

# **Developing a Framework for Strengthening Families: Phase I – Executive Summary**

by  
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**March 2016**

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## Study Purpose and Process

Currently there are no attachment-based programs in existence in any other second stage residential facility for women and children leaving abusive relationships. Therefore there are no established programming models for implementing attachment programs in these facilities. The Bravestone Centre, has piloted a program to address this deficit through the development of their Family Attachment Program. This program consists of four components:

- **The Attachment Group.** Developed specifically for the Family Attachment program, this group runs for four weeks and covers the definition of attachment, the importance of attachment, the long term impacts of attachment the effects of abuse on attachment, and how to repair relationships where attachment has been adversely affected. The group is guided by videos from the “A Simple Gift Series”.
- **The Circle of Security-Parenting (COS-P) Group.** This eight week program, developed by Cooper, Hoffman and Powell (Circle of Security International, n.d.), works to improve parents observations of their children and reflect upon their responses to their children. Throughout the eight weeks the discussion progresses from secure attachments and children’s needs to parents identifying attachment issues from their own childhood and the resulting behaviours that impact on their attachment with their child.
- **Positive Discipline.** Developed for this program from a number of resources on positive discipline, this ten week program helps mothers to understand what age appropriate expectations and disciplinary methods are for different stages of development.
- **Individual Counselling.** This counselling is specific to parenting and attachment issues that surface in the other components of the program and allows women to discuss more personally relevant issues without disrupting the group process.

The purpose of this study was to gather information needed to determine if this pilot program should become part of the permanent services offered at the Bravestone Centre and to develop a framework for the Family Attachment Program within the existing system of programs at the Centre. To accomplish this, information was gathered from the following sources:

- **Interviews with Program Participants.** Seven program participants were asked about their experiences with the program, their feedback about the program and its effects, and their recommendations regarding the timing of the program in relation to their arrival at the facility and the other programs at the Bravestone Centre.
- **Interviews with Program Staff.** The counsellor for the Family Attachment Program and the counsellor for the Individual Counselling Program were interviewed to obtain their perceptions of the program and its effect on women’s relationships and attachment to their children.
- **Agencies Providing Attachment Programs.** Eight agency representatives were interviewed to obtain their perspectives on attachment programs and their recommendations for a model for attachment programming at the second stage residential facility for women and children leaving abusive relationships.

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- **Literature Review.** A review of the literature on the impact of attachment on children's development, the impact of family violence on attachment, and the Circle of Security-Parenting program was conducted to support the application of attachment programming in second stage residential facilities.

## Attachment

Based on parents' ability to read their children's cues to their needs and responding to those needs, four different attachment patterns form:

- **Secure Attachment.** These attachments result when parents are attentive to their children's cues and meeting their needs for care, safety, and comfort.
- **Avoidant Attachment.** These attachments stem from neglect and are characterized by a lack of emotional connection between parent and child because the child has learned that their needs will not be recognized or met by the parent.
- **Resistant Attachment.** These attachments result from inconsistent caregiving and are characterized by anger and resistance in the child based on their experiences of seeking care and comfort but realizing that these are not always available when needed.
- **Disorganized Attachment.** These attachments develop from experiences of abuse and fear and are characterized by confused and disoriented behaviour and emotions.

Secure attachments lead to growth of neural connections in brain areas associated with processing of emotions, emotion and behaviour regulation, and coping with stress. Thus, individuals with secure attachments are less vulnerable to mental health issues and impulsive, under controlled behaviours. Increased cortical development related to secure attachments are also associated with enhanced cognitive capacities such as effective problem solving, reasoning, attention, monitoring of information, recognizing accurate and inaccurate information, making decisions, goal setting, planning and organizing, sequential thinking and linking current information to previously learned information. Because attachment represents a socio-emotional relationship, it is related to social skills and the development of healthy and secure relationships in childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Family violence, abuse and neglect are associated with insecure and disorganized attachments and impaired development in the above mentioned areas, thereby leading to poorer cognitive, emotional and social functioning. Left unaddressed, these adverse effects can last well into adulthood and perpetuate patterns of insecure attachment intergenerationally. Second stage residential facilities are the ideal venue for addressing attachment problems resulting from domestic violence.

