

An innovative and increasingly popular youth development program, titled Rock and Water, was recently trialled in the South Australian residential care system. This article provides a general outline of the program and details a case study involving a group 10 boys in care, aged between 11 and 15 years. A range of qualitative and quantitative data is tabled that provides preliminary evidence for the program's 'empowering effects' for both participants and youth workers involved with the program. These outcomes are discussed in relation to their contextual importance for the residential care system, areas of ongoing improvement and future directions.



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# The Rock and Water program

## Empowering youth workers and clients

by Ivan Raymond

**A**cross Australia, the number of children in out-of-home care is growing considerably (AIHW 2005). This is placing increasing pressure on the alternative care systems to manage children with more complex emotional and behavioural problems. Left untreated, these problems have the potential to trigger developmental pathways of social isolation, marginalisation, unemployment, homelessness and other at-risk behaviours (Wilson 2000). For this reason, the development of innovative strategies to counter such trajectories is becoming increas-

ingly important within Australia's child welfare systems.

Within the alternative care continuum, the care and support of Australia's most high-need children is often the responsibility of the residential care system (Ainsworth 2001). The youth workers who staff these facilities are at the front line of delivery of innovative practice to manage young people exhibiting complex emotional and behavioural problems (Delfabbro, Barber & Bentham 2002). The provision of these services often occurs with a background of crisis management, high

stress, limited positive client feedback and increasing public and internal scrutiny as the issue of child protection is examined in detail within government agencies. Such an environment often has an inhibitory effect on the implementation of proactive or innovative work practices. As a consequence, many youth workers experience feelings of disempowerment within the workplace.

Within the past five years, an innovative youth development program, titled Rock and Water (Ykema 2002, 2003), has gained increasing popularity within Australian schools and

youth-care agencies. This manual-based program, developed upon a psycho-physical framework, has received strong anecdotal support for its ability to foster self-control, self-reflection and self-confidence in both young men and women (Ykema 2002, 2003). Recently, this program has been trialled with young people living within the South Australian residential care system.

Despite its increasing popularity, the Rock and Water program has not been systematically evaluated within the literature. For this reason, the aim of this article is to undertake a preliminary and broad examination of the program's outcomes for both clients and youth workers within the South Australian residential care system. The broad construct of "empowerment" was chosen as the measure by which the effectiveness of the program was evaluated. By targeting such a broad outcome, it is hoped that this article will provide the impetus for further research.

Before describing a detailed case-study analysis, this article outlines the contextual framework through which the Rock and Water program is delivered for youth in the residential care system, including the case for "empowerment", a general outline of the Rock and Water program and discussion of the perceived therapeutic match between the Rock and Water program and the needs of the youth within the residential care system.

### **The residential care environment**

The South Australian residential care system provides both short- and long-term accommodation for male and female young people ranging in age from 7 to 17 years. Young people within the care system exhibit significantly higher levels of emotional, attention and conduct-related problems than children not in care (Delfabbro, Barber & Bentham 2002). These problems are, in turn, linked to higher rates of school suspension and expulsion, behavioural disturbances, inter-peer conflict, offending and social isolation (August

& McDonald 1996; Bolger & Patterson 2001). Within the residential care system, young people exhibiting high levels of emotional deregulation require higher levels of supervision by youth workers. The need for empowerment, therefore, is seen as the need for young people to develop greater personal self-management and self-control. Within the residential care environment this is likely to translate into less external management of young people (e.g. fewer restraints, a reduced need for intensive supervision), and greater equality within the staff-client power relations. This has important flow-on effects for the youths' social integration and their ability to meet other developmental milestones.

Because the residential care setting is, at times, intense and emotionally charged, there is the potential for both youth workers and young people to be "trapped in a conflict cycle" (Vollmer 2005). Characterised by an environment of crisis management, high stress and reactive interventions, innovative work practices are often stifled. In addition, many youth workers underestimate their own abilities in fostering pro-social change. For example, many youth workers refer clients to outside agencies (e.g. for anger management), rather than use their own skills and position to foster more efficacious outcomes. These factors translate to feelings of disempowerment, reduced self-efficacy and lowered job satisfaction, which in turn go a long way to explain the high level of staff turnover that exists within the welfare discipline in general (Barak, Nissly & Levin 2001).

