there and I play with my dog.'

Drawing also helps to put out your emotions on paper and change your mood, you can also write songs or poetry

Strength from Singing

I love to sing and singing helps when I'm stressed. It helps me to get my strength up from the beat and the lyrics.



Getting through the Storm of Hurt

Many of us have been hurt in different ways. It's sad and hard when children are hurt. When some of us get hurt we may show sadness. But for some of us instead we might show it through anger. In our conversations we discovered ways of dealing with the hurt.....

Caring for our family

There are things children say to make fun or disrespect one of our parents. *I remember these kids making fun of my mother and calling her fat. This made me really angry because she is so nice and when people say bad things about her it hurts me. I want to stick up for my mom because I care about her.*

Talking to my sister

My mom and I fight a lot. Sometimes I think she cares more about my sister and not me and this makes me feel sad, hurt and angry. My mom thinks I like my dad better than her. *I talk to my sister about everything and this helps me to feel better.*

- Lot of Alcohol and drugs
 - When family members lie and say they are not drinking
 - When someone becomes mean or violent when using drugs or alcohol
- Divorce
 - A parent not showing up to see you for a visit
 - Mom and dad fighting
 - Not seeing one parent



- Mean words and harassing things are like storms!

-Homophobic comments like 'Your GAY!' *When kids used to say it all the time I had no one to play with. That was the worst and I would cry non-stop because people wouldn't want to be my friend.*

-Racism - this is when other kids make fun of skin colour or maybe what you eat. Really it's about other children being mean for no reason. This makes kids feel bad about themselves.

- Poverty and not having enough food or clothes
- Getting in trouble at home and at school. *Sometimes when things are bad at home I am in a bad mood at school. It's not just about anger... but sometimes it's about being sad.*
- Seeing violence in our schools or community
- Someone we love getting hurt in an accident
- Too much homework and feeling too stressed
- Not knowing whether your parent is alive
- Not ever knowing a family member and feeling worried-sad-lonely
- A grandparent dying



Getting Through the Storms

After we talked about the many storms that we have faced, we also talked about and learned lots and lots of ways of 'Getting Through Storms'. In the next few pages we will share all of our skills and ways of getting through hard times. We learned a lot and helped each other. We hope that what we have written here will also be helpful to other children who are going through the storms in their life.

Getting Through the Storms of Violence

A number of us witnessed violence in our homes in the past. Sometimes we could stop the violence...and sometimes we couldn't. We learned that even when we couldn't stop the violence...there were lots of ways that we responded...

Protecting our moms

Many of us have seen our moms being hurt. It is upsetting and scary and can make us cry when we see the person we love the most being hurt. For some of us we have fathers who used to live with us who have temper problems. *'My dad almost killed my mom!' 'I remember when my mom was pregnant with my brother that my father was sometimes violent.'* *'When I was 6 years old my dad was really drunk and he poked both of my mom's eyes so hard that caused her to have difficulty seeing even today. I yelled at him to 'Stop!' and would shout at him 'Leave her alone!' got in-between him and my mom and tried to push him, but I was so little.'*

Responding to the storms of alcohol and drugs

Sticking up for each other

Sometimes storms can be about drugs. When my father wasn't taking his drugs he would get very angry and sometimes start hitting us. I would feel bad for everyone in my family, and want to protect my brothers. During these times we helped each other and would stick up for each other. I would tell him to STOP and leave everybody alone. I did this because I hoped that everyone around me would be safe and not get hurt anymore.



Hugging stuffed animals and calling grandparents we love...

A storm for kids can be alcohol and when parents drink a lot and there are lots of parties. When one of my parents would get drunk it was bad because sometimes they would get mean. It made me cry. During hard times I call my grandmother to talk to her and she calms me down. I have a bear too and he helps me and I hug him when I am upset.

Grandma singing to me

When I feel really sad or upset I phone my grandmother. She can tell by the sound in my voice that something is wrong. She sings me a song in Cree that she used to sing to me when I was a little girl. Her singing calms me and lets me know that she understands and cares

person closer to you. A picture can bring back memories and thoughts of the love people have for us.

