

**Examination of Children affected by
Family and Domestic Violence**

**The National Council
& of Single Mothers
Their Children Inc.**

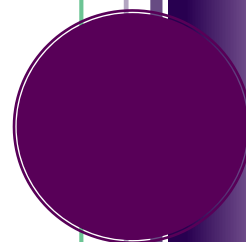
National Children's Commission

June 2015

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Eliminate and respond to violence, hardship and inequality for single mothers and their children.



Who we are

The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Incorporated (NCSMC) is an organisation dedicated to single mothers. The Council has become a platform whereby both the community and the government can communicate; it has led the way in obtaining a range of beneficial outcomes; has actively sought to reduce systemic prejudice; continually challenges existing norms, and over many years has achieved improved opportunities and outcomes for single mother families.

One of our greatest strengths is our expertise and commitment in working with, and for, the advancement of women and children due to poverty, violence, exclusion and gender inequality.

*68% of children
witnessing violence by
men only (NZ)*

National Children's Commissioner

We have a long and consistent record of speaking about the rights and needs of children. Our focus has been for children in a single mother household. In our research and response to the family law reviews, our priorities were to elevate the voice of the child and that safety is granted primacy in all family law deliberations.

Our expertise is derived from our own research, collaboration with others and steeped in the rich but often tragic experience of women who have sought our service. It is from this unique, but clear vantage point that we present our submission and recommendations.

*O*ur Recommendations

1. That the gendered lens is applied when talking about family and domestic violence. The reality that 'she can't just leave', that there are systemic failures and gaps in the crisis system. Separation in itself is a highly dangerous time and without financial resources there is real risk of homelessness with a future permanently scarred by financial hardship. We need to change the discourse of blaming mothers and exonerating perpetrators of family violence. Policy formation which does not understand this dynamic is at best limited.
2. We need to get real about the costs to seek and stay safe. Money does matter; it gives autonomy to a family. Autonomy provides opportunities and choices to seek out the required services that best suit their circumstances and to restore dignity. We ask that the Commission fully understand the need for autonomy and recognise the financial consequences for single mother families who have been subjected to family violence. In our response to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence we sought that impacted families be granted an exemption to the current rules, thus enabling them to retain access to the modest but appropriate Parenting Payment until they no longer require income support and/or the youngest child has turned 16 years. We pointed out an absence of consideration regarding the impact of domestic violence when deliberating on appropriate levels of income support. In particular the additional challenges in terms of access to the labour market and the increased parental demands, both were missing in recent welfare reviews and/or legislative changes.
3. Public commentary such as challenging the myths and the commentary that still surrounds family violence. The dominant views are a source of frustration to NCSMC and others. The perpetrators of family violence who are predominantly male appear to have their crimes of violence air-brushed and/or exonerated. This along with the trivialising and disbelief of violence isolates children and their family from speaking out.
4. Longitudinal study regarding the impact of family violence on child young people and children.

Certainly & Security

Intuitively we understand the importance of familiarity in times of crisis, the value of the informal networks and friends. The need to keep as much routine as possible as well as the elevated importance of maintaining the aspects that are working such as the continuity in schools and keeping trusted allies close. Mothers reported that this is vital for their children who are or had exposure to violence, but it is far from obtainable. NCSMC would argue that

children need to have a safe and secure place to live which is close to friends and school and at times close to extended family. In tackling homelessness in 2008 and making it a national policy various research was commissioned.

The DSS website hosts the research, *Women, Domestic and Family Violence and Homelessness*. It states Domestic and family violence related homelessness is a widespread and growing problem in Australia. However, establishing the true extent of domestic and family violence is difficult. There is no 'typical' woman who becomes homeless because of domestic and family violence. Such violence can and does affect women of all ages, cultural, social and economic backgrounds, and women living in all sorts of relationships¹.

It is a statistic that is under-representative as we don't know how many women couch-surf, cycle in out of temporary accommodation and/or their reason for insecure tenancy may not be reported. NCSMC promoted this submission and sought women views. One woman promptly said;

"The shelter could not help as they could not accommodate my teenage children."

Family violence can turn children's home into a battle ground, one where they always lose or it becomes a place that they had to leave, hide or flee. The lack of a safe and secure house may reoccur as we know that separation in itself does not equate to safety and we further know that housing affordable is beyond the reach of most single mother families. Family violence can be the catalyst to insecure housing.

The impact of family violence has a long reach which we are still to fully realise. It was concerning but important to read research regarding the intimate partner violence and child maltreatment. The New Zealand study revealed the evidence on the frequency with which intimate partner violence and child maltreatment co-occur and it stated that:

- 34% of the children who had witnessed intimate partner violence had also been subjected to direct maltreatment in the past year, compared to 9% of those who had not witnessed intimate partner violence.
- Over their lifetimes, over half of those (57%) who had witnessed intimate partner violence were also maltreated, compared to 11% of those who had not witnessed intimate partner violence.