For a child within the alternative care system, the most important factor in fostering long-term therapeutic growth is the provision of a stable and responsive relationship with a significant adult figure (Wilson 2000). In particular, the development of secure attachment relationships is fundamental to supporting children who are dealing with the scars of previous abuse, neglect and instability (Moses 2000; Ungar 2004). For this reason, residential care environments that foster both staff and client empowerment, job satisfaction, staff stability and,

most importantly, strong worker-client relationships, are in the best position to provide these relationships, and in turn, foster the most efficacious therapeutic outcomes.

### **What is the Rock and Water program?**

The Rock and Water program is a manual-based education system that was developed by the Dutch educationalist Freerk Ykema (2002, 2003). Ykema designed the program for boys aged from 10 to 18 in response to his perception that traditional educational programs were unable to support boys in key aspects of their development. These areas included verbal and emotional expression, emotional regulation, self-management of impulse-driven tendencies and the ability to respond to and manage aggressive tendencies in both themselves and others. While the program was initially developed for boys, in Australia, it is increasingly being run with both sexes.

The program is founded on a psycho-physical framework, with a number of existential and transpersonal philosophies built into the program (Ykema 2002). In short, this framework is based upon the notion that the development of body awareness (e.g. the ability to control one's physical state, i.e. breath) is a precursor to the development of emotional awareness (e.g. as emotions are expressed through the body), which in turn, fosters the development of self-awareness (e.g. the ability to link together one's environment, emotions and thoughts).

The 14 lessons in the program include a range of physical exercises, role plays, brief assignments, active discussions, inter-group challenges and periods of reflection. Lessons 9 to 14 of the program are primarily designed for participants aged 14 and over, as they require a greater level of abstract reasoning and an understanding of existential concepts.

While the physical aspects of the program are centered upon teaching self-defence, Ykema (2003) views this as a secondary learning outcome in relation to the program's core themes.



The boys who completed the program were observed at the presentation day as exhibiting a strong group ethos and camaraderie.

*The building-blocks of the Rock and Water program are self-control, self-reflection and self-confidence. Building on to this foundation, it is possible to pay attention to the themes of safety, assertiveness, communication and finding their own way (the inner compass) that connects them to others (solidarity) and gives them direction (spirituality) (Ykema 2003, p.9).*

An important component of the Rock and Water program is the symbolic references. For instance, “rock” represents a rigid and uncompromising approach to life, while “water” symbolises flexibility, communication and cooperation. The program teaches the consequences, both positive and negative, of approaching the world in either a “rock” or “water” manner. This semantic, or metaphorically based learning approach supports the generalisability of the program.

### **The program and youth in residential care**

The Rock and Water program was primarily designed for boys within a mainstream school setting. Despite this, the program would appear, for two main reasons, to offer much for youth within a residential care setting. First, the program targets a range of developmental or therapeutic tasks that are of central importance for a cohort of this type. These tasks include the development of:

- impulse control and emotional regulation (including the management of

aggressive and violent behaviour in themselves and others)

- positive self-concept and self-esteem
- interpersonal and social skills – including the application of appropriate personal boundaries and physical expression (e.g. touch)
- behaviour and demeanor that counteracts further cycles of victimisation.

Second, the program is delivered in a manner and style that is appropriate for young people who find it difficult to cope within traditional learning methodologies. In particular, the psycho-physical framework maintains the interest and attention of youth presenting with high energy, inattention, emotional deregulation, and poor verbal and written ability. For this reason, this action-orientated learning method would appear to have an important role in both engaging and educating youth within the alternative care system.

### **Case study**

A number of early attempts had been made to deliver the Rock and Water program to young people living within the South Australian residential care system. The following case study represents a culmination of these earlier learning experiences.

### **Clientele**

Thirteen boys, ranging from 11 to 15 years of age, were initially enrolled in the program. All of the boys were on Care and Protection orders and resided within one of seven alternative care facilities. The group included boys with backgrounds in offending, multi-placement breakdowns, substantiated cases of abuse, marginalisation within the school system and severe attachment-related problems.

### **Program details**

The primary aim of the program was to see the students systematically complete the Rock and Water program (lessons 1 to 8). A secondary aim was to provide the youth with a range of supplementary experiences to generalise the program’s goals beyond the immediate learning

context. This aspect of the program was based upon an experiential or action-orientated learning framework.

