

Centre for Children
and Young People



research, education & advocacy

SUPPORTING CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH CHANGE, LOSS AND GRIEF: AN EVALUATION OF THE SEASONS FOR GROWTH PROGRAM (EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ONLY)



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Prepared by:

Dr Sallie Newell

Ms Alison Moss


**Southern Cross
UNIVERSITY**
A new way to think

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NOTE: All quotes from open survey responses are presented in this report exactly as they were entered into the surveys, including any typographical or grammatical errors.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT: Dr Sallie Newell – Senior Research Officer

Phone: 02 6620 3802

Fax: 02 6620 3243

Email: sallie.newell@scu.edu.au

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The Centre welcomes feedback on both the development and implementation of this document from our partners. The Centre considers that collaboration with individuals, professionals, service providers and academic colleagues concerned with children can lead to better outcomes for children and young people.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONTEXT FOR THIS REPORT

Seasons for Growth (SfG) is a grief and loss education program which aims to promote the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people (aged 6-18 years) who have experienced significant change in their lives, usually as a result of death, separation or divorce. The SfG program is unique in terms of a) its theoretical orientation in weaving interdisciplinary understandings of childhood development with Worden's grief theory; b) the program structure and educational processes it engages, across five age-tailored levels, so as to maximise children's participation; c) the variations in the way it can be implemented in different contexts; and d) the considerable length of time the program has remained in demand. To date, over 150,000 children and young people across five countries have participated in the program. Previous independent evaluations have consistently concluded that the SfG program has a strong, positive effect on children and young people (Denis Muller & Associates and Irving Saulwick & Associates, 1999; Frydenberg and Muller, 2005; Jolley and Masters, 2004). However, these evaluations have each experienced some limitations in sample size, scope and/or response rate and, now, are somewhat dated.

Therefore, in February 2010, Good Grief (Australia) commissioned Southern Cross University's Centre for Children & Young People to refine their existing program evaluation tools and, then, to use them to conduct a larger-scale evaluation of the SfG program. This report provides an overview of the SfG program, describes the current tool development and presents the evaluation results from 57 SfG groups conducted across three countries. To the best of our knowledge, this report represents the first large-scale, Australian-based evaluation of a grief and loss program for children and young people: it is certainly the first that can be publicly accessed. Some brief evaluation summaries were located for three United States programs now available in Australia (all based on USA-only data) but substantial evaluative information could be found for only two programs exclusive to the United States (the New Beginnings Program and Family Bereavement Program).

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT METHODS

This evaluation utilised a collaborative and participatory methodology, with an emphasis on the central place of children and young people in the evaluation process. Consequently, SfG personnel were actively involved throughout the project's development and implementation and a PRE-&-POST survey for participating children and young people formed the cornerstone of this evaluation, supplemented by complementary post-only adult COMPANION and PARENT surveys. All surveys were administered using Qualtrics online survey software, although a paper-based version of the PARENT survey was also developed for distribution to families without computer and/or internet access.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

This report presents evaluation data collected from 57 SfG groups delivered across six regions (in Australia, New Zealand and Scotland), involving a total of 334 children and young people. High participant response and consent rates resulted in PRE survey data being available for almost all the children and young people in the participating SfG groups and POST survey data being available for over four-fifths of them. Similarly, 44 COMPANION surveys were completed, representing almost 85% of the 57 participating SfG groups. However, less than one-tenth of participants' families completed a PARENT survey.

The SfG group participants were aged between six and sixteen years, with a mean age of about 9½ years. Consequently, almost half were attending Level 2 SfG groups, with most of the others split between Level 1 and Level 3 SfG groups and only a small minority attending Level 4 or 5 SfG groups. There were more female than male participants and the vast majority came from Australian SfG regions. Over three-quarters of the participants were attending their first SfG group which, on average, was a school-based group with six members, usually more girls than boys, exploring a variety of grief and loss issues, in accordance with standard SfG protocols and led by a Companion who was female, of Caucasian background, aged over 40 years, working in multiple roles (usually including some teaching) and experienced at facilitating SfG groups.