¹ Flinders Institute for Housing, Urban and Regional Research, 2008 p V, *Women, Domestic and Family Violence and Homelessness* [URL](#)

- Men were more likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence incidents that were witnessed by children than were women, with 68% of children witnessing violence only by men².

Our Observations

Exposure to Family and domestic violence alters a childhood and it dictates how a family operates. The support system, or lack of, will determine the depth, degree and its longevity including intergenerational impacts. Family violence has a long reach and for children it infiltrates every aspect of their life. Below are some of the ways in which family violence manifests for children and young people. This information is reported by mothers and they say that their children are in the unenviable position of enduring:

- Plan and work out responses/actions to appease the perpetrator to avoid an episode of violence;
- Hypersensitive to 'signs' that are a precursor to a violent episode;
- Hiding emotions and/or not making requests to avoid episodes of violence;
- Feeling responsible and to blame;
- Failure to protect (mostly mothers) but can be siblings;
- Not inviting friends into the house;
- Not making friends or doing other activities with their peers;
- Engaging in similar language/actions as the perpetrators users onto others (mostly mums);
- Helping to clean up afterwards, destruction to the property, blood, first aid;
- Seeking assistance (running to neighbours) phoning the police;
- Hiding their own injuries or signs of abuse;
- Not concentrating at school, isolated or disruptive behaviours;
- Going hungry and/or having inadequate first aid or medical responses.

Separation doesn't equate to safety

NCSMC focus is to support single mother families and this can be at the start, during or after separation. The women who seek our assistance are:

- Still impacted by family violence;
- Seeking protection for themselves and their child/children;

² New Zealand Family Violence Clearing house, Issue Paper 3 April 2013 p1, *Understanding connections and relationships: Child maltreatment, intimate partner violence and parenting*

- Obtaining assistance and trying to find ways to reduce their exposure for themselves and their child/children;
- Overcoming barriers that can commence or enable post-separation violence and control most notably child custody and child support.

The cost and energy is not representative in policy and the socio-legal services still poorly respond to violence such as the process of mediation or a lack of safety at family courts.

Below is a collection of the recurring responses from mothers when talking about their children's experience after separation:

- Destruction of personal items (mobile phones), toys and clothing while visiting;
- Items been kept are not returned that impact on school and other routines;
- Exposure to arguing threats at change over;
- Unrealistic demands.

Examples:

A seven-year-old having to walk out the back door around the side and onto the footpath to be greeted by his mother (it's dark and scary). As father would not allow the mother onto property or for the child to walk through the front door. The perpetrator of violence was the father but it was reported that he used every opportunity to exert some level of control and to make the handover unpleasant and difficult. The son was always distressed and wanted to avoid spending time with father all of which required intensive parenting from the mother. The visits were court ordered;

A father wakes up two primary school children at 3am every second Monday to drive from Adelaide to Whyalla (384km) to reach school on Monday morning. He refuses to return the children on Sunday night. The children commence the start of the school week exhausted.

My son was told (age 10) that he could not phone me otherwise his dad would go to jail. I did not know the full extent of the trauma he was put through. He was showed information and thought it was true.

Supervised exchange does not protect children from concerning behaviour. Children were cognisant of the conflict or the tension. One mother reported that her child was undressed in the car park and then dressed in the clothes that he arrived in. The child was told that he can now wear his 'povo clothes from his mum'.

Children not playing sport or other structured activities as they may spend one weekend fortnight with a non-resident father. In this instance supporting the child to participate in school sport or activities does not always occur.

"My son has a backpack. It was a Christmas present just before he started school. This is what he takes each time we are forced to leave (run). We call it his 'buzz light-year bag'. I will only buy, as presents, toys

which fit into that bag. I just can't make him leave anything else behind. It's hard now as he loves footy. The ball takes up most of the room."

"Each time we leave we move further away, take less with us it is one step closure to the edge. Has anyone the maths on how much it cost to leave? We don't even think about joining the netball club. She is 12 years old, an excellent goal shooter but without saying anything we know that we will be moving again and again. Nothing keeps us safe."

Then there are the little known or discussed issues but they are frequently experienced:

- Children needed intensive parenting due to trauma and how this impacts upon employment and job seeking activities for the mother. One mother informed NCSMC that she walks passed her son's school so he visually get the cue that she is nearby;
- Challenges in forming friendships with peers;
- A sense that they have a secret or something is different;
- Acute awareness of protective mechanisms such as AVO's what they are and when they expire.

"Joseph age 10 informed his mum that his friend was crying today and the school (250 primary school children) went into lock down. His friend (Ben) watched his father hit his mum in car park. Ben was worried that his mums jaw was broken. Ben was confused as they still had three days of the restraining order left. Ben soon left the school. He was talented at sports. Joseph said that Ben was our best player (boy's netball team) but he was always worried. He could not relax. He was just too worried about his Dad hurting his mum."