The entire program was delivered over a six-week period and was comprised of four full-day activities, two camps and a presentation session. Earlier experiences indicated that a mixture of camps and day activities provided the optimal means to engage and maintain the interest of the young people. In total, 15 male youth workers were involved in the program, with three sharing the facilitation load.

### *Day activities*

The four day activities were completed within a two-week school holiday period and were conducted in a remote area in the Adelaide Hills. This location was chosen because it was semi-wilderness and sufficiently novel that it did not have explicit links to traditional learning methodologies and because it afforded the opportunity to run a variety of co-located supplementary activities.

Each of the four day activities included the delivery of two Rock and Water lessons, facilitated by an accredited youth worker, with supporting youth workers dispersed among the group. A ratio of one youth worker to two clients was maintained throughout all sessions.

During each of the activity days, a range of action-orientated games and activities were conducted outside the structured lessons. Activities were chosen on the basis that they required the boys to self-regulate their own emotions or behaviour, thereby affording the opportunity to generalise the Rock and Water skills.

### *Camp 1*

Two weeks after the completion of the day activities, a two-night camp was conducted in a remote and semi-wilderness location an hour from Adelaide. The camp offered rudimentary dormitory facilities, with half of the group required to sleep in tents. The camp afforded the opportunity for the boys to revise and actively practice the first eight Rock and Water lessons, to introduce a range

of experientially based activities that required the young people to generalise their learning and to start the written component of the program.

### Camp 2

The final phase of the program included a three-night camp on Kangaroo Island. This camp had a number of aims. First, the camp was a “reward’ for the boys who completed the program. Second, the camp afforded numerous opportunities for the boys to generalise and practice their Rock and Water skills. For instance, the close living conditions, high tourist load, abundance of sensitive wildlife and the inclusion of a range of experiential-based games and team activities required the boys to self-regulate on an ongoing basis. A final aim of the camp was for the boys to complete the written component of the program.

### Presentation

A presentation day involving a reunion of all staff and young people was seen as an integral part of the program. Experience indicated that many young people within the residential care system fail to complete programs or activities. For this reason, the presentation day afforded the opportunity for the boys to celebrate their sense of completion, re-experience the program through a video presentation and share their achievements with others.

### Program evaluation

The program was evaluated using a range of quantitative and qualitative measures. These included an analysis of key performance indicators, observational data, a client-completed questionnaire, and open interviews, which were conducted with all youth workers and stakeholders involved in the program. While such individual measures lack methodological rigor in their own right and should not be used to justify the empirical validity of the program, together they provide a range of information that provides preliminary data on the program’s overall effectiveness.

### Overall outcomes

The following indicators are seen as providing preliminary evidence for the program’s overall effectiveness.

- Minimal client drop out – 10 of the 13 boys completed the entire program (two boys were unable to complete the program for reasons outside their control, while one boy was excluded for an unwillingness to engage).
- No critical incident reports were completed during any of the program’s activity days or camps – reports of this type indicate either significant staff or outside (e.g. police) intervention.
- The completion of the work booklets indicated that the majority of the boys had assimilated the contents of the program.
- Improved staff–client relationships – both youth workers and boys reported more positive interpersonal relationships.

- Improved interclient relationships – the boys who had completed the program were observed at the presentation day as exhibiting a strong group ethos and camaraderie – this was despite the fact that they lived in seven separate alternative care facilities, which had traditionally interacted with competition and conflict.

### Client-related outcomes

At the conclusion of the program, all of the participants completed an evaluation form which drew on their experiences of the program. The questionnaire required the boys to respond on a five-point scale, from 1) strongly disagree to 5) strongly agree, to statements pertaining to the Rock and Water program. Table 1 provides a summary of these responses and indicates that the young people who completed the program not only enjoyed themselves, but believed that

**Table 1. Participant attitudes towards the Rock and Water program**

Per cent who	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 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



The program represents a form of innovative practice youth workers can employ with young people within a 'proactive', as opposed to a crisis management or 'reactive' framework.

the program had been beneficial. To illustrate, over two-thirds of the group reported that the program had helped them in at least one of the following areas: managing school, dealing with bullies, relating to their carers and feeling more confident.

