This edition of *Family Matters*, themed “Violence, abuse and neglect”, brings together research in the areas of child abuse and neglect, family violence and sexual assault; three disparate fields in service delivery; and matters that are heard in three different judicial courts (Children’s, Family and Magistrates). However, these are “joined-up” problems. They frequently co-occur and are often situated within a wider context of poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. This edition of *Family Matters* pulls together contemporary research that examines the impact of violence, abuse and neglect on children and their parents. Critically, this edition also includes research that explores the challenges for our service and judicial systems in providing responses to victim/survivors of violence, abuse and neglect and their families.

The best available estimates suggest that at some point during their childhood 5–10% of Australian children will experience physical abuse, 11% will experience emotional abuse, 12–23% will witness domestic violence, and 4–8% of boys and 7–12% of girls will experience severe (i.e., penetrative) child sexual abuse. The most recent data show that in a single year (2008–09), there were 339,454 reports to child protection services in Australia from professionals and community members who were concerned about the safety and wellbeing of a child, and more than 54,000 confirmed cases of abuse and neglect (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2010). The problems most commonly associated with the occurrence of child abuse and neglect and identified in families involved with child protection services are domestic violence, parental substance abuse, and parental mental health problems (Scott, 2009).

Domestic violence, substance misuse and mental illness are complex and frequently inter-related problems occurring as precursors to or consequences of another problem. For example, substance abuse has been identified as the most common co-morbid condition among people with a severe mental illness (Hegarty, 2004). Research also consistently indicates strong associations between domestic violence and substance misuse: drug use and heavy drinking may increase the risk of violence toward an intimate partner; and alcohol and other drugs may be used by victims of domestic violence to relieve the physical and emotional pain of abuse (Chan, 2005; Lipsky & Caetano, 2008; Thompson & Kingree, 2006). Experiencing domestic violence is itself associated with poor mental health outcomes for victims. For example, depression (33%) and anxiety (26%) were identified as the leading non-fatal health outcomes associated with the burden of disease attributable to intimate partner violence in Victorian women (VicHealth, 2004).

Trauma theory provides a useful frame for understanding these processes within the individual. For example, common symptoms of family violence (e.g., child abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault) include: anxiety; depression; being easily startled or overly fearful; anger/irritability; flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive thoughts/memories; cognitive and behavioral avoidance of traumatic reminders; out-of-body experiences and psychic numbing; and tension reduction behaviour (external methods of reducing internal tension or distress, such as self-mutilation, substance use) (Briere, 2005). These symptoms can endure for many years and can also make survivors more vulnerable to re-victimisation (Hermann, 2001). For example, the International Violence Against Women Survey found that 78% of women who were abused during childhood experienced violence in adulthood, compared to 49% of women who had not been abused as a child (Mouzos & Makkai, 2004). The effects of trauma can result in survivors being perceived as unreliable witnesses in court, which may affect their opportunities to achieve justice.

Violence frequently also occurs within a broader context of poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. The relationship between violence and other disadvantage is multi-directional, with poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion featuring as both risk factors for and consequences of traumatic histories. For example, histories of childhood trauma frequently featured in interviews with adults who received emergency relief (such as food assistance, clothing and help with gas and electricity bills) (Frederick & Goddard, 2007). Many of the interviewees had become parents themselves, some during adolescence and early adulthood, in turn bringing challenges for these adults as parents. In this way, early life experiences can form a chain of negative effects (Frederick & Goddard, 2007), cumulating in economic hardship and social exclusion in adulthood.

Violence, abuse and neglect are prevalent within our community, and families with multiple and complex problems have become the primary client group of contemporary family support and child protection services. This edition of *Family Matters* comprises a collection of papers that are useful for informing our service and judicial responses to these issues.
Prevalence and impact

Two articles in this edition investigate the prevalence of violence, abuse and neglect in our community and their impacts on children’s outcomes. Using data from the Australian Temperament Project (ATP), Price-Robertson, Smart, and Bromfield investigate the prevalence of abuse and neglect and explore the links between supportive parent–child relationships, adverse family experiences in childhood and psychosocial outcomes in early adulthood. Kaspiew and colleagues provide a synthesis of findings from the Evaluation of the 2006 Family Law Reforms report that pertain to family violence. They examine the prevalence of family violence within the family court context and describe the findings on relationship quality where there has been family violence, and on child wellbeing in the context of such a history. While not primarily an investigation of young people’s outcomes, Moore and colleagues’ research with young people whose parents misuse substances provides insight into the impacts of parental substance misuse on young people’s outcomes.

Justice systems responses

A dominant theme within this edition is justice system responses. Five of the articles explore challenges in responding to violence, abuse and neglect within the Children’s, Family and Magistrates courts. Humphreys and Kiraly investigate issues for infants removed from their families due to abuse or neglect, where the Children’s Court has ordered high-frequency contact between infants and their parents while the baby was living with carers. Clark presents her research describing the experiences of the justice system of adult victim/survivors of child sexual abuse and/or adult sexual assault, and their perspectives of and understandings of justice. Kaspiew and colleagues examine case outcomes in the family law system for parents who report a history of family violence, and the views of relevant professionals with regard to how the system is serving such families. There are also two brief papers—by Counsel and by Caruana—describing different dispute resolution services used for separating couples who require assistance with disputes over property or arrangements for their children.

Voices of children and young people

Moore, Noble-Carr, and McArthur provide an insight into the lives of young people who have parents with a substance misuse problem, highlighting the complexity and chaos of their family and the impacts of this on their health, wellbeing and development. Critically, this paper highlights the value of enabling young people to express their views, identify their needs and provide important information about how the service system might better assist them.

Children unable to remain in the care of their parents

Kinship care, where children are removed from their parents’ care due to abuse and neglect and placed with members of their extended family or friendship network, is the fastest growing placement option for Australian children. Boetto notes that kinship care is recognised to have many advantages, “most notably the preservation of family, promotion of cultural identity and reduced separation trauma”. However, she also notes that the circumstances of kinship carers are different from other carers and explores the issues in developing specific policy and practice frameworks for kinship carers.

Conclusion

The papers in this edition both highlight the need for and the challenges in achieving integrated child/victim-centred service and judicial systems to meet the needs of families in which violence, abuse or neglect has affected family members.

References


At the time of writing, Executive Editor Dr Leah Bromfield was Manager of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Acknowledgment: The literature in this editorial is drawn from the NCPC Issues paper by Bromfield, Lamont, Parker and Horsfall (in press).