Poverty - Think about how comfortable your clothes are...instead of how they look

For some of us being poor can be like a storm. Sometimes people make fun of you cause of the clothes you wear. Being poor can make you late for school and make it hard to do homework. Poverty can make kids sad and depressed. What helps is to think about how comfortable the clothes are instead of how they look. Focus on not wearing clothes to fit in and get other people to like you for who you are.

Wishing for a safe country and dreaming of visiting my grandmother again

I used to live in Iraq in a house in Baghdad. I went to school and all the teachers liked me. I had a lot of friends. One day, I was walking to my soccer game when I saw kids throwing rocks at the U.S. army. Then all of a sudden American soldiers began shooting. I was shot in my leg and fell to the ground. My friend yelled to me "Run!" but I couldn't. I stayed on the ground. My friend saw a red laser spot on me and he quickly pushed me away. But then he was shot. My best friend was dead. I think about him a lot. He saved my life.

I wish for my country to be safe and to have no more war. I would like to go back and talk to people to stop the war. I dream of visiting my grandmother who I used to live with in Iraq. This makes me happy...knowing one day I will see her again.

When I was 3 years old my dad was hurting my mom ...so I bit his leg and ran into my room. Ni ne years later he came back and asked for my brothers and not me. He always has done things that weren't nice or fair. When he calls I just say now that he has the wrong number and I hang up on him.

We care for our moms and want to protect them. We did lots of things to protect each other or ourselves.

Protecting and comforting our little brothers and sisters

For some of us, when our parents were fighting we wanted to get our little brothers and sisters away from the yelling or violence. Parents fighting is like 'lightening' during storms. We did things like get away in the basement until they cool down, took them outside to the park, or we would 'hide in the bed under the covers...shut the door and turn the t.v. loud so we can't hear mom being hurt'.

One group member used to try to interrupt my parents from fighting. I would say things like "If you don't want to talk it out...I'm going to take the baby and go somewhere" When this didn't work I put my baby brother on my back and carried him to another apartment in the building. This was like a safe place to go. They would help me and my baby brother to calm down and then they gave us snacks.

Many of us don't want our little brothers and sisters to hear the 'bad stuff' or see our moms being beaten. They are so little and they should not have to see or hear it.

Clever Hiding skills

Some of us developed clever hiding skills when we were much younger when people were trying to hurt us or someone we loved. One of us would hide under the bed. *'When things were really bad I would hide in my toy box and put stuff all over me so he couldn't find me.'* *'I would hide behind the wall in my closet so no one would be able to find me.'* I used to hide in the crawl space and sing to myself. *'I hid in my closet or a secret place that I built'*.

Face-Reading skills

When the violence was getting out of hand I thought that it was better to just leave and get way somewhere! We can try to read the person's face to know when we should try to get away. For example when my dad's face gets really red, it's like you can see smoke coming out his head. He has angry, bulging, surprising eyes and his eyebrows and lips might be in a frown.

Some other ways that we have got through storms of violence are:

- When parents are fighting we can try to keep them in separate rooms and ask them to stop
- Tell others what is going on and ask them to help.
- Go to someone else's house (neighbour-friend) or to our 'safe area'
- As the oldest child I have tried to teach my younger siblings how to take care of themselves
- It can be helpful to agree with what the abusive person is saying... even when we disagree. *I would do this with my dad so that he wouldn't swear at our mom*

- *When my dad was fighting with my mom I pushed him to get him away from her and now we have a camera in that part of our building where he tried to attack her*
- *I couldn't do anything to stop my dad from hurting my mom. But I would bring her tea and tell her I loved her*
- *When my brother and mom would fight, I would go to my room to be safe and hug my dolls*
- *I yelled at my dad and told him that if the violence continued I wouldn't visit him again for at least 5 months. After I said this to him he stopped.*
- Sometimes police can be called and be helpful. But for some of us calling the police made things worse.
- Our families can help. We can go to cousins, aunts, grandparents and other family and tell them and they would try to stop it

Remembering and/or looking at pictures

Looking at pictures can help us to get through storms. One of us comes from a country where some people have been sent to prison for having a different religion. *This happened to my father and we do not know whether he is still alive. This is a big storm...not knowing where someone important and loved is. What helps me when I worry is to think of him still being alive. My father used to travel a lot to places like China and South America. I like to remember seeing the pictures of him enjoying and being with people. There is a picture I remember of him in South America with a group of aboriginal people.* Looking at pictures brings the