#### Youth-worker-related outcomes

The reports of youth workers involved in the program were nearly all positive. To quickly summarise, the workers reported that while the program had been both tiring and challenging, it had been something that they had really enjoyed and, for some, it had been a highlight of their youth work career. The common themes reported by youth workers centered on the opportunities the program provided, including:

- to receive both positive verbal and observational feedback regarding their interventions
- to galvanise their commitment and interest in working with young people
- to acknowledge their own abilities and skills in being able to foster prosocial change
- to reflect upon their own work practices
- to work within a proactive, as opposed to a reactive or crisis, management framework

- to take “time-out” from the routine-driven workplace stresses that manifest within the residential care facilities.

This feedback indicates that the youth workers viewed the program as providing a unique opportunity for involvement with a proactive and innovative set of interventions and, as a consequence, the program was seen as an extremely positive and empowering experience.

#### Evaluation summary

This evaluation highlights a range of positive outcomes of the Rock and Water program for both young people and youth workers alike. The key aspects of the delivery of the program that would appear to be linked to its success include:

- keeping the program as action-orientated or experiential as possible
- having a dedicated, hands-on and enthusiastic staff team
- striking a balance between self-development activities (e.g. Rock and Water lessons) and supplementary activities that are fun and interesting
- providing opportunities for the program’s learning experiences to be generalised
- using camps to provide intensive periods of learning and role modelling
- providing a significant reward at the end of the program (e.g. camp to Kangaroo Island) to minimise client drop out
- ensuring a high staff-to-client ratio.

Despite the program’s successes, a number of areas requiring ongoing development were identified, they included:

- the need for intensive staffing levels – this became problematic as the program’s needs had to be balanced against the operational requirements of the residential care facilities
- the written component of the program – the low literacy levels of the boys restricted the value of this component
- the generalisability of the program’s learning objectives beyond the

immediate learning context – this concern is not isolated to this program, but is an issue with experiential programs in general (Gass 1990)

- support to keep the boys on task in the initial stages of the program
- additional research to evaluate whether or not the initially positive reports provided by both staff and young people have translated into longer-term behavioural outcomes.

#### Conclusion

The results of the case study provide strong preliminary support for the hypothesis that the Rock and Water program represents a “tool” that can mutually engage both young people and youth workers within a residential care system. For children in care, the Rock and Water program provides an opportunity to develop self-management and personal control skills, and, in doing so, skills that foster personal empowerment. Although additional evidence of longstanding benefits is required, nonetheless the program’s treatment goals represent important targets for change for children within the alternative care setting (Wilson 2000).

The experience of workers involved in the case study also suggests that the Rock and Water program can galvanise youth worker interest and utilise their abilities in a manner that has translatable benefits to the young people they service. Within the residential care setting, the program represents a form of innovative practice youth workers can employ with young people within a “proactive”, as opposed to a crisis management or “reactive”, framework. This has important flow-on effects including improving job satisfaction and staff–client relationships, reducing stress and burnout and, ultimately, fostering empowerment within the workplace. These factors are central to reducing workplace turnover, an area of considerable importance to the social welfare discipline in general (Barak, Nissly & Levin 2001).

A range of secondary effects are also worth considering when evalu-

ating the overall effectiveness of the Rock and Water program within a residential care system. For instance, staff and client empowerment, positive staff-client relations and improved youth worker job satisfaction and stability are all factors that are significantly linked to the development of secure attachment patterns between clients and youth workers (Wilson 2000). By galvanising a child's resilience to cope with previous abuse, neglect and instability, this attachment pattern has significant therapeutic benefits (Moses 2000; Ungar 2004). For this reason, preliminary evidence suggests that the Rock and Water program has achieved benefits that extend beyond the program's stated aims.

This article represents a first attempt to systematically evaluate and understand the Rock and Water program. It is hoped that this broad but exploratory analysis of the program will inspire future, methodologically sound research. While the program is gaining increasing popularity within Australia's youth agencies, further research is required before it can be accepted as an evidence-based intervention.

Despite these limitations, "proactive" interventions like the Rock and Water program show promise for future child welfare planning and provision. At present, the program is being trialled for girls within the South Australian alternative care system. Initial reports suggest

that program benefits are translatable to young women.

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