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In this article author presents “Shadow World” project, which is the first serious attempt to reach all Finnish children and young people suffering from parental substance misuse, and to provide them with information, support and means to deal with the difficult life situation.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON A-CLINIC FOUNDATION

The A-Clinic Foundation of Finland operates to reduce alcohol, drug and other addiction problems by providing versatile professional services. Through its regional units, the Foundation provides treatment, detoxification and rehabilitation services in order to improve the quality of life for both people with addiction problems and their families.

The A-Clinic Foundation serves about 30 000 clients per year. It receives over 300 000 outpatient visits and provides about 120 000 days of rehabilitative treatment per year. Over 50 000 people use the Foundation’s web services every month. The central office is involved in national and international activities in the fields of prevention, information, development and training.
INTRODUCTION TO SHADOW WORLD

The *Shadow World* project (“Varjomaailma” in Finnish) is the first serious attempt to reach all Finnish children and young people (ages between 11 and 18) suffering from parental substance misuse, and to provide them with information, support and means to deal with the difficult life situation. Equally importantly, the project has helped children of problem drinkers to break the silence through giving them a voice and a chance to share their story.

The starting point of the *Shadow World* project is the observation that about one out of ten children suffer from parental substance misuse. Unstable, quarrelsome and stressful family environment increases a child’s risk for social exclusion, mental health problems and future substance misuse. These children are very difficult to reach due to their families’ tendency to avoid attention and interventions by authorities. The innovative use of information and communication technology has allowed for approaching the target group directly, penetrating the “curtain of silence”, which is maintained by shame and families’ internal social control.

The two basic methods used to reach children were a comic book and an interactive website, both of them utilizing a narrative approach and a manga-style appearance, which is very popular among young people nowadays. In addition to the story, the comic contains links to the website and information on how and where to seek help. The comic book was sent through schools to about 70,000 5th and 6th graders (11 to 13 year-olds) and a media campaign was targeted to primary high school pupils (13 to 15 year-olds). The comic is available in English in electronic form by following a link from [http://www.varjomaailma.fi/english](http://www.varjomaailma.fi/english).

On the website ([http://www.varjomaailma.fi](http://www.varjomaailma.fi)), children can find information on the issue (addiction, dynamics, feelings) and the rights of the child as well as how to seek help (relatives, professionals in school, anonymous services). Moreover, the website allows sharing one’s story anonymously, either by writing or by creating a comic strip with an application specifically developed for the purpose.
In addition, children were invited to join a closed web group led by two counsellors. The group met in the internet and the children were given a chance for instant messaging through A-Clinic Foundation’s Power Circle free SMS messaging system.

The project reached its target group efficiently using innovative methods, and the feedback from the users has been mainly very positive. Moreover, the project was a demonstration of the power of a positive partnership of three major Finnish expert organisations.

The Shadow World has received an e-Inclusion Award 2008 by the European Commission in the category of marginalised young. It has also received an Honourable Mention in the Mentor International Prevention Awards Gala in 2008.

IMPACT

In March 2008, more than 70 000 comic books were distributed to 5th and 6th graders in elementary schools all over Finland. According to a reception survey conducted after the distribution, 90% of the teachers reported on having distributed the comic book to children, and nearly all had also discussed the issue in class using various innovative means such as drawing and theatrical methods. All in all, the feedback on the children’s reactions towards the comic, received from teachers, was very positive. A more qualitative data on the impact of the intervention will be collected in the late Fall 2008.

During the five first months of activity, the web service had been visited nearly 9 000 times and 1 107 users had registered to it. 419 comic strips have been made and 62 stories have been written.

From summer 2008, 10 children and young people has participated in the piloting of a virtual closed counselling group, utilising discussion forum software and SMS messages. The experiences from this group has been very encouraging. All children has expressed a wish to continue after Fall and a new group have been set up in February 2009.

