

How therapy group programs can be a stepping stone to community engagement and participation

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Short Abstract

To “support the independence and social and economic participation of people with disability” is a stated objective of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013. CPEC runs several group programs aimed at increasing independence and social participation in the wider community of children, teens and adults with sensory, motor and communication disabilities. Group programs offer a unique opportunity for people with similar abilities and learning needs, and their support people, to learn from each other.

In this paper we will explore how group programs can facilitate wider community participation. The experiences of people with disabilities participating in these group will be shared. This paper will also explore the challenges of running group programs under the NDIS and the perceived changing attitudes to therapy models in Australia.

Long Abstract

To “support the independence and social and economic participation of people with disability” is a stated objective of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013. CPEC runs several group programs aimed at increasing independence and social participation in the wider community of children, teens and adults with sensory, motor and communication disabilities. Group programs offer a unique opportunity for people with similar abilities and learning needs, and their support people, to learn from each other.

The group programs have a focus on upskilling support people, including communication partners, family members and paid home and community support workers. Support people are coached about how to modify tasks, make accommodations and interact with the individual they are supporting and as well as other group members. Positive outcomes in community participation, communication, physical health and overall wellbeing, are achieved by focusing on participation in everyday tasks and routines. Individual participants and/or their support people, identify key issues for participation in the wider community, and these are addressed through group sessions.

The literature reports on the challenges families have replicating intervention at home (Fragala-Pinkham M.A. et al, 2005) Often therapy programs involve ‘tasks’ and equipment not naturally available in people’s homes and the wider community. CPEC’s group programs involve problem solving active participation in everyday, routine tasks. Sometimes specialised

equipment such as postural supports (e.g. wheelchairs) and communication systems are required to enable participation, but the tasks themselves are routine and use everyday items.

Prescriptive programs such as ‘exercise programs’ and ‘aided language tasks’ also reinforce the outdated idea that disability is something to ‘treat’ or ‘fix’ as opposed to making accommodations for inclusion. AAC users are often not provided the time and space they need to join activities and conversations in the wider community. It can take much confidence and resilience to participate in the wider community. CPEC’s group programs provide opportunities for participants to practice skills, learn in a safe environment and develop the confidence and resilience needed in the wider community. Each participant is encouraged to provide feedback to each other, to the therapists, to the mentor and to their support people. In this way we work together as a team to develop each other's skills. As participants learn to direct and provide feedback to members of the group, they develop the skills and confidence to do this out in the wider community also.

Each therapist, mentor and support person is also learning to change how we do things to make space and accommodate for the needs of the group participants. As we practise observing, responding and making time and space for the group participants, we learn to take these skills and attitudes with us into the wider community too.

In this paper we will explore how group programs can facilitate wider community participation. The experiences of people with disabilities participating in these group will be shared. This paper will also explore the challenges of running group programs under the NDIS and the perceived changing attitudes to therapy models in Australia. CPEC’s experience is that generally families are valuing group programs less under the NDIS, than individual therapy sessions. Yet clinical, longitudinal observations suggest long term outcomes are far greater for participants who are members of group programs.

References:

Maria A Fragala-Pinkham, Stephen M Haley, Jeffrey Rabin, Virginia S Kharasch, A Fitness Program for Children With Disabilities, *Physical Therapy*, Volume 85, Issue 11, 1 November 2005, Pages 1182–1200, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ptj/85.11.1182>

NDIS Act 2013