



Through a child's eyes

Children's Experience of
Family Violence & Homelessness



VICTORIAN STATEWIDE CHILDREN'S RESOURCE PROGRAM

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Statewide Children's Resource Program would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and elders past and present and the various members of the Aboriginal community who have been generous in their provision of resources and assistance with this booklet.

ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This booklet may assist you to help a child through their experience of family violence and/or homelessness. It contains children's own stories in their words.

Homelessness resulting from family violence can have a serious impact on a child's mental and physical health and overall developmental progress. It is important to remember that only the person using violence is responsible for their behaviour and the resulting effects.



Love my mum

WHAT IS FAMILY VIOLENCE? (taken from www.dvvic.org.au)

Family violence is a pervasive, life-threatening crime that impacts on thousands of women and children with serious physical, psychological and economic effects.

Family Violence includes not only physical assaults but also an array of power and control tactics, including:

- Direct or indirect threats
- Sexual assault
- Emotional and psychological torment
- Economic control
- Property damage
- Social isolation; and
- Any behaviour that causes a person to live in fear

Family violence can occur within any intimate relationship, age and ethnicity. While it can be perpetuated by any member of a family against another, it is more likely to be perpetrated by men (predominately by a woman's current or ex-partner) against women and children.



THE VICTORIAN INDIGENOUS FAMILY VIOLENCE TASK FORCE (2003) DEFINES VIOLENCE AS

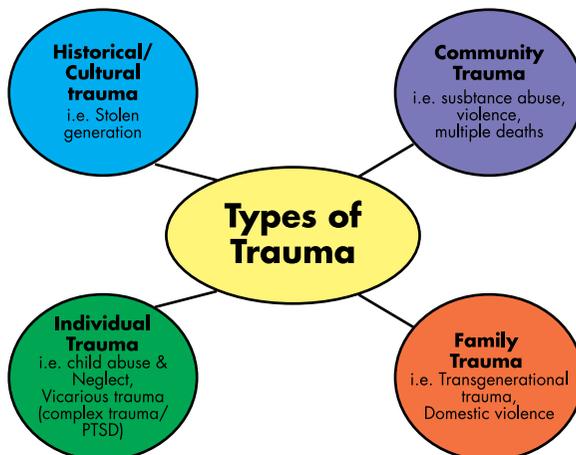
“An issue focused around a wide range of physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities. It extends to one on one fighting, abuse of indigenous community workers as well as self-harm, injury and suicide.”

- Although only representing 2.5% of the total Australian population, indigenous people represent 22% of those accessing specialist homelessness services in 2011-12
- Nationally, 1 in 15 indigenous Australians received support from a homelessness agency in 2011-2012 compared with 1 in 142 non indigenous clients
- 31% of indigenous female clients reported “domestic and family violence” as the main reason for seeking assistance from a homelessness agency (compared to 14% of indigenous male clients, most of whom were children)

(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2012, Specialist Homelessness Services: 2011-2012 Canberra: AIHW p.48-50)

- The rate of indigenous children accompanying their parents or guardian to a homelessness agency was 7 times that for non-indigenous children under 14 in 2011.

(SAAP National Data collection 2010 - 2011)



Adapted from Yarning Up On Trauma: Healing ourselves, our children and families, healing our communities: Shaun Coade and Sandie de Wolf (with permission)

CONSIDERATION FOR CHILDREN FROM A CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE BACKGROUND

“For children who are part of families who have migrated to Australia, the effects of family violence is compounded by several factors. These include being in a new country, learning a new language and set of cultural norms and being removed from extended family, friends and community support networks. Some children also carry the burden of experiencing discrimination at school and in the community at large.”

(What about the Children: The voices of culturally and linguistically diverse children affected by domestic violence. Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service)

- Children may not have English as a first language and the use of a translator may not convey everything a child is trying to say. Drawing and play may be better ways for children to explain what they have experienced.
- Children may have experienced traumatic events in their home country.
- Children may have spent time in detention centres which may contribute to their trauma.



