

# Early intervention:

## keys to preventing youth homelessness

The Prevention of Youth Homelessness Project (PYHP), auspiced by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, ran from 1992 until the end of 1996. Using an action research approach, it aimed to explore ways to prevent youth homelessness in the two Victorian communities of Ballarat and Dandenong.

The project found that when schools and community agencies combined to provide programs for young people emphasising 'real life' issues and practical skills, young people improved their communication, their conflict resolution skills, and their academic performance. These in turn gave them the necessary skills to deal with problems occurring at home and impacting on their school life.

Two programs were aimed at helping secondary school students deal constructively with conflict in order to increase their attachment to school. These were the Alternative Behaviours to Violence (ABTV) and Peer Mediation programs piloted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence as part of its PYHP Project.

A seminar in October to launch the Brotherhood's Prevention of Youth Homelessness report, *Strengthening Attachments*, highlighted the need for early intervention strategies to effectively prevent youth homelessness.

### Intervention and prevention policy desperately needed

Dr Chris Chamberlain, Sociologist from Monash University, said that a national early intervention and prevention policy was desperately needed. 'Homelessness is a real issue that schools, the community and government have to face,' he said.

Dr Chamberlain also said that school-based responses to homelessness should also target two groups of young people at risk — those at risk of suicide and of drug and alcohol abuse. Similar responses were required in all areas.

According to Dr Chamberlain, key factors behind the growth of youth homelessness since the 1960s were continuing high unemployment and changing family structures. Recent research has shown that there were about 30,000 homeless youth in the mid-90s.

Another speaker at the seminar, Kathy Hilton, Director of the Ardoch Youth Foundation, described the innovative education work in the youth homelessness area of the Foundation.

### An action / research project

The Brotherhood's Prevention of Youth Homelessness project was an action/research project aimed at piloting activities which will prevent youth homelessness. The project arose from the findings of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity

Commission Inquiry into homeless children. One of its main findings was the need to do much more to prevent youth homelessness.

Initially working in two Victorian communities of Dandenong and Ballarat, in its later stage the project focused on programs working with teachers and students of the Ballarat Secondary College and relevant agencies in the Ballarat area.

### Violence — a critical factor

Because violence has been identified in research as a critical factor in weakening attachments to family, school and community, these programs provided opportunities for students to learn how to deal with violence in a constructive way.

In the *Alternative Behaviours to Violence* program, students broadened their understanding of violence and showed improvements in their attachment to the school and their relationships with other students.

The program was curriculum and participation-based and involved the students learning about violence and effective alternative responses to it.

The *Peer Mediation* program had similar positive outcomes. It trained student mediators to resolve conflicts between students and was used as an alternative to other disciplinary action in the school.

A publication for schools will help teachers who wish to initiate similar programs, while the full report of the Prevention of Youth Homelessness Project will be useful for people working in the field.

*Bette Moore*



**At the launch of *Getting it Together* in Ballarat, a student reports on the future of the Peer Mediation program at Ballarat Secondary College:**

*"At Wendouree Campus there are 15 trained mediators. After other students learnt to mediate, and found it successful, the school decided to train more mediators, so last year we left for a three-day training camp at Pax Hill. Once there, John taught us the skills necessary to start mediating.*

*We now plan to have another camp in December to train, and re-train some teachers as well as quite a few year 7s and 8s. If that is successful, we plan to train primary school students some low level mediation skills.*

*We as students hope to take more responsibility in the organisation process of the mediations and also assist teachers to resolve low level disputes.*

*Mediation means to me communication skills, helping people to resolve their conflicts...*

*After all, who knows where us mediators may end up — with so many foreign countries in conflict..."*

**Programs such as ABTV and Peer Mediation can:**

- strengthen young people's attachments to their families, friends and community;
- allow students to experience conflict as a positive and enriching experience rather than a negative and alienating one;
- in the case of peer mediation, allow both parties to 'win', instead of one person winning and the other losing;
- improve students' interpersonal skills;
- reduce the need for teachers to be involved in disciplinary action;
- heighten an understanding of self and others through improved communication skills;
- enhance academic and lifestyle skills, such as listening, critical thinking and problem solving;
- allow schools to develop non-adversarial ways of resolving conflict, and more effective dispute resolution methods generally, which could reduce violence, vandalism and school absenteeism; and
- help students to use their skills in dealing with home-based conflict.

Various publications of this project's work are available: a full report, *Strengthening Attachments*, a *Findings* publication and *Getting it Together*, a publication describing the work achieved by teachers, students and project workers at the Ballarat Secondary College. These can be obtained by contacting Sarah Lappin, Public Affairs, tel. (03) 9483 1383.

*Getting it Together* has been distributed to all Australian secondary schools.