

Figuring Violence

Young People Living with Family Violence

This is a review of the research on young people's experiences of family violence. This fact sheet can also be downloaded from DVIRC's website www.dvirc.org.au

How Many Young Australians Live with Family Violence?

According to a national survey of 5,000 secondary school students, funded by the federal government, almost one quarter of young people in Australia (23.4 per cent) have witnessed their father or stepfather's violence against their mother or stepmother. The definition of violence in this figure relates only to physical violence; young people's exposure to emotional, sexual, financial and social abuse is probably much higher (National Crime Prevention 2001).

Based on findings from this national survey, it is estimated that one in ten young people currently live in homes where the male carer uses violence against children and young people 'for reasons other than bad behaviour' (Indermaur 2001).

Other research showed that children and young people are present at 85-90 per cent of domestic violence incidents and in about 50 per cent of those incidents they were directly harmed (Department of Community Services NSW 2002).

Indigenous young people are more likely to report having witnessed domestic violence than non-Indigenous groups (National Crime Prevention 2001).

How Often do Child Abuse and Domestic Violence Overlap?

There is increasing evidence to suggest that the presence of one kind of violence in a family, such as domestic violence, is a good predictor of other kinds of violence, such as child abuse (Shea Hart 2004).

The overlap or co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse is estimated to be between 30-70 per cent (Sullivan 2000).

What Effect does Living with Violence have on Young People?

Young people and children who live with domestic violence can show some of the same symptoms as children who are being abused directly. The effects include anxiety, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, and substance abuse (Fraser 1999; Evans and Sutherland 1996). Violence can also impact on the development of cognitive abilities, which may affect school performance and social skills.

However, young people show a great diversity in their responses – whereas some will 'act out' at school, others will not change or will excel at school, which is a safer and more predictable place than home (Humphreys and Mullender 2004).

In some cases young people will be directly physically hurt during domestic violence, particularly if they try to intervene to protect their mothers or siblings from harm. But they can also experience indirect or non-physical suffering through:

- isolation from their friends and family, enforced by the abusive parent;
- reduced availability, neglect and sometimes harsher disciplinary methods from parents;
- constant fear, tension and intimidation created by an awareness of their mother's stress and the possibility of further violence;
- assuming parental responsibility, for example by protecting or caring for siblings; and
- life changes and events that follow violence, such as separation, missing school or work, disrupted sleep and moving away from home (Stasiak et al 2004; Humphreys & Mullender 2004;

National Resource Center on Domestic Violence 2002].

The impact of exposure to domestic violence is complex rather than causal, and is mediated by a range of factors such as the young person's environment, family and individual characteristics (Wolfe 2003). Few studies have separated the effects of violence from the effects of poverty, for example, while many studies focus on young people living in refuge and temporary accommodation, which may affect the young person's well-being in different ways to domestic violence. More research is needed to understand the effects of domestic violence and how they interact with the effects of other life circumstances.

As individuals move through conception to birth, infancy, early childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, they experience the effects of exposure to domestic violence in different ways. Young teenagers, for example, are more likely to try to intervene in a violent incident and may suffer injury as a result.

Homelessness as a Result of Violence

In a longitudinal study of 691 young homeless people in Melbourne, nearly half (43 per cent) mentioned violence as an 'important' or 'very important' reason for leaving home. Family violence (physical or sexual) was discussed by 34 per cent of those interviewed, and this reason was mentioned second only to drug and alcohol use. The main perpetrators of the violence were parents, followed by step-parents and siblings (Edwards et al 2003).

Young People are Not Just Passive Witnesses of Domestic Violence

Young people actively respond to violence and develop a range of strategies to deal with it, such as:

- finding support through their informal networks (e.g. friends, family);
- seeking help from formal networks and professionals; and
- finding other ways to build safety and

skills, such as involvement in academic, social and sporting activities (Irwin et al 2003).



Young people think critically about the violence they are exposed to and try to make sense or meaning of it, and they will re-visit these meanings throughout their lives. As young people get older, they understand more about the power and control aspects of violence (Stasiak et al 2004).

Problems with the 'Intergenerational Cycle of Violence' Theory

The theory of the intergenerational cycle or transmission of violence holds that children and young people who are exposed to domestic violence are at greater risk of perpetrating relationship violence in their adult lives¹. This theory is often focused on boys and has strongly influenced prevention and support programs for young men exposed to domestic violence (Boyd 2001a).