NCSMC undertook research on the matter of Child Support - Private Collect. This method of collection is now the most common form of collection. It is reliant upon the payer (mostly dads) and the payee (mostly mums) transferring the child support between themselves. It is often presented as options for parents who have a co-operative approach because the success is dependent upon such a dynamic. The Child Support Agency assumes 100% collection rates. The research revealed that only 45.24% of respondents surveyed indicated that they or their child/children experienced did not experience any forms of domestic violence. The majority of respondents indicated the presence of domestic violence with a small percentage indicating that it got worse after separation.

Additional Observations

On 1 January 2013 tens of thousands of single mother families were forced off the modest parenting payment single and onto Newstart allowance (the dole). These affected families reported significant and un-recoverable financial losses of up to \$140 per week (dependent upon their patterns of employment, age of child etc).

During this period NCSMC received unsolicited responses from young adult men and women who were raised by a single mother and had experienced domestic violence. They shared their story of their exposure to violence and trauma, the spoke about their experiences when they 'felt safe'. The young adults who contacted NCSMC were deeply proud of their mothers, and had a depth of awareness of what she had to overcome in order to provide them with safety. They made it clear that they would not have had the post-separation opportunities if they were one of the families who are forced onto Newstart. They were extremely cognisant of the financial pressures despite a recurring theme of their mother undertaking long hours of employment in a low paid job. They shared the following:

"The relief to go to bed at night knowing that they could sleep deeply and without fear that screams would wake us"

"To play sport and hang out with their friends"

"To laugh too loud to have the TV on too loud - just to make noise"

"Our big treat was Sunday morning at the bakery - we were never allowed to do this"

"Just watching our mum smile"

"We found a stray dog are allowed to keep it"

"Stuffing up an assignment for a test was no big deal"

"We are allowed to spend time with our grandma again"

"I remember my first pair of new jeans (we always had second-hand). Mum had worked so hard"

"We argued about me quitting school and getting a job. Mum won but I did get a job in the school holidays. She was right. I am now finishing off my architecture degree"

The young adults who had survived family violence and made the decision to contact NCSMC could not speak more highly about the need to have a strong and certain foundation. Unequivocally, they needed a place to call their own as part of their journey to survival and that they required certainty of tenancy and that it was safe. They needed solace and a routine. Recurring responses was the need to stay in one place, form those networks and

become part of the community. Most of all they wanted a chance to make friends and just do 'stuff that their mates were doing'. This may not necessarily involve expensive activities such as school camps but it was more about going to the local park and kicking the football and having friends over. They also spoke about how hard it was to talk about family violence and that as the victims of violence they were some way were responsible. They impressed upon NCSMC to continually speak publically and to challenge poor media portrayal and other public messages that 'he is a good bloke' and his actions were a product of circumstances.

'I am 28 years old have two young sons of my own. Can never understand or forgive him. I can't imagine beating my beautiful wife and boys, looking at myself in the mirror and then going about my business as nothing happens. There was nothing good about it! He is not good. He was a good bully and a criminal'

In 2012 NCSMC wrote a response to the [Blood-curdling scream to haunt witness to Story Bridge tragedy.](#)

NCSMC Blog

A little 2 year old boy lost his life – thrown from the bridge by his father. The report indicates an apparent murder suicide. The approach that the journalists took was to portray this man in the most positive light and included quotes from various clubs, schools, neighbours and friends with picture of a smiling friendly man. The fact that he made the deliberate decision to go to the bridge and throw a little boy to his death appeared a secondary consideration. NCSMC heard the outcry from advocates against violence and abuse and we share their concern. Whilst not wishing to minimise the grief of the impacted community who was connected with the man a responsible and truthful journalism would have acknowledged the effect that these actions (and sadly many before them) have on our community and what destruction it has left to the dead boy mother and other family members. Do we demonstrate empathy and to a degree exonerate the murderer (such as this article), or do we try to understand the impact from the victims perspective, an element that was absent from this story. Sadly, this article will serve as a chilling reminder for many women that as a community we still fail to keep them and their children safe. Experts continuously state that such murders are preventable if only the community read and acted upon the signs. We all have a responsibility including those who report violence [\(2012\)](#)

Recently, Rosie Batty made similar observations when she spoke at the National Press Gallery. Press coverage before and after her speech received strong media coverage.

"Domestic violence campaigner Rosie Batty will call for an end to a culture of victim blaming when she addresses the National Press Club in Canberra on Wednesday.

Batty will urge journalists to use their influence to report responsibly on family violence and to help change the culture, behaviour and attitudes which she believes [underpin it.](#)"

In presenting this submission we are of the opinion that the National Commission for Children can play a critical role in giving voice to Children affected by Family and Domestic Violence but we caution that it needs to be undertaken with a gendered lens. We further believe that the National Commission for Children is well-placed to be part of the collective team to seek solutions and welcomes the Commission undertaking this important work.

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ⁱ New Zealand Family Violence Clearing house, Issue Paper 3 April 2013 p1, *Understanding connections and relationships: Child maltreatment, intimate partner violence and parenting*