Almost all the 30 PARENT surveys were completed by females from the Sydney SfG region, most of whom were aged over 40 years, non-Indigenous Australians and had a child attending a SfG group for the first time. Almost everyone had received some information (usually written) about the program before their child started their group. Most parents reported that their children were attending SfG as a result of a parental separation and/or a significant death, usually following a teacher's suggestion.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. **Children and young people enjoy their SfG experience and value it very highly**
 - The vast majority of SfG participants completed the program with their group, with only 16 participants (5%) known to have left early.
 - SfG group participants reported very high levels of satisfaction with all aspects of the program. They particularly enjoyed being in a group, having a Companion as a guide and being listened to. They felt their Companion had helped them very much, was a good listener and very trustworthy. These high ratings were supported by very enthusiastic responses (particularly in the Post survey) to an open question asking how participants felt about coming to a SfG group. A few participants, mostly in the PRE survey, expressed some level of concern or apprehension, usually in relation to feeling 'nervous', 'shy' or 'anxious'.
 - When asked, after their SfG group, why it's a good idea to attend, a quarter of participants nominated group characteristics (eg: safe place to share), while a fifth nominated SfG groups being enjoyable.
 - SfG Companions nominated more than twice as many things children enjoy MOST (as opposed to LEAST) about the SfG program. The most-frequently nominated 'likes' included the camaraderie of being in a group, the opportunity to express themselves and the SfG resources or activities. Becoming comfortable with the group and the initial sharing of their story were also the most-frequently nominated 'dislikes'.

- 2. Parents value the SfG program**
- Almost all parents felt the SfG program met their expectations (usually very well), most often in relation to helping their child realise that other children have similar experiences and allowing their child to express their feelings and/or thoughts. Very few parents had any concerns about their child attending a SfG group and over one-third chose to write an additional, positive (often very enthusiastic) comment about the program at the end of their survey.
 - Although only a small sample, the PARENT survey responses closely reflect much consistent anecdotal feedback from Companions and Project Advisory Group members about the positive verbal comments they receive from participants' families, particularly during the 'Celebration' sessions.
- 3. Companions value the SfG program**
- SfG Companions were confident (usually very) in their ability to effectively facilitate their groups and felt most strongly influenced by their personal capacities and motivations but also as a result of their initial SfG training.
 - Almost half of the Companions chose to write an additional, positive (often very enthusiastic) comment about the program at the end of their survey.
 - Most Companions perceived they had been changed by their involvement with the SfG program, either 'a little' (41%) or 'a great deal' (43%). The mostly frequently nominated changes were improvements in Companions' understanding about children (57%) and in their own personal qualities (32%).
 - Most Companions acknowledged that learning about Worden's grief tasks had contributed to their improved understandings, particularly in relation to 'the importance of action in working through loss and grief' and 'the experiences of the children'.
- 4. The SfG program addresses an increasingly-common area of need**
- Experiences of change, loss and grief feature significantly in the lives of many children and young people: as just one example, almost one-third of Australians experience the loss of a parent (through divorce, separation or death) before turning 18 years of age.
 - SfG Companions agreed that five key issues¹ addressed within the SfG program do each represent quite a challenge for children experiencing change in their families, with mean ratings of between 3.86 and 4.30 points from a possible five for each item.
 - Parents also agreed that these five key issues each represented somewhat of a challenge for their child, with mean ratings of between 3.17 and 3.83 points from a possible five for each item.
 - About half the participants also nominated similarly-themed potential benefits as good reasons to attend a SfG group.

¹ The five key issues evaluated were: Knowing there is someone they can talk to; Understanding and managing their (mixed up) feelings; Recognising they can't change what's happened; Understanding they are not to blame; and Recognising that sometimes change can be a good thing.

- 5. The SfG program helps children and young people experiencing change, loss and grief**
- Almost all participants felt that SfG had been helpful for them, 69% 'a lot'. Similarly, almost all parents also felt that SfG had been helpful for their child, 43% 'a lot'.
 - Over four-fifths of both participants and parents nominated a variety of ways in which SfG had been helpful for the participant, with most of these comments falling into four main benefit categories:
 - Building participants' understanding & skills;
 - Improving participants' emotional wellbeing;
 - Enabling participants to express themselves; and
 - Strengthening participants' social and support networks.
 - Only eight participants (3%) rated and/or commented about their SfG group having been of limited help for them.
- 6. The SfG program builds participants' understanding and skills**
- When asked how SfG helped them, 90 participants (35%) mentioned ways it had helped their understanding and/or skills. Participants' PRE-POST self-ratings showed widespread, statistically significant improvements in their emotional literacy and their understanding of change. The most significant changes were in relation to: 'Some good things have come from the changes', 'It's OK to cry when you're sad', 'It's OK to feel angry' and 'Change happens in lots of families'.
 - When asked how SfG helped their child, 17 parents (57%) mentioned ways it had helped their child's understanding and/or skills. Parents' also perceived extremely significant PRE-POST improvements in their children's learning, particularly in relation to 'Recognising they are not the only one' and 'Understanding that families change'.
 - Similar themes emerged (in a similar order) when Companions were asked what they considered the main learning for SfG group participants. Companions rated the SfG program as very successful at supporting a range of children's learning, particularly in relation to the dominant themes already identified, 'Recognising that they are not the only one' and 'Understanding that families change'.
- 7. The SfG program improves participants' emotional wellbeing**
- When asked how SfG helped them, 79 participants (31%) mentioned ways it had helped their emotional wellbeing.
 - When asked how SfG helped their child, 6 parents (20%) mentioned ways it had helped their child's emotional wellbeing (eg: it had boosted their child's confidence, the child was feeling happier and/or showing less emotional distress). Parents' perceived extremely significant PRE-POST improvements in their children's resilience, self-confidence and self-esteem.
 - Thirteen Companions (30%) mentioned similar emotional wellbeing-related themes when asked what they considered the main learning for SfG group participants. Companions rated the SfG program as successfully supporting children's self-confidence, self-esteem and resilience.

