

The thinking behind building a Big Life

**Description**



The Big Life program aims to prepare children for the challenges of life by helping them recognise their own strengths, qualities and talents. Image: Stockimage/

[box] We asked **MICHAEL BARLING** (Big Life program) and **SEAN KENNY** (President of Warrnambool Student Wellbeing Association) to write for us about the issues facing students in the south-west:[/box]

**Guest writers: Michael Barling and Sean Kenny**

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] I [/dropcap]ncreasingly the issues that kids are dealing with in schools are a product of a broader social problem.

We can help kids manage their immediate challenges through chaplaincy and other forms of case management, but the strategic aim is to also address the root causes and reduce the number of kids in crisis.

Put another way, there is always a need for an emergency department in a hospital because life happens and injury is a part of being human. But it also makes sense to teach people how not to injure themselves and create environments whereby the really big injury risks are avoided.

**Over the years, chaplains have identified some consistent themes central to some of the emotional 'injuries' people tend to get. We have framed these as five big questions. These are at the heart of the Big Life program.**

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] T [/dropcap]hese questions are:

- How do I relate to people who are different to me? (*Living with difference*)
- How can I love and be loved? (*Relationships & sexuality*)

- What is the meaning of life? (*Spirituality and purposeful occupation*)
- How do I make family work – even if I haven't got one or don't want mine? (*Family in the 21st century*)
- What do I do when bad things happen? (*Grief and loss*)

The appeal of framing A Big Life around The Big Life questions is that it gives schools a platform to engage and connect kids with life's challenges in an optimistic and hopeful way.

This perspective involves allowing kids to identify and acknowledge their strengths, qualities and talents. From this broad direction, A Big Life is developing along the lines of a whole-school, strengths-based approach that seeks to develop daily habits, tools and routines that help develop the optimistic and hopeful perspectives of our kids.

At the application level, it has meant both **Warrnambool** and **Brauer Colleges** developing a Morning Welcome routine that leverages off the energy and commitment of our teachers to raise awareness to and build the strengths of our kids.

Our Morning Welcome focuses on modelling positivity and persistence, on learning and developing new capacities and applying those new capacities with a consistency so that they stick with our kids.

Underpinning our Morning Welcome is the development of a mindfulness habit that encourages kids to focus, become more self-aware, develop a sense of empathy and approach situations with a calmer perspective.



Former Emmanuel College teacher Michael Barling is steering the Big Life program in Warrnambool. Image: Supplied.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] T [/dropcap]he structures and routines that are developing as part of our Morning Welcome are proving effective.

However, the multiplier effect of our teachers will be the determining factor in any success. The other great multiplier that we hope to harness is our parents and guardians.

As teachers undertaking the emotional labour of caring for our students, we have a strong appreciation of the next level of emotional labour our parents and guardians go to in caring for their children.

We have so much that we want to do.

A Big Life is in the swimming lessons game. We could be lifeguards pulling kids out of trouble. Or pool fence installers putting barriers between our kids and trouble. No, we want to be swimming teachers so we can develop the capacities and strengths of our kids to get themselves out of trouble.



Big Life builds on the work of school chaplains and extends into the family, school and home. Image: Huffington Post.

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[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] W [/dropcap] **here has Big Life come from?**

The 'Big Life' program has emerged out of the work of school chaplains who have been operating in Warrnambool secondary schools for more than 50 years.

The chaplaincy program has a long history of working in partnership with local schools and their community. Our chaplains have worked incredibly hard to support the wellbeing of kids, staff and parents, in both uplifting and devastating life situations.

At the heart of chaplaincy is a holistic view of the person.

**It aims to offer pastoral care to people, walking a short part of an individual's life with them. It sees people as neither a clinical issue to be fixed or social problems to be solved.**

Chaplains help join the dots. Whether it is acting as a referral service for more intensive support and care, or helping people make sense of a troubling life situation, pastoral care aims to help people understand their needs, challenges and concerns more deeply, and act to improve their life.

It has become increasingly clear that whilst pastoral care can be offered individually, many of the challenges individuals face relate to how the broader community functions. Individual care is only effective when located in a community that cares.

That's what Big Life is trying to do – extend these caring ideals beyond the individual, toward the community.

We want to help people live full and fruitful lives – and we can only do this by creating a community that understands what it means to grow, learn and live – together.



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