

Domestic Violence and Child Protection

By Jude Irwin, Fran Waugh and Marie Wilkinson (University of Sydney 2002)



In August 2002, a report entitled *Domestic Violence and Child Protection* was released by the University of Sydney. The report makes a valuable and detailed contribution to knowledge about the experiences of women and children who have survived domestic violence, as well as the attitudes and decision-making practices of practitioners.

The report aimed to examine practitioners' knowledge and understanding of domestic violence and child protection; to review child protection strategies utilised by practitioners; to explore the needs of women and children who have lived with domestic violence; and to develop effective strategies which could be used to respond to these needs by means of a template of good practice.

The report presents the findings of four independent but related studies which were conducted between 1997–2001 by the Department of Social Work and Policy Studies at the University of Sydney in collaboration with Barnardos Australia. The collaboration aimed to address the gap that is often present between research and practice. The NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) contributed financially to the first study.

The collaboration allowed for different perspectives to be gained about issues that arise when dealing with domestic violence where children are involved. Taken as a whole, this report provides a comprehensive picture of the situation in NSW, and offers recommendations for good practice at the individual, agency and interagency levels which could be extended to other States and Territories.

STUDY 1: Domestic violence and child protection – the practice and policy context in the Department of Community Services (DoCS)

One of the key issues in the area of child protection and domestic violence is the way in which child protection authorities respond to cases of domestic violence where children are involved. The first study comprised an analysis of statutory responses to domestic violence based on observation of intake practices in five DoCS offices. This involved data collection of all child abuse intake referrals to the Department; in-depth interviews with intake workers and assistant managers to explore practices surrounding intake; and the tracking of a percentage of referrals over an 18-month period.

It was found that domestic violence was the most common reason for a child to be referred to DoCS. Even in cases where domestic violence was not the primary reported concern, it was often the reason for subsequent re-referrals. However, domestic violence-related child protection referrals were found to be less likely than other child abuse notifications to undergo an investigative assessment. Where these did occur, the most common outcome was either referral or closure, with little follow-up of cases referred to other agencies.

The inclusion of 'exposure to domestic violence' as a category of child abuse in NSW has occurred in response to growing recognition of its impact as a category of emotional abuse. However, the current report suggests that the change has been

administrative only. Little attention has been given to how these changes should translate into child protection practice, and many workers feel under-equipped to deal with domestic violence as a child protection issue.

Further, the demands of dealing with incoming calls and often irate people, in combination with insufficient staffing levels, have their toll on the capacity of intake workers to take on domestic violence referrals. Intake workers interviewed for the study exhibited different understandings about domestic violence, its indicators and impact on children.

Study 2: Practitioners speak about domestic violence and child protection

The second study aimed to obtain practitioners' views about practice, policy and research issues faced by workers when intervening in the lives of women and children who experience domestic violence. The study involved twenty-one focus group interviews with (153) practitioners from statutory and non-statutory organisations. Focus groups were run in both rural and urban NSW and were attended by practitioners from family support services, refuges, courts, police, health, DoCS, preschools, Indigenous services and workers from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.


The study's findings support what is generally known: that practitioners acknowledge the importance of interagency collaboration, but find it difficult to achieve in practice. The study also supports anecdotal knowledge that a lack of resources available for women and children can affect the capacity of women to ensure the safety of their children. Police expressed concerns that mandatory reporting requirements eroded mothers' trust and their willingness to contact police.

Practitioners commented on the fact that definitions of domestic violence varied between agencies. They expressed a desire to see research in this area focus attention on practice issues and strategies, and saw a need for locally-developed and culturally-diverse public education campaigns to assist in increasing community awareness about the issues confronting women and children who live with domestic violence. Practitioners also expressed concerns about the way in which culturally and linguistically diverse groups were often treated as homogenous groups, with their individual needs and values frequently not considered. The evaluation of services for women and children was viewed as essential by all practitioners.

Study 3: Women's speak about children and domestic violence

The third study carried out in-depth interviews with 41 women aged 24–47 who had lived with domestic violence. The study asked the women to reflect on how the violence had affected their children; how they had aimed to protect their children; and the supports they would consider helpful to enhance their children's capacity to deal with the violence.

It was found that mothers believed that the impact on their children of living with domestic violence included increases in aggressive behaviour, depression, suicidal thoughts, slower school progress, lower self-confidence and strained relationships amongst siblings and between children and their mother. Further, some women noted that living with violence had diminished their capacity to care for their children, and many identified the importance of support from friends and family.



It is recommended that agencies ensure that the services provided are accessible to the women and children they are targeting.

With regard to formal support from services, some women commented on their usefulness, while others mentioned that a lack of information about the availability of formal support services was an issue for them. Women isolated from both informal and formal supports found it the most difficult to care for their children.

Women also commented on the lack of specialist services available to support children and young people who live with violence, and that most generalist services did not address the issue of family violence. Indigenous women expressed their lack of trust in the ability of services to meet their needs, and fear of child removal by statutory workers was mentioned as a factor which prevented them disclosing the violence.