DILLON: Age 10

I used to live in a house. It was scary because my step dad kept on hurting me, lashing out on me, blaming me for everything. He used to hit me with the potato-masher, meat tenderiser, a pot on the head. It was hurting and everything. I wished I could have stopped things. I tried to stop him hurting my sisters but he told me to go away/ shutup or he'd hurt me again.

This person was also hurting my sister. One day the police came to our house and took this person away and we have never seen him again.

We stayed in our house for 2 months and we moved. I wanted to move cause the whole town found out what happened and the neighbours and kids at school teased us, telling me it was my fault.

We went to a new house for 5 months, it was an emergency house. The new school was ok because no-one bullied me cause they didn't know.

We moved to a new house and settled in. Now I feel safer that I have someone who cares about me cause my Dad has given me stuff to keep him out of my mind. Now I don't have nightmares anymore because I feel safe because he is in jail. Now I am going to another new school and I'm in another new house.

Jenny: Age 7 'Mum & Dad didn't know I was watching'



EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE IS TRAUMATIC AT ANY AGE

COMMON MYTHS

“They’re too little to know what’s going on”

Family violence affects children in utero and beyond their own lifetime (it will impact on their own parenting and so their children’s lives)

“He doesn’t hurt the kids”

Family violence has significant short and long term impacts on children who witness it; regardless if they have been directly abused. Children are affected even when in a different room.

“They didn’t see it when”

Research has shown that children are greatly affected even if not present at the time of an incident. They are affected by their mother’s state of fear.

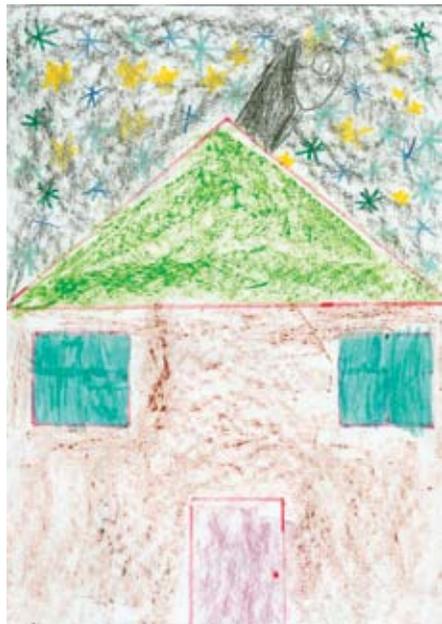
FACTS AND STATS

- Around 80,000 Australian children aged 0-14 (19 out of every 1000) presented as part of a family group (that is accompanying children) to a specialist homelessness agency. (*SAAP National Data collection 2010-11*)
- In 2011-12, 43% of all clients (99,228 clients) were children (aged 0-17) presenting with others or young people (aged 15-24) presenting alone. Of these, 57% were children presenting with others, and 43% were young people who presented alone. (*AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services 2011-2012*)
- The main reason for seeking assistance (from a Homelessness agency) given for one-third (33%) of all children was ‘domestic and family violence’. A further 12% reported ‘housing crisis’ as the main reason for seeking assistance, followed by ‘inadequate and inappropriate dwelling conditions’ and ‘financial difficulties’ (both 9%). (*AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services 2011-2012*)
- Of children identified in the court data as affected family members (aged 17 and under) has risen 341 percent over the 11 year period, from 4530 children in 1999-2000 to 19,974 children in 2009-2010. (*Victorian Family Violence Database Vol 5 Eleven Year trend Analysis 1999-2010*)
- Important knowledge from the research literature indicates the co-occurrence of family violence and child abuse

CHILDREN EXPERIENCE FAMILY VIOLENCE IN A NUMBER OF WAYS

- Babies react to and learn from their environments, instability can affect their ability to form healthy attachments to their caregivers
- Long term exposure to traumatic experiences can affect brain development, particularly around regulation of emotions, language and memory
- Constantly feeling alert and worried about the perpetrator's changes in mood and behaviour. Feeling insecure and unsettled, never knowing when a crisis will erupt
- Feeling scared of those they love in their own home where they should feel safe
- Feeling anxious about their safety and that of other family members.
- Having to be responsible for the care and safety of the abused parent and/or siblings
- Guilt; feeling they are responsible for the violence
- Unable to bring friends home/sleepovers/birthday parties
- Loss of a healthy safe family; potential loss of one parent if they leave or constantly threaten to
- Homelessness and the loss of personal belongings and a sense of place (e.g. favourite toys, familiar surroundings and people)
- Physical harm during a violent incident

Impacts on children who live with family violence may be acute and chronic, immediate and cumulative, direct and indirect, seen and unseen.



