



Waitakere Children and Family Violence Project

Yates, Deborah (2012), *Do West Auckland children who witness FV get an adequate response? An assessment of the current situation with suggested strategies.*

Executive Summary

This project set out to investigate how schools in West Auckland currently respond to children who witness family violence (CWFV) and how they could improve their response with support from the family violence (FV) sector. To this end, over 40 primary and intermediate school principals, approximately 140 school staff members and over 30 agencies working in the FV field were consulted.

It was disclosed that the effects of witnessing family violence on children has not been an issue put to schools until now, that it is not discussed as a form of emotional abuse in their policies and procedures for reporting to Child Youth and Family (CYF) and that the Education Review Office (ERO) does not require schools to respond to reports of FV or symptoms of emotional trauma resulting from FV. It was revealed that teachers are very wary of even asking children if they are upset about anything, for fear of asking leading questions or hearing material they are unprepared for and that Special Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), usually senior staff members, receive minimal training in pastoral care or child abuse and neglect. Furthermore schools who report child protection matters to CYF are frequently not informed of the outcome so that they can be left wondering how to respond to the child. Most schools appear to have few contacts with FV agencies other than CYF (and the Police) and all decry the shortage of assigned social workers in schools (although this is to improve shortly). These factors complicate the prospect of developing the schools' response.

It was also found that of those families reported to CYF for FV, mostly through the Police, the majority (those whose violence is not deemed sufficiently serious or repetitious) are deemed 'no further action' (NFA) and the children, at least, receive no direct support (unless the family is referred to Partnered Response and the parents choose to participate in this). This underscores the fact that CYF, although the main referral and triage point, are a statutory crisis service with a high threshold. The Government's newly proposed Child Protect line operated by NGOs with local Children's Teams appears to have the potential to be an early intervention process that could, with the right values, expertise and sufficient funding, provide much needed support to families and especially children before things become critical. It could also provide impetus to the FV sector to develop its response to children and child trauma resulting from witnessing FV and a Phase II of this project is recommended to carry this out.

The findings suggest that these enhancements, plus a response from MoE, also encapsulated in MSD's White Paper, would pave the way for work with primary and intermediate schools in a recommended Phase III. This could include rewriting the reporting policies and procedures to include both FV and new reporting procedures that would involve the use of the Child Protect line; training to staff in FV and trauma, in supporting children with their issues and in information sharing; education to children and families within the school community and the development of collaborative relationships with the FV sector, who would support schools with these changes and processes and provide specialist services. A Phase IV could eventually look at developing responses within early childhood education centres and secondary schools.

This research phase, which is projected to finish in February 2013, is also conducting a survey of young people who witnessed FV as children, for their views on what they felt they needed. Concurrently, a literature review of the needs of CWFV and evidence-based programmes that help meet these needs is underway. It is hoped there will also be time to identify which similar services and supports are currently available to CWFV in West Auckland and gaps requiring attention. A final report including these findings, with the purpose of informing any future phases, will be available by March 2013.