

## SNAPSHOT

# The impact of domestic violence on children



Living with domestic violence has serious effects on the emotional and behavioural wellbeing of children and on their development. However, good support services can help children cope with and, over time, recover from the effects of domestic violence.

In mid 2011, against the backdrop of proposed amendments to Australian family law which were intended to better protect children from ongoing violence and abuse post-separation, The Benevolent Society commissioned the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse to undertake a literature review of the latest research on the impact of domestic violence on children. The review also summarises the research evidence on how best to support and work with children and families affected by domestic violence.

For ease of reading, this Snapshot does not contain original references. The complete, fully referenced, literature review is available at [www.benevolent.org.au](http://www.benevolent.org.au).

## Key Points

### Domestic violence and children

- Children, especially babies and young children, affected by domestic violence experience significant emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- More than half of women in Australia who experience violence from a partner during their lifetime will be caring for children when the violence occurs.
- Children continue to be at risk of violence during and after their parents' separation.
- Shared care parenting arrangements for children from separated families where domestic violence is present place these children at significant risk of harm.
- Children can cope with and recover from the effects of violence, drawing on both their own resilience and the support of effective services.

Research by:



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### Key Points

#### Implications for policy and practice

- Service providers need a standardised, universal framework for screening for domestic violence.
- Professionals working with families affected by domestic violence should all have regular training on the dynamics and impact of domestic violence.
- Organisations should increase collaboration across sectors to better respond to domestic violence.
- Better data collection around domestic violence is required.
- All disclosures of domestic violence to services and authorities should be taken seriously and receive a consistent response.
- Children should be supported in disclosing their experiences of domestic violence, and have their opinions considered when parenting decisions are made.

## INTRODUCTION

### Defining domestic violence

There are many definitions of domestic violence. For the purpose of the literature review, domestic violence is defined as an abuse of power that occurs when one partner attempts physically or psychologically to dominate and control the other. Domestic violence includes physical and sexual violence; threats and intimidation; emotional and social abuse; and economic deprivation.

For many Indigenous people the term 'family violence' is preferred as it encompasses all forms of violence in intimate, family and other relationships of mutual obligation and support.

As domestic violence is most often perpetrated by men against a female partner or ex-partner, the review focuses on the impact on children of male violence perpetrated against mothers.

## THE FINDINGS

### Prevalence of domestic violence

There is little accurate data relating to the prevalence of domestic violence in Australia. What we do know is that more than half of women who report an experience of domestic violence in their lifetime will have children in their care during the violent relationship, and many will be pregnant when the violence occurs. In the 2001 *National Crime Prevention Survey* almost one quarter of Australian youth reported having witnessed physical domestic violence against their mother.

### Children's experiences of domestic violence

Children's experiences of domestic violence are extensive and complex. They include witnessing or being exposed to violence, being the victims of direct abuse, being injured while trying to intervene, and exposure in utero. Research shows that the severity of the impact on children is similar regardless of whether they witness violence or experience physical violence themselves.

The term 'affected by domestic violence' encompasses all the different ways in which domestic violence may have an impact on children. It recognises that children are affected by the presence of domestic violence, whatever form it takes.

Violence towards children (or threats of violence) is also a strategy used by perpetrators to exert control over their partner or ex-partner and to undermine their parenting and the mother-child relationship. For mothers, such strategies create feelings of helplessness around protecting their children.

Children's safety and emotional wellbeing are directly linked to the safety of their mothers. Addressing the needs of mothers strengthens the mother-child relationship, as it supports mothers to respond effectively to their child, which in turn reduces the impact of the trauma of domestic violence on the child.

Children affected by domestic violence are at greater risk of direct physical and sexual abuse, as domestic violence and child abuse often occur together. In the 2001 *National Crime Prevention Survey*, one in ten young people had experienced physical violence from their male carer. Of these, 55% reported that there was also domestic violence in their home. In contrast, only 23% of young people who had not experienced physical violence reported that domestic violence existed in their home.

## The impact on children

There is an extensive body of evidence showing that the wellbeing of children is significantly affected by domestic violence. When children's early life experiences involve unpredictable stress, persistent fear and threats, they learn coping strategies such as defiance, withdrawal and avoidance, which in turn can lead to behavioural problems. The experience of domestic violence can impair young children's ability to regulate their own emotions and form healthy relationships.