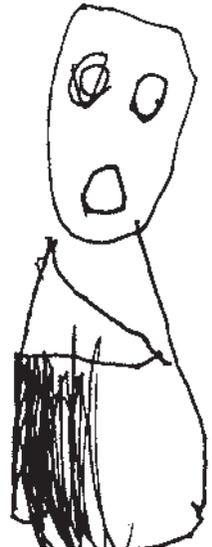
IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Children may feel:

- Scared
- Powerless
- Confused
- Angry
- Worried about the future
- Guilty about loving the abusive parent
- Guilty about not protecting the abused parent
- Grief and Loss
- Shame/embarrassment
- Unsettled
- Blame
- Withdrawn
- Numb
- Detached

Children may believe :

- Men have the right to control women
- Violence is an okay way to solve problems
- My mother is to blame for my father's violence
- My mother can't protect me
- Nothing is safe
- Family violence is normal
- Intimidation is the only way to get what you want
- Other people have the right to abuse me
- My parent's violence is my fault
- It's okay to abuse my mother
- Inappropriate ways of coping



CHILDREN MAY:

- Be aggressive to other children, brothers, sisters, pets
- Treat the non abusive parent the way the abusive person did
- Experience problems concentrating
- Be easily distracted
- Fight or bully other children at school
- Refuse to go to or not do well at school
- Become overly responsible for their age
- Experience developmental delays
- Withdraw, become shy, isolate themselves
- Have problems sleeping, nightmares, bedwetting
- Have a heightened sensitivity to noise, smells, sights, crowds
- React strongly to triggers e.g. a look, tone of voice
- Try to be "good" to please others or seek perfection
- Attach easily to unfamiliar adults

BUT IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER!

- Children need to be allowed to have a childhood
- A warm and secure relationship with a parent or primary caregiver is the best way for children to overcome the effects of the violence
- Both children and parents can recover and heal from the impact of violence
- The earlier the exposure to family violence in a child's life the more vulnerable and cumulative are the effects

TOBY'S STORY: Age 11

What happened?

He hit mum and tried to strangle her and threw me against the wall. I got really bad headaches. He hit David all the time with his hand and the belt.

What did you do?

Us kids ran off and hid in the cupboards or put things up against the door. We wanted to help mum but we couldn't.

What did you want to do?

Hit him

How do you feel about him now?

I hate him. Wish he was dead. I just wanted him to stop and be a normal Dad

What did you do to keep yourself safe?

Be good or hide

Who did you talk to?

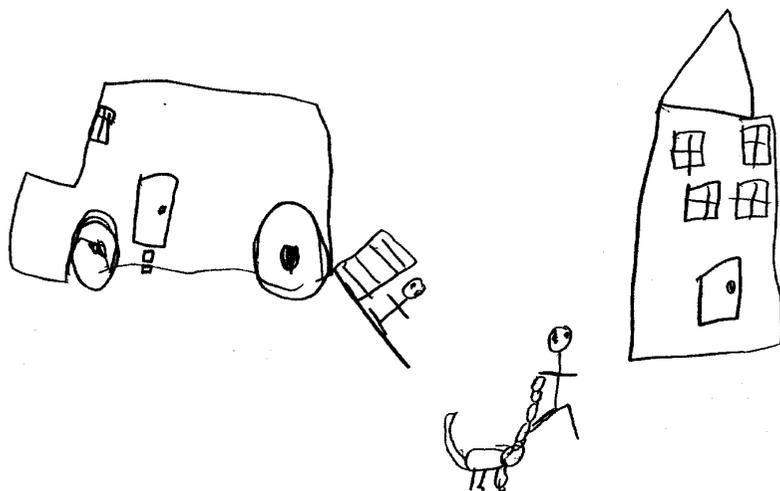
No-one

What was it like when you first left?