- 8. The SfG program enables participants to express their views, thoughts and feelings**
- When asked how SfG helped them, 59 participants (23%) mentioned ways it had helped them express themselves. Participants' PRE-POST self-ratings also showed significant improvements in their capacity to express themselves, specifically in relation to 'I have some important things to say that might help other kids', 'I am OK talking about the change in my family', 'I am OK talking about my feelings' and 'Sometimes I find it hard to say how I feel'.
 - When asked how SfG helped their child, 11 parents (37%) mentioned ways it had helped their child to express themselves (eg: how their child had become more willing, confident and/or better able to verbalise their feelings). Parents' also perceived an extremely significant PRE-POST improvement in their child's capacity to express their views.
 - Most responding parents reported that their child discussed what they were learning in their SfG group. Almost all parents reported talking with their child about the changes in their family, with the vast majority perceiving that these conversations had changed since their child attended the SfG group.
 - Companions also agreed that the SfG program was very successful at supporting participants to express their views, with a mean rating of over 4½ points from a possible five.
- 9. The SfG program strengthens participants' social and support networks**
- When asked how SfG helped them, 12 participants (5%) mentioned ways it had helped their social and support networks. Participants' PRE-POST self-ratings showed a very significant improvement in relation to 'I know who I can talk to when I feel scared or lonely'.
 - When asked how SfG helped their child, 4 parents (13%) mentioned ways it had helped their child's social and support networks (eg: how their child had developed new friendships or benefited from having access to a 'neutral' adult). Parents' also perceived an extremely significant PRE-POST improvement in their child's capacity to identify their support networks.
 - Fourteen Companions (32%) mentioned similar network-related themes when asked what they considered the main learning for SfG group participants. Companions rated the SfG program as successfully supporting participants to identify their support networks, with a mean rating of over 4½ points from a possible five.
- 10. The SfG program is equally popular and effective across most participant subgroups but it is used less often in secondary school contexts**
- Multivariate analyses for each attitude, outcome and satisfaction survey item revealed relatively few consistent differences between 16 participant subgroups, suggesting the SfG program is equally well received and effective across a wide range of participant, group and Companion contexts.
 - There were, however, consistently more favourable responses from younger participants – who reported liking SfG more, feeling more helped by it and finding the 'seasons' metaphor the most helpful.
 - It was difficult to recruit secondary school-aged participants for this evaluation, as few such groups were held in the six participating regions. Companions and Project Advisory Committee feedback suggests that this is an ongoing issue: although the SfG program can work well for older participants, its eight-week, group structure can be challenging within secondary schools' culture and time-tabling.