Behavioural difficulties exhibited by children affected by domestic violence include aggression, social incompetence and antisocial behaviour, and academic difficulties. Emotional and psychological difficulties include anxiety, depression and symptoms of trauma.

The impact of domestic violence is particularly significant for babies and young children. Babies may experience symptoms of trauma such as sleep disturbance, eating problems, heightened irritability and increased crying, and loss of developmental skills.

A study of infants aged between one and six years found that the majority displayed behavioural problems; depression and anxiety; high levels of general distress; sleep disturbance; poor concentration; hyperactivity; and significant anxiety when separated from their primary caregiver.

When discussing the violence they and their families have experienced, children themselves report feelings of sadness, confusion, fear and anger, and fear of their violent fathers.

There is conflicting evidence regarding the intergenerational effects of domestic violence. Some research suggests that children affected by domestic violence are more likely than other children to become perpetrators as adults, while other studies suggest that they are no more likely to.

## The effects of culture and gender

### Culture

#### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Extensive research and data consistently demonstrate disproportionately high levels of family violence, as well as child abuse and neglect, amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The causal factors of the high prevalence of family violence in Indigenous communities are complex and must be understood in the context of the ongoing effects of colonisation. The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) emphasises that:

*Dispossession of land and culture; breakdown of community kinship systems and Aboriginal law; racism and vilifications, economic exclusion and entrenched poverty; the breakdown of gender roles; the intergenerational effects of institutionalisation, racism, oppression and child removal policies, have resulted in ongoing trauma, loss and unresolved grief, alcohol and drug abuse and a range of other health and well being problems and issues, including violence.<sup>1</sup>*

### Refugee and migrant communities

There is concern that children from some refugee and migrant communities may be at greater risk of negative effects as a result of a lifetime of exposure to various forms of violence. These families also tend to have significant barriers to accessing support services and are often unknown to child welfare and support agencies.

<sup>1</sup> NACCHO, What's Needed to Improve Child Abuse/Family Violence in a Social and Emotional Well Being Framework in Aboriginal Communities, National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), ACT, 2006, p. 4.

### Gender

While some studies conclude that female children are more at risk, others conclude that boys are at higher risk. Some studies have indicated that girls are more likely to demonstrate emotional problems as a result of domestic violence while boys are more likely to exhibit behavioural problems.

### Coping, recovery and resilience

Despite the negative effects of domestic violence on children and mothers, they can cope with and recover from the impact of violence.

Specialised counselling services for mothers and children affected by domestic violence show promising results. Research also shows that children find it helpful to talk with someone, such as friends, relatives, teachers and doctors, about their experiences.

Several studies have found that, as more time passes after the experience of domestic violence has ended, children demonstrate fewer problems.

### Domestic violence and parental separation

It is often assumed that, once a violent relationship has ended, the violence will also cease. However, research shows that mothers and children continue to experience violence both during and after the separation process. One study found that 76% of women experienced post-separation violence, with child contact arrangements in particular providing the opportunity for continued violence against former partners and children.

Services can provide important support to help mothers and children while the violence is still continuing.

### Shared care parenting arrangements

There are many different care arrangements for children post-separation. A small proportion of Australian children (approx 16%) live in what is known as 'shared care' parenting arrangements, where children spend an equal or substantial (35% or more) amount of time with each parent.

In separating families in which there is little parental

conflict, and where parents have the ability to share decision making and amicably negotiate parenting arrangements outside the judicial system, shared care can be effective, long-lasting and positive for children's wellbeing.

However, cooperative relationships can be challenging during the emotional and distressing process of separation and, for families in which the relationship between the parents is volatile and there are high levels of conflict, shared care is problematic.

Several studies have shown that where domestic violence is present, shared care arrangements not only do not benefit children, but can result in significant harm to them. Children in these circumstances tend to display high levels of emotional distress and have reported a desire to change the shared care arrangements.

Shared care does not work well for children under the age of four regardless of the level of parental cooperation.

### Shared care and family law

Australian family law is intended to ensure that decisions and parenting orders are made in the best interests of children. Following changes to family law in 2006, which stipulated that having a 'meaningful relationship with both parents' was in the 'best interests of the child', shared care arrangements have become more common. Although the 2006 law reforms provided for exceptions from shared care for families in which violence is present, in practice the courts have been equally as likely to order shared care arrangements for families experiencing domestic violence as for families in which there is no violence.

