

## **STARSS Sessions: setting the stage**

Kathy Dwyer, Keystone Child, Youth & Family Services, Owen Sound, Ontario

We have 3 staff, two early childhood educators and one parent group facilitator who prepare for the group. As few as 2 or 3 and as many as 8 or 10 group members can be accommodated comfortably. We purchase and prepare healthy snacks and drinks. If families have transportation difficulties we pay for taxis or gas. Groups are roughly an hour and a half long. Punctuality is not an issue because we realize that getting small children out the door when you live with high stress and limited resources is hard. Everyone is welcome as they are, whenever they can get here. We also don't react to absences of those who have committed to coming or unexpected participants showing up. We know that circumstances change quickly and if a parent needs us to go over last week's agenda, it could be an opportunity for another parent to be the leader by explaining what we talked about. This review can reinforce what the rest of the group learned and we know that people are more likely to be open to information given by someone in their shoes. An important idea to keep in mind while facilitating **STARSS** groups is that you can sit back, observe, nod, smile and let go of the pressure of running a successful group once a comfortable environment is established. In fact, the less you talk, the better, once the tasks of each session and the various handouts and worksheets have been referenced.

Resistance to getting help to change smoking behaviour gets triggered when parents feel judged, preached at, or lectured to by professionals. We recognize that group members know that smoking causes serious harm to them and their children and don't focus on fear tactics. We state over and over again "Stress, guilt and worry make people smoke more, not less." Plenty of agencies and organizations exist that can educate smokers about the damage done by tobacco use. **STARSS** facilitators must understand that people are most able to change when they feel free not to. A resistance strategy taught by TEACH (Training Enhancement in Applied Cessation Counselling and Health, a program offered in Ontario by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health) is emphasizing personal control. A statement that counsellors are taught to recite is "It's your decision; nobody can take that away from you."

Each session has a theme that coincides with **The Guide to STARSS Strategies**. We utilize the worksheets, handouts, and journals throughout all of the groups. The order that materials get distributed is sometimes modified based on the stage of change that various members are at. For example, we might not give a cigarette monitoring form to a parent who says she has set a quit date for tomorrow and has purchased nicotine patches to put on in the morning or give a handout about withdrawal symptoms to someone who hasn't decided that she's ready to quit smoking in the near future.

Group interventions that we have found helpful are:

**Establishing Group Guidelines** – some might include ‘What is said here, stays here’ ‘Leave gossip and disagreements from outside the centre at the door’ ‘Take turns talking and listening’ etc. We have the group come up with their own list and keep it on hand to remind us that we all agreed on them.

**Ice Breakers** – if parents don’t already know each other, it’s especially important to do an exercise that gets people connecting socially. It can be as simple as asking each parent to introduce herself and let the others know the names and ages of her children or as involved as getting out of your chair to play a game, make something etc.

**Flip Chart or Chalk Board** – group members like to physically see their own words and ideas. It’s important not to translate into your own language or thoughts. Things you might want to write are goals, triggers, how to cope with cravings, ways to manage stress etc.

**Celebrate Together**- look for any opportunity to praise participants, encourage them to brag! Give treats, stickers, applause or pats on the back. They will look forward to the recognition from each other.

The clock or the atmosphere in the room will let you know when the group or focus on smoking should end. It is better to switch topics than to let the session deteriorate into arguing or someone getting too down on themselves or each other. It is the nature of groups in general to have unpleasant phases with bickering, conversation monopolizers, those who refuse to contribute or those who are attending to appease someone other than themselves. Remember there will be good days when people are motivated, interested and don’t want to stop brainstorming.

Addictions can be rooted in feelings that are tough to explore at times and smoking is no exception. **STARSS** group facilitators can expect people to share personal stories and experiences that may be upsetting. Such events are signs of success; a disclosure is a gift. The parent is saying “I think you are trustworthy enough to encourage me to deal with this.” When this happens it isn’t a time for pushing, tricking, or psychoanalyzing. You can ask permission to give advice, suggest resources (pamphlets, websites, other helping professionals) and thank them for sharing. It is important to bring the whole group back to a lighter, more casual level before you say good-bye to one another. Shifting gears to homework activities in **STARSS** journals and outlining the plan for next session is a nice way to end.

When the group is gone and you are packing up materials, don’t get too discouraged if it appears that progress is slow. Quitting is a process and extremely hard to do for endless reasons. Believe that the parents can and will do it in their own time. You could be surprised by the ripple effect that **STARSS** sessions have on families and communities. At TEACH the core course was concluded with a quote that I try to keep in mind: “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink. But you CAN make him thirsty.”