



BaptistCare: Community Services: Examination of children affected by family and domestic violence

A Response: Domestic Violence Accommodation Support (for women and children escaping Domestic & Family Violence DFV).

- 1) **What are the definitional issues in relation to family and domestic violence affecting children?**
 - When the term domestic violence is used it is often perceived as the adult only being affected with the children being invisible and or seen as not being impacted. It is common to hear “but the children were not in the room”, “he has never hurt the children”, “he is a good father”, even though the children ‘witness and hear’ what happens to their mother/female partner.
 - At times it seems what children experience/suffer is denigrated due to their size and age. Impact on their growing development and attachment relationships is not taken into account.
 - Advertising frequently shows woman as the one “needing help” so DFV is presented as a “women’s problem” and no reference is made to the male/father figure being challenged to change his behaviour or to seek professional help.
 - The terms used ‘domestic’ and ‘family’ imply that the violence is within the family and “personal” with the implication that others are not to interfere.
 - Children grow in an environment where family violence, abuse and controlling behaviour is seen as normal instead of a using a terminology that reinforces that Violence and Abuse is Wrong
 - Although in Family Law the ‘well-being’ of children is held paramount the experience and impact of DFV on children can be dismissed once the couple separate. Little research involves how children continue to experience DFV through the controlling behaviour of the abuser even when parents are separated.

- 2) **What do we know about the prevalence and incidence of family and domestic violence affecting children, including who is involved in family and domestic violence events?**
 - Police record all incidents and the numbers of children present at ‘incidents’
 - In Campbelltown for the month of May 2015, 83 children were present during a violent incident
 - In Macquarie Fields for the month of May 2015, 102 children were present for a violent incident
 - Note the children reside in the home and are present for all incidents where police are not called and do not attend. It is estimated that up to 80% of DFV incidents do not involve the police.

- Increased numbers of children & young people exposed to DFV are now attacking parents, as observed and reported by the police indicating no intervention for the children.
- However, statistics can be inaccurate as not all incidences of domestic violence are reported to authorities
- Not all forms of DFV are “reportable” and 50% of women and children in a refuge will not have an ADVO – too scared. Their experiences of emotional and psychological abuse leave them fearful of the system’s ability to intervene and provide them protection.

3) What are the impacts on children of family and domestic violence

Observational date: Seen by staff children who attend our service (refuge and medium term accommodation) BaptistCare:

- Children being bullied at school
- Disrupted/ diminished attachment with primary caregiver
- Disrupted education
- Social isolation
- Delayed/disrupted development, e.g. speech
- Regressive behaviour
- Hyper vigilant behaviour and reactions
- Trauma responses
- Fear response seen in children who have experienced DFV, this is qualitatively and quantitatively different to other children.
- Frequent illness
- Homelessness/ lack of stability
- Loss and grief of friends/pets
- Lack of interaction with community i.e. after school activities
- Extended family relationships disjointed
- Inappropriate adopting adult roles and responsibilities within the family
- Likely to enter unhealthy relationships as a teen

Domestic violence impacts on every part of a child’s life and developmental stages.

- BaptistCare Relationship Services Statistics indicate the majority of the men who participate in BaptistCare’s Men’s Behaviour Change Program (for men who use violence in the home) grew up in homes where violence in its many forms was manifested.

4) What are the outcomes for children engaging with services, programs and support?

A program was developed by BaptistCare staff for children in the DVAS program. **Break Free** focuses on supporting children to work through recent trauma, anger management, feelings and develop healthy relationships with their peers, siblings and mother. Break Free averages 8 children per school term ranging from 6 years to 13 years.

Children in the group have been observed to:

- Increase self-concept /esteem
- Develop an understanding and examples of positive and respectful role models
- Experience the effects of stable housing
- Stability which leads onto educational and developmental benefits, increased concentration evidence through homework completion
- Repair of relationships – Increased positive attachment to primary care giver (mother) and siblings
- Link to other services & supports

Baptist Care's Break Free program receives great feedback from parents and children and is a positive environment for the children.

5) What are the outcomes for children of public policy approaches and educational campaigns targeting family and domestic violence?

- Recognition that children are also victims of domestic violence
- Acknowledgment that, programs and advertising mainly focus on the adults.
- Little evidence is available due to very few programs and campaigns focus on the impacts of DFV on children.

6) What are the surveillance and data gaps/needs in relation to children affected by family and domestic violence

- Map what services there are for children *before* they need Brighter Futures/FACS
- There are significant gaps in statistics because types of DFV that are not considered a crime go unreported e.g. Financial, social and emotional abuse.
- Expand early intervention programs such as healthy relationships education needed in primary school and pre-schools
- Minimal support services are currently available for all children
- Less available for primary age children
- Most groups seem to be centre based rather than in the school therefore parents need to be very motivated to bring their children. , e.g. same as
- Again, the educational programs or advertising seem to focus on the Adults, although one very good police project of posters showed children.
- FACS don't follow up every child identified as having experienced DV

Example

A recent client was a mother with four children who is Sudanese refugee. This woman experienced severe physical violence from the partner since the arranged marriage in the refugee camp. The incident prior to coming to the refuge included the woman's partner choking her to kill her. During the incident the eldest child aged 5 years jumped on father's back to try and stop him choking and killing his mum. The father in his attempts to get the child off of his back injured him. Concerned neighbours called the police who attended the incident. An ADVO was taken out by the police but the man was not charged.

The police put the family in a motel for the night and tell her never to go back to the house rented in her name that she is paying for, because it is unsafe. She was accepted into a refuge and a few days later FACS from Rockdale rang looking for her as the police reported the children being involved in the incident to the Child Well Being Unit. The woman's rented property was at Blacktown, following the incident was placed in a motel in Campbelltown, then a refuge in Campbelltown but the report went to Rockdale FaCS. FACS was informed the mother and children need a great deal of assistance as the children had been hurt and exposed to a great deal a lot of violence in their life.

A week later FACS had not as yet contacted the women however the woman had to leave the refuge as her partner found her (the Sudanese community is small and she had been followed). Refuge staff kept in touch with her and she has reported ongoing abuse with her moving between motels and refuges. To date FACS have not seen her or the children. Apparently this family does not meet the 'significant risk of harm' scale. All the children are all aged under 7 years. Refuge staff do what they can but the constant moving and limited resources mean this family 'drops through the cracks' – what this means for their future is very uncertain.

The information reported above is from the experiences of working with children affected by DV.

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References

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