A number of systemic factors and common misconceptions have contributed to the prevalence of shared care in families experiencing domestic violence.

Systemic factors include lack of a standardised formal screening process for domestic violence in the family law system. Legal and social sector staff associated with Family Court processes do not always have the skills to identify and understand violence. This places the onus on victims to report violence, despite well documented evidence that many victims will not do so.

<sup>2</sup> The Benevolent Society is a child and family service provider. We do not currently provide employment services.

Common misconceptions that exacerbate these systemic factors include that:

- a meaningful relationship with both parents benefits all children regardless of family circumstances
- violence ends after parental separation
- women fabricate allegations of violence during parenting disputes.

The result is that women's reports of violence may not be adequately addressed and/or taken into account when parenting arrangements are determined.

Further reforms to family law passed in late 2011 are intended to better protect children from domestic violence after parental separation. The reforms direct the Family Court to prioritise the protection of children from ongoing domestic violence ahead of the benefit to children of having a meaningful relationship with both parents.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The literature shows there are opportunities for systemic, organisational and practitioner interventions to better support children and their mothers before, during and after the separation process.

### For government agencies and service provider organisations

- **Screening for domestic and family violence**  
This review reinforces the importance of using screening and risk assessment tools in the family law system and in other areas, such as in general assessments of family needs, for example, during healthcare visits by pregnant women and home visits to parents of young children.
- **Ongoing training**  
A strong understanding of the complexities of domestic violence is essential for effectively working with and supporting women and children. Professionals within the family law system and those who work with families affected by domestic

violence should receive ongoing training on the dynamics of domestic violence, including the diverse forms of violence, the continuation of violence post-separation, perpetrator strategies to attack the mother-child relationship, and the impact of trauma on mothers and children.

- **Coordination and interagency collaboration**  
High level government coordination is required to address the inconsistencies between responses to domestic violence by state-based police, child protection agencies, domestic violence services and criminal justice systems, and responses by the federal family law system. Coordination can also be implemented at a local level through the use of memorandums of understanding and information sharing protocols between agencies.
- **Specialised programs and counselling**  
Australian research indicates that children's safety and emotional wellbeing is directly linked to the safety of their mother. Providing support to mothers, with an emphasis on rebuilding and strengthening the mother-child relationship, can reduce the impact of trauma on the child.
- **Support for frontline workers**  
The management of agencies and organisations should support their frontline workers, through supervision and training, to incorporate a holistic approach into their work, that focuses on both the mother and her children.
- **Improved data collection**  
Australia lacks adequate data on the number of children affected by domestic violence. There needs to be a better system of data collection that provides accurate, reliable and easily accessible information about the number of domestic violence incidents where children are present.
- **Consistent responses to domestic violence**  
All disclosures of domestic violence must be taken seriously by police, the judiciary, legal services, and health and welfare services, and responded to consistently and appropriately.

## For practitioners

- **Build on the resilience and coping strategies of children and mothers**

To help them cope with and recover from the effects of violence, including acknowledging and building on the steps mothers have taken to try to protect themselves and their children from violence.

- **Ensure children's opinions are considered in parenting decisions**

Children and adolescents are happier with their parenting arrangements when their opinions have been considered in the decisions. Practitioners should adopt child-inclusive approaches during the parental separation process to ensure that children's voices are heard.

Finally, everyone in the community - not only professionals - can play a role in providing safe environments in which children can talk and ask for help.

## Future research

The review highlights the need for further research into how children are affected by and cope with domestic violence. In particular, there is a need to improve our understanding of the needs of children who are very young, from culturally and linguistically diverse

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backgrounds, and from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

There is also a need for rigorous evaluation of specialist programs that support children affected by domestic violence, and for more studies into children's own perspectives on their experiences of violence.

## CONCLUSION

Children's experiences of domestic violence are complex and intertwined with their relationship to the victimised parent, most often the mother. Whenever violence is present, infants, children and adolescents are significantly affected regardless of whether they are directly abused, witness the violence, or are implicated in acts of violence. However, children and mothers can cope and recover, drawing on both their own resilience and the support of effective services.

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