



Waitakere Children and Family Violence Project

**The voices of young adults in
Waitakere who were exposed to
family violence as children**

**A report on their experiences
and needs at the time**

**Prepared for the WAVES Trust by Deborah Yates
August 2013**

**“Na to rourou, na taku rourou, ka ora ai te iwi”
With your basket and my basket the people will thrive.**

**This well known whakatauki is dedicated with humble thanks to
the rangatahi who have shared their basket of knowledge in order
to help others thrive.**

WAVES Trust (Waitakere Anti-Violence Essential Services), July 2013

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All enquiries about the content of this document should be made to the author at

WAVES Trust, 7 Henderson Valley Rd, Henderson, Auckland, NZ

deborahayates@gmail.com or admin@waves.org.nz

www.waves.org.nz

Executive Summary

The Waitakere Children and Family Violence Project has been researching the response to children exposed to family violence in an effort to define ways this could be enhanced (see our 2012 report on <http://www.waves.org.nz/network-services/projects/waitakere-children-who-witness-fv/>). As a means of hearing from those who have lived the experience, young Waitakere adults who had been exposed to family violence as children have now participated in a short survey.

There were 29 self-selected respondents, two-thirds aged 16 or 17, the others younger or older, and, incidentally, all claiming some Maori or Pacific descent. Thirteen had experienced violence throughout their childhood, while for most others it occurred over a number of years. For 17 the violence they were exposed to was male to female, while for three it was female to male, eight perceived it as 'fighting' between adults and five witnessed multiple perpetrators. Amongst other emotions experienced at the time of the violence, 25 felt frightened, 23 felt sad and 22 worried.

As children, 18 told no one and only 4 turned to an adult for help. Four received services of some sort, a few others felt supported by friends or cousins and two spoke to the perpetrator and found that helpful.

All respondents selected services that they would have appreciated at the time, either to support them to disclose or find safety, such as having a trustworthy adult to confide in, or to help them manage their feelings and relationships, such as counselling or group work. Twenty identified at least three services.

Twenty-three identified ongoing negative effects of the exposure to violence, including recurring upsetting memories, the use of alcohol and drugs to help them cope, experiencing mostly negative feelings, spacing out under stress and poor family relationships. Poignantly, 17 were able to identify that they had learnt and grown in some way as a result of their experiences.

The findings indicate a dearth of support for this group of children and young people, in facilitating their disclosure, helping them feel included and supported and in giving them the opportunity to process the fear, trauma, loss and anxiety generated by their experiences and likely to impact on their adult lives. There is, unfortunately, not a lot of evidence to show this has improved significantly over the past ten years or so.

We are most grateful to these young people for their thoughtful participation in this survey and their wise comments. Their intention was to contribute to improving services for younger children in similar situations. It is now down to us, the responsible adults, to hear their testimony and ensure that this happens.

“He taonga nui a tatou tamariki”

Our kids, our future, our responsibility

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Introduction

The Waitakere Children and Family Violence Project consulted in 2012 with primary and secondary schools and community agencies working with family violence about the local response to children exposed to family violence (CEFV). It had concluded that, despite the best efforts of some, the overall response was minimal and tended to focus on the most severe and repetitive cases brought to notice, mainly through Police callouts to FV incidents. Other work with CEFV appeared to be mainly incidental to referrals for other matters, such as behavioural problems, though the work some, such as Man Alive Youth, and Warrior Kids, has a major focus on family violence while Family Action actually provides trauma therapy for children. While there were some excellent NGO initiatives aimed at informing and supporting children through schools and elsewhere, these do not reach all children by any means.

As the project manager, I had been reading extensively, particularly on the needs of CEFV and what was proving to work successfully for them. Most of this literature emanated from overseas, the United States and Australia in particular.

I decided to ask young adults in Waitakere who had been exposed to family violence as children about their needs, the services they had received, what had helped, what hadn't helped and what they would have liked to have happened.¹ The purpose of this was to hear about family violence and the response to it from a child's point of view, in fact seeing these children as experts in their own right, having lived the experience first hand.

As Carroll-Lind et al state in their seminal New Zealand work on children's views of violence in general: "The meanings that children attach to their experiences are not necessarily those shared by adults because their conceptions are informed by the impact these events have on them rather than by legislation or research".²

The objectives of this survey were to hear from a number of this group at an age when they had had some time to reflect on their experiences of violence as children and to quantify to some extent the impact on themselves. It was hoped they would be able to recall what programmes or type of service, if any, had helped them, what barriers there were to getting help and to consider hypothetically what help they would, in hindsight, have appreciated.