In addition, 1 000 schoolteachers involved in the distribution were provided with an info package and support material and dozens of
children’s helpline (telephone & web) volunteers were given a special training concerning the issue of parental substance misuse.

A publicity campaign was launched in young peoples’ media to increase the impact through visibility: banner advertisements were shown on the most popular young people’s portals’ front pages (e.g. Habbo hotel), radio spots were played on a pop-music oriented radio channel and articles were published in magazines. Press releases were sent out to reach general media, as well.

INNOVATIVE ELEMENTS:
THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

The innovative elements of the Shadow World are: (1) the creation of an interesting and a dynamic concept based on narrative approach; (2) the creative combination of various young people’s media, to deliver a sensitive message to a special target audience; and (3) the involvement of leading Finnish experts as well as young people and children through all the stages of planning and testing of the project products.

The interactive website is built around a comic theme and utilizes a narrative approach based on a manga-style appearance. Technology-wise, the most innovative element on the web site is the “comic machine“, where children may build their own comic strip by choosing elements (characters and items) from a menu and fill in their own captions. The strips from young people received express the family situation vividly. Another way of expressing oneself is writing “my story“. These technological innovations provide a possibility for the children to express feelings and experiences, which too often are kept inside and in secret.

A message board, “Shadow Forum”, was launched in the Shadow World in February 2009. Shadow Forum works on three levels, there is a 1) a message board, where children can freely discuss the situation at home, 2) an ask from an adult -service and 3) closed online counseled discussion groups. After a successfully piloted online dis-
discussion group, new counselled online support groups have been set up since February 2009.

NOTIONS FROM THE ONLINE SUPPORT GROUPS

The pilot online support group was counselled by psychiatric nurse and child protection social worker. 12 girls between 12–17 years signed up originally. Eventually 7 girls introduced themselves, of which 5 were very active. Members could freely start subjects and discussion areas in the group. In addition the councillors used methods from the child protection (question forms, capacity mappings, scheduling, what do i think of myself, questions on feelings).

Ethical questions and the child protection law were issues to be considered right from the start. It was very obvious from the beginning that these children and adolescents who participated the group had a true need for adult counselling. During the group (it lasted one year, from June 2008 to May 2009) the circumstances in the family did not change much, however many were encouraged to open up and tell about the situation elsewhere. As already mentioned the feedback from the group members was very positive:

This group has helped much that I don’t think only negative side on things but i can think much more “brighter” now. :) – Girl, 12 years old

According to the councillors the most challenging from the children’ and adolescents’ point of view is 1) to give voice to the most silent ones, 2) developing the peer support activity to a direction, where it would also reach boys and 3) empowering these children and adolescents to find help and support in ”real life”.

PARTNERSHIPS

The project has brought together three major expert organisations: A-Clinic Foundation (ACF, addiction treatment), the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (MLL, child protection) Life Tastes Better without Drugs (EOPH, substance misuse prevention for school children).
Each of the organisations contributed with their expertise and on their part secured both the quality and the effectiveness of the project. ACF has more than 50 years of experience in treating addicted persons and providing support to their close people. MLL has extensive experience with promoting child welfare and working with schools and young people. EOPH is a pioneering organisation on the field of applying new technologies in substance misuse prevention.

SUSTAINABILITY

The comic book was produced and distributed with a funding from Finland’s Ministry of Social Affairs. This project ended in May, 2008. The development of the Shadow World concept continues within the Fragile Childhood activity of A-Clinic Foundation, Fragile Childhood activity was started in 1986 and has been established as a well-known form of activity in Finland. Its goal is to help children suffering from parental alcohol misuse.

The programme works on three levels: (1) equipping professionals and (2) activating the civil society as well as (3) providing children with direct help through new methods. With funding from the Finnish Slot Machine Association the web service is taken to a more interactive direction, which has been the wish coming from the Shadow World users. Setting up a message board will enable not only peer-support among the children but also starting up new closed web discussion groups, which will be counselled by professional helpers from the A-Clinic Foundation’s units.

REFERENCES