Good, but keep losing friends and have to change schools. School was normal, better than being at home.

Jimmy: Age 7

Happiest memory – leaving our old house where Mum and us kids got hurt. We took our dog.



WHAT PEOPLE SAY IS HELPFUL:

Kids say:

"Put an AVO [ie. Intervention Order] or something on him"

"Seeing other members of the family who care"

"Someone to play with"



Mums say:

"Don't stay because kids need a dad, they can still have a relationship with their dad when you don't live together"

"Teach kids that they don't have to put up with it"

"Lots of talking"

Workers say:

"Tell the kids that it is not their fault, to give them a voice and to know that they too are important"

"Counselling for children and parents"

"Give children the opportunity to talk about the good times they had with dad, but acknowledge his violent behaviour is not okay"

PARENTING IN A LOVING, CARING MANNER IS:

- The best way to promote healing and health in children who have lived with violence
- A unique bond with your children; which may assist healing
- Challenging and constant; but one of the most rewarding roles you may have

WHAT CHILDREN NEED

Children need someone who will talk to them and listen to them that person could be you.

Break the silence – talk about domestic/family violence

- Talk about their feelings – invite children to talk, draw or play
- Show understanding
- Let them know IT'S NOT THEIR FAULT
- Let them know they are loved
- Let them know you will try to keep them safe/and act in a way that is safe
- Let them know that violence is not okay
- Validate the child's experience
- Acknowledge how they feel
- Talk about the "violent behaviour" of the person not the "violent person"
- Let them know it's okay to love someone and be angry at them at the same time
- Always act in a non threatening and non violent way yourself
- Don't expect them to make adult decisions
- Children need to be given age appropriate explanations

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP CHILDREN

- Provide a **safe** environment free from violence
- **Discuss** the situation using words that suit their age
- Give them lots of reassurance that the violence or separation is **not their fault**
- Let children know it's normal to feel angry, sad, scared and upset. Encourage children to talk about their feelings.
- Tell them it's okay to be angry but not to hurt others
- **Get support for yourself** – find ways to keep in contact with family, friends, professional help. Children look to parents for reassurance, security and certainty – getting support and help for yourself is an extremely important way to help your child
- **Be mindful** about discussing details of the violence with another adult, if the children are present, it may cause the children to relive the trauma.
- The person who uses violence **acknowledges responsibility** for their behaviour

WE NEED TO PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN TO TELL THEIR STORIES IN THEIR OWN WAY

Outcomes from this may be:

- They can learn that the violence is not their fault
- It helps them to feel cared for and understood
- Children learn that it is okay to talk about feelings
- Children feel safer
- They can learn to express strong emotions in more helpful and appropriate ways
- Know it is okay to love the perpetrator even when they hate the behaviour
- Develop a support system of extended family or friends outside the home
- Create a safety plan with someone they trust

WHEN TO SEEK ASSISTANCE

Children need safety, support and belief; while numerous children can overcome their difficulties with help from their parent, there are children who require specific intervention to address their unique needs.

When children show strong and persistent patterns of unhappiness, aggression, or non-cooperation, it would be wise to seek specialist assistance.

Other signs:

- Changes in behaviour
- Regress developmentally – bed wetting, thumb sucking
- Problems at school
- Nightmares
- Withdrawing
- Physical illness – stomach ache, nausea, headache

Children rarely talk about their experiences the way adults do. Children might tell their story through: imaginative play, artwork, stories, drawings and the way they behave, re-enacting their experiences.

THERAPEUTIC WORK WITH CHILDREN

Counselling: sometimes it is hard for children to talk about what has happened. A counsellor is someone outside the family with whom a child can feel safe to talk about what's worrying them.

Art/Play/Sand Therapy: Children naturally express themselves through play, art and games. They may not yet have the vocabulary to communicate solely with words and in the presence of a trained art or play therapist they can start to communicate about their experiences in a way that they are familiar and comfortable with.