A number of women commented that they felt they had been treated as being responsible for the violence perpetrated against them, and some also felt responsible for not protecting their children. However, women also talked about the many ways in which they aimed to protect their children from the violence.

Some women experienced an increased risk of violence when they departed from the violent relationship. Many women talked about the difficulties associated with their children maintaining contact with their fathers, especially when their ex-partner undermined the mother's relationship with the children.

Also mentioned was a lack of safe and suitable locations for children to be picked up and dropped off for contact visits. While some women supported their children's wish to maintain a relationship with their father, others talked about the Family Court tending to ignore the presence of child abuse which, they believed, sometimes compromised their children's safety.

Study 4: Children and young people speak about domestic violence

Interviews were conducted with 17 children and young people aged 8–18, in order to explore their experiences, sources of support and the services they considered helpful in supporting both themselves and their mothers.

The children and young people interviewed had been subject to a range of violence, which included being exposed to violence against their mother and being abused themselves. Many of the young people talked about trying to intervene during physical and violent incidents between their mother and her partner, including physically trying to stop the violence, distracting the perpetrator, fleeing for help or calling police.

Younger children described even extreme violence as an 'argument' and talked about wanting the 'arguments' to stop. They were also less comfortable than older children in speaking about the violence outside the family. Many considered that their fathers should stop being violent and their mothers should leave. Younger children also felt that they had no power to stop the violence. Their mothers' decisions to leave the violent relationships were often complicated by a

range of complex factors including social, economic and cultural issues. Children expressed the need for parents to talk to them about the violence and that children should not 'blame' themselves. Children felt that when they asked other adults questions about the violence, it was normalised.

Children and young people had developed a range of coping strategies including seeking social support (including their mothers') and becoming involved in a range of academic, social and sporting activities. Several children and young people expressed concerns about the limited supports available for their mothers. The findings of this study support the theory of parentification, where young people take on additional responsibilities in the absence of appropriate support for their mothers.

Children also stressed the importance of being believed and having their views sought and taken into account for developing trust in practitioners. They had positive things to say about the professionals that had assisted them including teachers, police, counsellors and DoCS workers. An important message gained by children from professionals was the feeling that they were not to blame for the violence.

Good practice guidelines

The report concluded with some objectives and guidelines for good practice for those who work in the domestic violence and child protection sectors.

Individual practitioners

The report recommended further development and enhancement of knowledge for practitioners about domestic violence and its implications for child protection practice. It also recommended that all practitioners become familiar with relevant legislation and legal reporting responsibilities, and take seriously and believe in the stories of abuse told by children and women. Workers were also advised to develop skills in risk assessment for women and children, and to assist in the development of safety plans. Practitioners were

encouraged to develop knowledge of resources and sources of referral in the area, in addition to knowledge about agency policies, practice protocols and interagency agreements.

Agencies

The report suggests that agencies need to recognise the extent to which domestic violence is prevalent in families, and to develop policies and protocols for how workers are to deal with cases of domestic violence where children are involved. It is recommended that agencies ensure that the services provided are accessible to the women and children they are targeting. Practitioners should be provided with opportunities for professional development to enhance their knowledge and skills in the area of domestic violence and child protection. Agencies are also advised to develop policies for worker safety.

Interagency collaboration

The report suggests that agencies need to increase their efforts to network with other agencies, in order to develop agreements as to their particular roles and responsibilities. It is suggested that interagency training and professional development programs are formed. Agencies are encouraged to initiate locally-developed community education programs to increase awareness of domestic violence and its implications for children, while also addressing specific local concerns about domestic violence and children.

The Domestic Violence and Child Protection report makes a valuable contribution to knowledge about the issues that arise where domestic violence occurs where children are involved. While only the key issues have been identified here, the report discusses a number of these aspects in greater detail. The interviews with women and children who have lived with domestic violence, give a voice to their experiences which allows for a better understanding of the impact of violence on their lives.

A copy of the report can be obtained from Rages Palanisamy, School of Social Work and Policy Studies, University of Sydney, email: rages@social.usyd.edu.au or phone 02 93514038 Cost \$30.00

NEW PUBLICATIONS FROM SAVE THE CHILDREN WALES

Participation: SPICE IT UP!

The Wales Save the Children program has recently commissioned a publication which offers a very easy-to-read guide to involving and engaging children and youth in consultation and participation.

This resource is written by Dynamix, a creative training co-operative located in Wales, whose methods are based on the principle of making participation fun. The publication offers a very practical guide to innovative and interesting methods of working with young people more effectively, while also pointing out possible pitfalls and how to avoid them.

The publication includes background material about the values and issues embodied in the activities, as well as details about 49 practical activities to engage young people. The resource also provides a range of practice resources for people working with young people, including sample timetables, a worksheet and suggestions for further reading.

The resource is relevant for anyone working with children and would be adaptable for many different settings. Activities can be used successfully for adults and children in team building, developing school policy, consultations, fun days and curriculum development. The resource can be used to explore issues such as bullying, the environment and discipline, and to tackle issues of young people who feel excluded.

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