Some studies have found evidence to support the theory of intergenerational violence. Whitfield et al for example found that the use of bullying and aggression is higher amongst children who are exposed to violence compared with children who are not exposed (Whitfield et al 2003). However, researchers identify that there are many factors affecting the transmission of violence, such as the frequency of violence and the young person's relationship to the abuser parent and the victim parent.

The evidence reveals that children and young people are often responsive to and critical of their abusive father's behaviour. The majority of young men who are exposed to domestic violence do not go on to be perpetrators of violence in their own lives (Boyd 2001a). The most popularly cited

¹ For more on this research see Laura Cornwall (2004) 'Transmitting Family Violence? A theory in need of a reality check' *DVIRC Newsletter* Spring 2004.

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rate in the research is of around 30 per cent (Tomison 1996). This leaves 70 per cent of boys who resist the use of violence in their own lives (Boyd 2001a).

Witnessing domestic violence must not be understood as a singular or causal predictor of adult violence. A range of other factors mediate the long-term impact of exposure to domestic violence, such as the severity of abuse, access to personal support, and community and cultural attitudes toward violence. The national research on young people and domestic violence found that exposure to intimate partner violence can shape young people's attitudes about the acceptability of that violence, however there was no evidence to suggest that such attitudes necessarily lead to violent behaviour (National Crime Prevention 2001).

The majority of offenders and victims are from non-violent homes, suggesting again that the relationship between exposure to violence and personal use of violence is complex, not causal (Humphreys & Mullender 2004).

The Influence of Stereotypes

Young people who live with family violence often experience a 'double-labelling': that is, they are not only seen as the children of violent fathers – a stigma in itself – they are also targeted by services as potential offenders and sometimes potential victims (Boyd 2001b). The powerful influence of these stereotypes can often make it difficult for young people to critically reflect on their experience and develop their own understandings of violence.

The focus on young people as potential offenders can also shift the focus away from the social, political and structural causes of family violence. Services and researchers may target individual or family dynamics instead of addressing the structural inequalities that allow perpetrators to use violence or at least fail

to hold them accountable for it. Boys who live with violence at home are certainly not the only boys who 'receive training in dominant masculine (violent) ways of being', yet most initiatives to prevent domestic violence do not yet target our whole society (Boyd 2001a).

What Do Young People Think About Family Violence Services?

Research in the UK with children and young people who had lived with family violence found that they often felt that professionals 'come across...as lacking sensitivity; children often do not feel they are noticed, believed or offered support in their own right' (Humphreys and Mullender 2004: 20)

The fact that young people have needs and interests that are separate and different to their mothers has only been recognised recently. There are a number of assumptions that get in the way of considering young people's needs and individual responses to exposure (Shea Hart 2004). These include:

- the idea that family is a source of nurturing and support;
- a belief that the abuser is or can be a good parent; and
- definitions of domestic violence as conflict 'between parents' or as an 'adult issue'.

In addition, there is a shortage of resources amongst support services for working specifically with young people.

There can be particular problems for young people from Indigenous, ethnic, migrant and refugee communities. For example they may be reluctant to contact a support service for fear of breaching the 'secrecy' of their family issues or reinforcing negative stereotypes about their community. They may also have a distrust of authorities and non-ethno-specific services (Fraser 1999).

Children may especially dread being forced to leave their home because they are protected from racism there.

What can we do Better for Young People?

Rather than being 'protected' from adult discussions, young people want to be included and told what's going on. They are also willing to talk about their experience when their safety has been re-established, which is known to be important in mitigating the effects of witnessing violence.

The following are some of the strategies that practitioners can use to support young people.

- Avoid falsely reassuring them that nothing bad will happen – instead, show young people that we appreciate the complexities of disclosing violence.
- Allow them time to assess and build trust, safety and respect with their workers.
- Name the perpetrator as responsible for violence without demonising him, especially because young people may continue to have a relationship with him.
- Assist young people to negotiate potential conflicts between their mothers' and their own interests and needs (e.g. the right to safety vs relationships with family).
- Avoid medicalising, pathologising or stigmatising the young person's responses to violence, and instead recognise their individual and emotionally complex response (Fraser 1999).

In relation to how young people are responded to in family law, Shea Hart et al (2004) argue that we must incorporate exposure to domestic violence into how we understand the 'best interests of the child' in court cases.

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More information on family violence can be found on DVIRC's website for young people *Bursting the Bubble*: www.burstingthebubble.com
