



Information sheet 1

Family and Domestic Violence is a Child Protection issue

Definition

Family and domestic violence (FDV) is usually not an isolated event but is a pattern of ongoing repetitive and purposeful use of physical, emotional, social, financial and/or sexual abuse used to intimidate and instil fear. Such behaviour enables the one person to control and have power over the other person, and any dependent children, in an 'intimate' or family relationship.

Family Violence is traumatic

Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed whereas repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the developing personality.

The child trapped in an abusive and violent environment is trapped in a life of repeated trauma. The potential impact on the developing child of growing up in an environment of physical and/or psychological terror with no available adult to keep them safe and secure cannot be overstated, and is usually understated and under-reported.

Exposure as a child to ongoing trauma can result in negative neural biological functioning including the development of 'destructive "use dependent" neural pathways leading to persistent hyperarousal or dissociation ¹.

But what if the child has only witnessed or heard the violence and has not been physically hurt themselves - is that still a child protection issue?

Yes it is.

Family violence combines the impacts of inescapable shock with an acute or chronic deprivation of sensitive care-giving from both parents. The latter, as much as the former, can be the catalyst for negative psychological and developmental impacts.

The reality for the developing child living in the terror of family violence can be characterised as constituting all of the following to a greater or lesser extent:

- Experiencing the father ² (figure) as huge, overwhelming, capable of killing mother and/or self, unpredictable and monstrous
- Experiencing the unavailability of the mother and her capacity to protect, care for and soothe
- Experiencing and internalising the mothers' own fearful state
- Longing for safety in attachment relationships (the essential building block for healthy psychological functioning) but fearing abandonment
- Being preoccupied with the unachievable task of trying to feel safe in an unsafe world that contains no one they can rely on ³.

¹ Perry, B et al (1996) Childhood Trauma: The neurobiology of adaptation. In *Infant Mental Health Journal* 16 (4) p 271 - 291

² Although mothers do perpetrate violence against partners within the family home they do so at a rate and a level of severity significantly less than that of fathers.

³ Woodhead, M (2009). *Incubated in Terror; growing up to Terrorise*. In: *Domestic Violence Working with Men: Research, Practice Experiences and Integrated Responses*. Ed A Day et al. Federation Press. NSW

The age of the child (the younger the child the greater the potential impact), the length, type and severity of the violence and the availability or unavailability of refuge with another safe adult constitute contributing or mediating factors.

*She must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness. Unable to care for or protect themselves they must compensate for the failures of adult care and protection with the only means at their disposal, an immature system of psychological defenses*⁴(p 96).

*When trauma emanates from within the family, children experience a crisis of loyalty and organise their behaviour to survive within their families. Being prevented from articulating what they observe and experience, traumatised children will organise their behaviour around keeping the secret, deal with their helplessness with compliance or defiance, and acclimate in any way they can to entrapment in abusive or neglectful situations”*⁵ (p 404).

Some facts about the short and longer-term impact on children living with ongoing family and domestic violence

- Infants show clear neurobiological disturbances in response to intimate partner violence from at least 6 weeks of age, and potentially in utero
- There is a large body of research that indicates that the development of a child's nervous system can be affected by prolonged family violence in a similar way to the impact of inescapable shock, war or abduction
- The non-abusive partner in the relationship (generally the mother) sometimes can be rendered incapable of meeting the emotional, and other, needs of her children due to the effects of family violence
- There are strong correlations between being exposed to family and domestic violence and experiencing other forms of abuse and neglect within violent households
- Initial reactions to family violence by children are often avoidant and dissociative in nature. This can be misleading as withdrawn behaviour can be misunderstood as 'quiet' and 'well behaved'
- Emotional distress and/or mental illness is four times more likely to occur in the children of women who are subjected to abuse, than in children from homes where violence is not present
- Violence against mothers during childhood is strongly associated with ongoing depression in adolescent girls and in aggressive 'acting out' behaviours in adolescent boys.
- The home can become a place where the actions of all adult caregivers become 'angry' and 'unthinking'
- A proportion of children will develop complex Post-traumatic Stress Disorder⁶ which can cause life-long difficulties in their relationships with themselves, others and the world.

Whenever a health professional has clear concerns of physical, emotional, sexual abuse and/or neglect happening to the child they are seeing, or any other child in the family, they have a responsibility to take action to ensure that protective measures are put in place.

Refer to *Guidelines for Protecting Children 2015* and *Family and Domestic Violence Guideline and Reference Manual 2014* for further information and guidance.

⁴ Herman, J (1997 – 2nd Ed) *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books, N.Y.

⁵ Bessel Van Der Kolk (2005) *Developmental Trauma Disorder: Towards a rational diagnosis for children with complex trauma histories*.

⁶ Hermann, J Ibid