Interviews with program participants, staff and agencies further lent support to the implementation of an attachment program within a second stage residential agency such as the Bravestone Centre. Family Attachment Program participants liked the program and found it easy to apply in their daily interactions with their children. They particularly liked the videos and

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handouts used in the program and they readily adopted the COS-P language used in the program. Part of the appeal of the program is its' positive rather than shame based approach that makes parents less defensive in facing and dealing with their parenting struggles. Participants and staff reported changes towards more secure attachment with children, reflective parenting, and confidence in parenting. Women also reported positive views of parenting and gaining more enjoyment from their parenting after the program. The women were better able to read their children's cues and respond to those cues, thereby making interactions more rewarding and effective. Consequently their children's behaviour became more cooperative and controlled and the children were happier. In some cases the attachment program helped mothers and children heal from their experiences of violence.

### **Conclusion**

As a preliminary study, this research has demonstrated that the Family Attachment Program is popular with clients and staff of the Bravestone Centre, and their reports suggest that it may be effective in improving parenting behaviour and attachments. These reported changes were in-line with agency reports of changes related to the COS-P. Further, based on the client and staff reports, the goals of the COS and COS-P are being met through the Family Attachment Program. These goals consist of helping parents be more attentive and responsive to their children's signals of their need either to explore or to be comforted, helping parents understand their children's and their own behaviour, and helping parents identify attachment issues in their own childhood and link them to attachment issues they are having with their children. These findings are limited however, by the small sample size and the possibility that enthusiasm for the program and the counsellor may have biased perceptions and reports of change. They are also limited by their failure to determine the separate impact of the different components of the Family Attachment Program in relation to their combined impact. The preliminary findings however, suggest that a more extensive evaluation that addresses these limitations is a worthwhile endeavor.

Innovative attachment programs such as the Family Attachment Program require evaluations as evidence of their impact. Evidence of the effects of this program would support its continued application with women who have left abusive relationships, or guide modifications to increase its effectiveness. These types of evaluations would also promote the Family Attachment Program as a model for attachment-based parenting programs in second stage residential agencies. With no other Canadian second stage residential agency offering an attachment-based parenting program, building a model that could be used by other agencies would not only add to the literature but to the available resources for second stage residential agencies and the clients they serve.

The need for evaluation however, is predicated on the continuation of the Family Attachment Program. The program has been implemented as a pilot program and thus has been internally funded. The agency cannot support the program with its current level of funding and therefore

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more permanent funding needs to be found, particularly in the face of significant evidence of the importance of attachment to life-long wellbeing, clients' positive perspective of the program, and preliminary evidence that it may work to improve attachment between clients and their children.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the literature reviewed for this study and the interviews conducted the following six recommendations were developed. These recommendations are intended to help establish a strong foundation and support for the Family Attachment Program at the Bravestone Centre and potentially create a model for attachment programming at other second stage residential agencies.

### **A. Programming Recommendations**

#### **1) Ensure that the Family Attachment Program Becomes a Permanent Program at the Bravestone Centre**

The Family Attachment Program is a pilot program that has been internally funded by the Bravestone Centre for the past two years to determine if the program would work with the population and the other programs at the Centre. The current research was conducted to improve the positioning of the program relative to entry to the agency and to the other programs offered at the agency. Thus, with the information guiding these refinements, the program will be even more beneficial to the women accessing the Bravestone Centre.

The research clearly indicates that having a secure attachment is an important part of physiological, cognitive, social, and emotional development and has long term positive effects intergenerationally. It also demonstrates that secure attachments are adversely affected by experiences of family violence, and therefore children and parents who have experienced domestic violence need to have the opportunity to rebuild secure attachments and thus maximize their chances of having a healthy developmental trajectory. Therefore, a second stage residential facility for women and children leaving abusive relationships is ideally situated to provide an attachment program. As indicated in this study, this program is well liked and appears to having a positive influence on the women who have taken it and on their children as well. For these reasons, it is strongly recommended that permanent funding to support this program long term be found. Without this additional funding, the program will be discontinued and the important issue of attachment will remain unaddressed for clients and their children. With additional funding, the program would be the first specific attachment program in a second stage residential facility for women and children who have left abusive relationships, placing the Bravestone Centre at the forefront of innovative programming. Based on establishing the Family Attachment Program as a permanent part of Bravestone Centre services, the following recommendations are made.

#### **2) Offer Attachment Programming within Three Months of Client's Arrival**

It was clear from the interviews that the best time to introduce the Family Attachment Program to the women would be two to three months after their arrival at the Bravestone Centre.

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With most of the women attending the Family Attachment Program within the first three months after their arrival, many would then have the opportunity to go through the program a second time. Second exposures to the program were recommended by clients and agencies interviewed for the study. Both indicated that individuals gain deeper understanding and more complex perspectives with a second exposure.