- 11. All aspects of the SfG program contribute to promoting participants' wellbeing**
- Both Companions and parents rated all aspects of the SfG program as quite-very important in promoting participants' wellbeing, with mean ratings over four points from a possible five on all components.
 - Almost all SfG group participants acknowledged the usefulness of the 'seasons' metaphor for helping them understand how life sometimes changes too, either 'a little' / 'quite a bit' (42%) or 'a lot' (53%), with a mean rating of 4.35 points from a possible five.
 - Companions also considered the metaphor important in facilitating participants' learning, particularly regarding the inevitability of change and loss and understanding life's ups and downs.
 - Parents also rated the 'seasons' metaphor as the important aspect of the SfG program, in terms of supporting their child.
 - Almost all SfG group participants felt it was important for young people to have a say when changes happened in their lives, with a mean rating of 4.47 points from a possible five. The importance of 'having a say' revolved around three key themes: the potential impact on their emotional wellbeing, ensuring others were aware of their views and equity or rights-based reasons. However, 20 participants (10%) felt it may not always be important and/or appropriate or that some caution may be needed.
- 12. The new evaluation system received mostly positive feedback**
- SfG group participants generally reacted positively towards the new survey, particularly in the POST round, where it received an overall rating of 4.33 points from a possible five. Younger participants were much more likely to report liking the survey 'a lot' but the largest PRE-POST increases came from older participants. Male participants were also much more likely to report liking the survey 'a lot' in the PRE survey while female participants were more likely to increase their liking of the survey over time.
 - Companions were also mostly positive about the participant surveys, with most agreeing the PRE survey successfully achieved its aim of providing a non-threatening introduction to the program whilst capturing participants' views before starting their groups. Indeed, almost half the Companions felt that completing it had a positive impact on participants' experience of starting the SfG program.
 - While most Companions felt that participants found their surveys 'mostly' or 'very' easy to complete, one-third reported having experienced some difficulties in relation to the survey's language, length and/or complexity, particularly for younger participants.
 - About one-fifth of Companions chose to make an optional additional comment about the Companion survey (with all of these comments being positive) and about the PARENT survey (with most acknowledging the difficulty of securing parental survey feedback and/or suggesting paper-based surveys may be more successful).
 - The internet-based survey delivery method appears to have worked well for most groups, with only three Companions (8%) reporting any access issues or technology-related difficulties. However, limited computer access and/or internet speed did prohibit some willing SfG sites from participating in this evaluation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. The SfG program warrants more widespread implementation, across a broad range of participants and contexts.** Good Grief (Australia) can actively promote the current SfG program with confidence in the benefits it offers for participating children and young people, across a broad range of change-related issues. The SfG program's acceptability and impact remained mostly very consistent, even in the face of variations to its recommended content and or delivery methods. The SfG program addresses a significant area of need which can have long-term impacts on mental wellbeing throughout the lifespan. The overwhelmingly positive feedback, from all stakeholders, suggest that the SfG program is a particularly acceptable and appropriate way of addressing this need, especially among primary school-aged children. Comments regarding the limited capacity of some SfG sites and Companions to meet the demand for SfG groups suggest an urgent need to train additional Companions and/or to better resource existing Companions, especially those working in other, often time-intensive, school roles.
- 2. Further evaluation is required to review the SfG program's implementation and impact for older participants, particularly within secondary school contexts.** Unfortunately few older groups were available for inclusion in this evaluation, making it more difficult to draw confident conclusions about the SfG program's acceptability and impact for these young people. Anecdotal Companion and Project Advisory Committee feedback suggests that the SfG program can deliver substantial benefits for older participants but additional evaluative data are required to confirm this. The anecdotal feedback also suggests some factors (eg: school workloads and increased self-consciousness) that may restrict the involvement of older participants, as well as suggesting some potential program modifications that might increase participation rates. A useful first step towards answering this question would be to gather further feedback from young people, other Companions and school principals (from SfG sites with higher and lower rates of conducting secondary school-aged SfG groups).
- 3. Additional research is needed to determine the longer-term impact of the SfG program.** With increasing focus on the life-long importance of children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing, and the inevitability of encountering major changes through life, a larger and longer-term trial would provide more conclusive evidence regarding the SfG program's contribution. It certainly offers a low-cost approach (usually being delivered by volunteers with materials costing less than \$15 per participant) to address what is becoming an increasingly costly problem for society.
- 4. The SfG program may be further enhanced by a review of its content and activities.** It is almost ten years since the SfG program was last reviewed. Therefore, although 'out-datedness' did not really feature in the feedback, it would seem timely to ensure that the program still fully reflects the most contemporary evidence in the field. There were also some comments, from participants and Companions, requesting the incorporation of activities using the personal technologies (eg: i-pods and digital cameras) that are now a major part of young people's lives.

- 5. The SfG program may be further strengthened by the inclusion of a 'parent' component, for the families and carers of children attending a SfG group.** There is consistent research evidence demonstrating the critical role of quality parenting and parent-child relationships in supporting children to adjust to family changes (Amato, 2005; Mooney et al., 2009; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). Although not a major focus of this evaluation, most responding parents reported having also felt challenged by the changes in their families and indicated that they could be interested in getting involved in a SfG program for parents. Some Companions and Project Advisory Committee members also commented on the need for/ potential of a parent SfG component. Given the usual difficulty of achieving consistent attendance at multi-week adult programs, a more flexible delivery approach (ie: half or full day) could be useful. Again, gathering additional feedback from families and carers (about preferred program content and delivery options) would be a useful starting point in addressing this recommendation.
- 6. Following some minor revisions, Good Grief should strongly encourage all SfG Trainers and Companions to utilise the new evaluation system as a routine part of conducting their SfG groups.** This system can provide 'live' feedback, at regional, national or overall levels, based on the surveys completed at any given point in time. Given the large numbers of children and young people attending SfG groups (over 10,000 annually across at least five countries), this could provide an invaluable data source for more nuanced research regarding young people's experience of change, loss and grief. The limited access to computers and or the internet, which was an issue for some SfG groups, could be partially addressed by developing paper versions of all surveys. However, this may raise other concerns about literacy levels and if/how paper-based data could be entered into the computer-based system for inclusion in overall analyses and reporting.

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Centre for Children and Young People
Southern Cross University
PO Box 157
Lismore NSW 2480

Phone 02 6620 3605

Fax 02 6620 3243

Email: ccyp@scu.edu.au

www.ccyp.scu.edu.au