PRACTICAL THINGS TO DO

SAFETY AND CHILDREN

- Let the school personnel know to whom children can be released and if legal orders are in place.
- Help your child to identify people they trust to call or talk to.
- Talk to your child about what things are important to them, for you to take if you have to leave.
- Help children understand the role of any workers helping them or the family

Books you can read to your children:

Talking to my Mum

A picture workbook for workers, mothers and children affected by domestic violence. C Humphreys, Ravi K Thiara, A Skamballis & a Mullender

A terrible thing happened

M Holmes

A Family that Fights

Sharon Bernstein

I Don't Want to Go to Justin's House Anymore

Heather Klassen

Words Hurt

Chris Loftus



POST SEPARATION CONTACT

This can be a particularly difficult time for all family members.

A significant issue for people who have separated from a violent person is contact between their child and their child's other parent.

- Is it safe for you or your children to see the other parent? If you are feeling unsure about this contact one of the agencies listed in this booklet for advice.
- Make sure you don't fight with your children's father/mother in the presence of your children.
- Be aware that children may relive the trauma by overhearing adult conversations regarding violence.
- Let your children know that it is ok for them to love both their mother and their father. It is okay and very normal for children to be confused about their feelings for the perpetrator.
- Do not use your children as messengers between adults.
- Know your legal rights!
- Where there is family violence professional help is recommended

It is important to allow children to talk about and ask about the violence if they choose to. Keeping silent about the violence around children can send the message that it is too dreadful to speak about and should remain a secret, shameful and shaming.



IMPORTANT CONTACT NUMBERS

Police Fire Ambulance	000
The Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service of Victoria	1800 015 188 (toll free)
Statewide Homelessness Assistance.....	1800 825 955 (toll free)
Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention & Legal Service	1800 105 303
Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service.....	1800 755 988 (free call)
WIRE Women's Information Referral Service	1300 134 130
Interpreting and Translating service	131 450
After Hours Child Protection Emergency Services....	13 12 78 (toll free within Victoria)
Victoria Legal Aid Help	1300 792 387
Aboriginal Legal Aid	1800 064 865
Women's Legal Service of Victoria	03 9642 0877
Sexual Assault Crisis Line	1800 806 292
Kids Helpline	1800 55 1800
Lifeline	13 11 14
24 hr Maternal and Child Health	132 229
Men's Referral Service	1800 065 973 (free call within Victoria)
Nurse on Call	1300 60 60 24
Parentline Victoria	13 22 89
Victims of Crime Helpline	1800 000 055

Statewide Childrens Resource Program

Regional Children's Resource Programs aim to improve sector response and service delivery for children in the homelessness and family violence sector. Program coordinators provide resources, training, brokerage, information and secondary consultation to the homelessness and family violence sector across Victoria.

Children's Resource Program Contacts by Department of Human Services' Area and agency

Barwon & Western District Areas

Colac Area Health 03 5232 5231

Central Highlands & Western District Areas

UnitingCare Ballarat 03 5337 2791

Goulburn & Ovens Murray Areas

Junction Support Services 02 6043 7404

Inner & Outer Gippsland Areas

UnitingCare Sale 03 5144 7777

Loddon & Mallee Areas

Centre for Non-Violence 03 5434 4115

Brimbank Melton & North Eastern Melbourne Areas

Merri Outreach Support Service 03 9359 5493

Hume Moreland & Western Melbourne Areas

Merri Outreach Support Service 03 9359 5493

Inner & Outer Eastern Melbourne Areas

Wesley Homelessness & Support Services 03 8870 4042

Southern Melbourne & Bayside Peninsula Areas

Hanover Welfare Services 03 8626 5506

Regional Aboriginal Children's Workers

Inner & Outer Gippsland Areas

Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative 03 5150 0731

Loddon & Mallee Areas

Bendigo District Aboriginal Co-operative 03 5442 4947

Family Violence & Homelessness Websites

Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearing House www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu

Domestic Violence Resource Centre www.dvrcv.org.au

Bursting the Bubble www.burstingthebubble.com

White Ribbon Day www.whiteribbonday.org.au

Council to Homeless Persons www.chp.org.au

Hurt www.hurt.net.au

Children's Rights www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/childrens-rights

Better Health Channels

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bharticles.nsf/pages/Trauma_and_children

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bharticles.nsf/pages/domestic_violence_and_children

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