



Multicultural Centre against Family Violence

Submission to
Megan Mitchell
National Children's Commissioner
Australian Human Rights Commission
on

**Examination of children affected by
family and domestic violence**

15 May 2015

About Us

InTouch, the Multicultural Centre against Family Violence was established in 1984. Today it is a leading state-wide agency in Victoria, which provides services, programs and responses to issues of family violence in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. By acknowledging the rights and diverse experiences of our clients, we develop and implement a number of culturally sensitive and holistic models for the provision of services to both victims and perpetrators of family violence.

Our vision is for women and children from diverse cultural backgrounds to be safe and free from family violence.

Our mission is to facilitate healthy relationships within CALD families to live life without violence. We achieve this by providing support to individuals, families and groups and working toward preventing family violence through social and systemic advocacy and community awareness.

Thirty years' experience in working with CALD communities and women who are victims of family violence has demonstrated that current models of practice do not work for all of our clients. CALD clients experience some unique barriers and disadvantages; the compounded impact of so many factors place them in a high risk group. CALD women who experience family violence suffer in silence. They are reluctant to ask for help, focused on keeping their families together and often they do not report until the violence reaches a severe level of unsafe and unhealthy living. This places them in a high risk category of being killed by perpetrators. For those who have made the courageous step of coming forward and asking for support, inTouch supports women in a culturally appropriate and best possible way that allows them to make informed decisions and to enable them to navigate systems.

During the past 4 years inTouch has adopted a broader approach that integrates a culturally appropriate and language accessible multidisciplinary model. During this time, inTouch rebranded its name from the Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service (IWDVS), reviewed its strategic directions and restructured the organisation to ensure that the transition to a new model is well supported. Today, inTouch's work spreads across six strategic areas:

- Prevention and Early Intervention,
- Crisis intervention,
- Post-crisis support,
- Research & Advocacy,
- Building Sector Capacity, and
- Expanding Organisational Capability.

1. What are the impacts on children of family and domestic violence?

InTouch report published in 2008 *“What about the Children? The voices of culturally and linguistically diverse children affected by family violence”* argued the need to attend to the serious impact of family violence on children (report attached). The impact of regularly witnessing family violence has serious consequences on a child’s emotional, behavioural and neurological development. The impact of family violence on CALD families mirrors the impact felt amongst families in the broader community. However additional factors complicate engagement and support.

It is undeniable that exposure to violence increases children’s levels of anxiety and fear. This leads to disrupted sleep, inhibits developmental milestones and interrupts school performance. Physical ailments such as headaches and stomach pains can accompany social difficulties such as withdrawal, angry and risky behavior. Family relationships are often disrupted affecting interpersonal trust, feelings of shame, self-esteem, confidence and beliefs that violence is normal.

CALD children may experience the additional impact of being displaced from other countries, spending time in refugee camps, witness torture and trauma, unsafe travel to Australia and/or loss of extended family and community networks. CALD children may have additional pressures to learn at school while acquiring a second language and navigating new social rules. They may also experience discrimination and racism in the wider community.

The intersection for CALD children of pre-existing loss and grief, adjustment disorders, displacement and post-traumatic stress and the additional trauma of family violence is critical.

2. What are the outcomes for children engaging with services, programs and support?

InTouch Counselling Program has engaged CALD women and children across several of Melbourne's Metropolitan Regions since 2008. Models include:

- Family Holiday Camps
- Children's School Holiday Programs
- Mother and Child Holiday Programs

Qualitative evaluations completed for each group collates feedback from partners, facilitators, therapists, mothers and children assess outcomes for children and families engaging in the therapeutic group work program. Topics explored with children include

- Journey and Life in Australia
- Changes in relationships
- Respectful relationships
- Healthy and respectful communication
- Building trust
- Resolving conflict
- Learning about emotions
- Strategies to "Boss" angry feelings
- Gender role –expectations

A recently completed holiday program with CALD children in refuge was evaluated (report attached). When children were asked to write some new and better ways they learnt to react to difficult situations. Responses included

- I learnt how to be respectful to other people
- Deep breathing
- Splash water on your face
- Not much but I had fun
- Don't take it out on others
- Go to your room
- Squeeze something

Partner and facilitator reported the following benefits for children:

- Building confidence and trust
- Making connections and friendships
- Nurturing and encouraging connections

- Healing some previous difficult group experiences
- Siblings spending quality time together
- Opportunity to feel confident with speaking in a group
- Families being able to offer their children fun and meaningful school holiday activities

In addition to the Counselling Program projects InTouch has focused on further developing resources for children, families and therapists.

The Empty Jar – Children's Book

InTouch Psychologist Jennifer Dawson collaborated with Pablo Brown (writer and illustrator duo Judith Martinez and Craig Billigham) to create *The Empty Jar*.

Based on 30 years of experience the InTouch team supported the project informing the story line and providing evidence of the common experiences of CALD children who have experienced family violence.

Launched at the Melbourne Writers Festival 2014, *The Empty Jar* is a therapeutic resource outlining the story of a young girl.

Migrating to Australia Sunni finds herself facing yet another challenge when her mother separates from her father. Sunni and her younger brother, Marli, are afraid of moving to a new home, and a new school, where they will have to make new friends. With their mother's support, and a little imagination, Sunni and Marli find ways to overcome their fears.

The intention was to provide a story that appeals to young children and their families, through engaging illustrations and a narrative that validates difficult emotions while recognising a child's resilience and strengths. The story also, importantly, acknowledges the dual impact for a child of family violence as well as the possible trauma of dislocation caused by migration.

Built firmly upon therapeutic frameworks *The Empty Jar* provides practitioners with strategies to help children tell their story to an empathic listener, to find words to express their emotions and to find a place for difficult emotions and thoughts. It also provides the opportunity to help children identify their strengths and get the support they need to heal from their experience of trauma.

More broadly *The Empty Jar* provides an opportunity to gently introduce an awareness of the commonalities we all face when exposed to family violence and encourages compassion and understanding within a wider audience for our newest and smallest Australians.

3. What are the gaps in relation to children affected by family violence?

InTouch is working to bridge the gap existing in resources available to assist therapists to support children who have experienced family violence. Extensive research of current resources reveal limited therapeutic resources aimed specifically at helping children move through their experiences of family violence. Resources will be developed from a multicultural perspective while maintaining relevance to the wider community. InTouch Psychologist will work with Pablo Brown Illustrator to develop resources that speak directly to children.

Resources will focus on providing illustrations to assist children to find words with trained therapists to speak about

- Positive and Negative Coping Strategies
- Recognize and further build upon their strengths

In addition to a lack of resources for children who have experienced family violence, there is also a lack of training that specifically focuses on therapeutic interventions to assist children and families to recover from family violence. InTouch aims to bridge this gap by developing and delivering a training package to assist professionals to effectively use the resources from a CALD perspective. The training will also have significant relevance to the wider community.