Prior to the second or third month women are settling in to their new circumstances and are emotionally and cognitively unprepared to focus on in-depth programming. At this time they require more individual counselling to deal with the trauma and life changes they have experienced. In fact, the clients interviewed for this study indicated that it was best to do the Family Attachment Program after having some individual counselling to deal with more personal intimate partner violence trauma-related issues. On the other hand, waiting more than three months to attend the Family Attachment Program will mean that behavioural and relationship issues between mothers and their children may continue and even escalate, further disrupting the attachment that was negatively affected by the abusive home situation they escaped. For this reason the Family Attachment Program counsellor offers the Attachment Group components to women as they wait for the complete program to commence. It is recommended that this practice continue. This will provide women with timely information on attachment and how to rebuild secure attachments with their children. Agencies interviewed strongly recommended this process for women who have to wait for the Family Attachment Program to begin.

### **3) Familiarize All of the Staff with the COS-P**

Because the women often use the language used in the COS-P component of the Family Attachment Program, it is important that the staff at the Bravestone Centre are familiar with this terminology. Interviews revealed that the women understand their interactions with the children within the context of this language and that the other staff are not aware of the meaning of these concepts. To facilitate women's continued efforts to build attachment and their discourse of this process in other aspects of their lives, the staff at the Bravestone Centre need to become familiar with the terms and concepts used in the COS-P. This could be accomplished through a one day or half day training session with the Family Attachment Program counsellor who has been trained in delivering the COS-P. This training would also encourage the staff to apply the concepts to benefit their own relationships with children, partners and co-workers. As agencies who utilized the COS and COS-P indicated, the program can be applied to any relationship and its application with co-workers and clients on the part of the staff would model its use and increase the likelihood that mothers would use it with their children. It would also serve to enhance the relationship between counsellors and clients and the supportive co-worker relationships that currently exist at the Bravestone Centre.

## **B. Evaluation Recommendations**

### **4) Evaluate the Family Attachment Program Against Other Potential Attachment Programs**

The Family Attachment Program includes a number of components two of which (the attachment group and the positive parenting group) have specifically been developed for the Bravestone Centre clients, and one, the COS-P, which is an established program focused on attachment. The Family Attachment Program represents one of the only models of attachment programming that incorporates a number of program components rather than just one program (i.e. the COS-P). Research into the benefits of this model of attachment programming compared to other attachment programs needs to be established to provide confidence that the current model is the best choice given the nature of the clients and the facility. An investigation into other existing attachment parenting programs, including their application and empirical support would help to determine if the selected model is the most appropriate or if modifications of the model need to be considered.

### **5) Conduct a Formal Evaluation of the Family Attachment Program**

Once the Family Attachment Program has been determined to be the preferred programming model for Bravestone Centre clients or modified to a more appropriate form, then a formal evaluation of the program and its components could be conducted. Ideally the evaluation would be able to speak to the value of each component as well as the entire program to determine the impact and effectiveness of all aspects of the program. The evaluation would include developing and administering pre- and post-program tests as well as follow-up tests. Research on the COS-P and some of the agencies interviewed suggest that some changes may only occur sometime after program participation, necessitating the need for a follow-up evaluation. The initial evaluation would detail each specific component and result in recommendations for each component as well as for the entire program. An evaluation of this sort may set the stage for further evaluations that include control groups, thus offering a more empirical testing of the model. The evaluation process could also be used to develop a pre-, post-, and follow-up program assessment package that could be used by the Bravestone Centre to track changes in clients' parenting behaviours and attachment to their children, thereby continuously gathering evidence for the impact of the Family Attachment Program. This would allow for the rapid availability of evidence of program effectiveness for funders and would provide information to maintain the program's relevance to clients' needs over time.

Currently only the COS-P component has been evaluated, albeit minimally. This evaluation would allow all components to be assessed and to add to the literature and evidence related to the use of the COS-P. A number of measures have been suggested by Circle of Security International as potential instruments to assess the effectiveness of the COS-P. This pre-established list could be used to select the most appropriate measures of effectiveness given the client population at the Bravestone Centre and the anticipated changes related to the Family Attachment Program. Other measures might be included to ensure that other program components and their impact are equally represented in the evaluation. The initial evaluation of

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program components could serve as a pilot for the measures to be included in an ongoing assessment of program effectiveness, ensuring that the most appropriate measures are selected for long-term use by the agency.

## 6) Dissemination of Results

Since there are few studies on attachment program models, this formal evaluation would add to the literature considerably. Its dissemination would also add to the literature on the COS-P and evidence of its variety of applications. Further, it would provide other second stage residential agencies for women leaving abusive relationships with a pre-established model to utilize and potentially test. This would add to the resources available to agencies and possibly to research-based support for this particular model.