Data was also collected on who, in their family, had been violent to whom, how they had felt about it and acted on it and whether they were still affected by it. They were given options to choose from a range of both negative and positive effects of the violence, which they used widely.

Methodology

Participants were invited to participate as a way of helping younger children in situations similar to those they have experienced, by contributing their expertise. They were told they needed to

¹ Waitakere, or West Auckland, is a large area encompassing a wide variety of suburbs, a number of industrial parks, the bush-clad Waitakere Ranges, part of the Manukau Harbour and several remote West Coast beaches. Comparatively low-cost housing attracts a younger and mixed ethnicity population, including Maori, Pacific and Asian peoples. In 2006, of a population of 208,000, 16.2% of its population was Asian, 15.3% were Pacific peoples, and 13.1% were Māori.

(<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/auckland-places/page-8>)

² <http://www.msdc.govt.nz/about-msdc-and-our-work/publications-resources/journals-and-magazines/social-policy-journal/spj37/37-childrens-perceptions-of-violence.html>

be aged between 16 and 25 and to be living in Waitakere. Information and definitions were provided to them, such as family violence as: "This might include hitting, yelling, threatening, being cruel or insulting. You might have heard it, seen it or just been affected by it." They were also warmly thanked for their participation and offered numbers to call if they needed support for themselves or anyone else they knew.

Over 30 youth workers and therapists from community agencies and schools were asked to help recruit participants and information and flyers were given to them to distribute. In the end there were four who actually found participants and one young person who persuaded her programme leader to allow their group to participate. One person told me they were frequently approached with such requests and didn't like to ask young people. Another expressed the same concern, but changed her mind and helped out when I explained it further.

The survey was initially created on Survey Monkey, in the hope that the young people would have access to computers at the centre or school where they were approached, or at home. This limited the survey to 10 questions, which was no doubt as much as they could be expected to answer.

When it became evident that access to computers was not readily available to many young people, a paper-copy was developed and copies were distributed. This produced a better result. One youth group sat everyone down to a meal, with a copy of the survey beside them and 9 out of 11, identifying themselves as qualifying and willing to participate, completed a survey.

The questions were initially developed as open-ended to allow participants to speak freely and without restraint, but this was adjusted to mostly multi-choice questions after the first group of five participants fed back that this placed too much demand on limited writing or language skills for some. 'Comment' and/or 'other' boxes were also provided. Those first five responses were readily adapted to the new question format by sorting them into the options and retaining significant comments.

The 29 accepted surveys (some did not qualify) were scored against the survey template and written comments recorded. Further observations were gained by trawling through them for individual threads.

The starting age of 16 to 25 was decided upon to avoid having to seek parental consent. Some returns were nevertheless received from younger people and, eventually, it was decided to accept them, as they were worthy and anonymous responses.

Other ethical considerations

The possibility of upsetting participants by reminding them of their negative experiences was given ethical consideration. To this end words of thanks and encouragement were given at the end of the questionnaire, along with contact details of free counselling services available to their age group. Supporting documentation was also distributed in the form of posters and an explanatory email to youth workers, both designed to ensure that participants fully understood what was required of them. The questionnaire was worded with ethical considerations foremost in my mind, informed by my relatively recent clinical work in an adolescent mental health service.

Results: The participants and their experiences of family violence

As earlier stated this was not targeted at any particular group, beyond age, geography, experience of family violence and willingness to help others. Uptake was dependent on the professionals approached and whether their clients or students chose to take part. In the end three groups participated (one was part of a school and the others were youth groups), and three counsellors, two working in schools and one working privately, collected the rest.

In terms of gender, only male and female were given as options, as it was thought it might be too tempting to tick an 'other' box, whether true or not. As it happened, 19 identified as female, 9 as male and 2 gave neither, who may perhaps have otherwise ticked 'other', given the opportunity.

All but 1 identified at least in part as either Maori or Pacific or both, with two including Asian. The other one called themselves Pakeha but added 'half-caste' in the 'other' box. Six identified as Maori only, 5 as Pacific only, 7 as Maori/Pakeha and 2 as Maori/Pacific. This is not seen as a representation of children exposed to family violence in Waitakere and is perhaps more reflective of the fact that one Maori professional was particularly helpful in finding participants.

Nineteen participants were aged 16 to 17. Three were under 16, 5 were aged 18 and 19 and 2 were aged 20 and 21.

Who was violent towards whom? (Examples and comment space given – open answers)

Three (3) people did not answer this question, one stating they were not comfortable in doing so, and another reply was unclear. Seventeen (17) named male violence against women, though not necessarily fathers or partners to their mothers, and 3 named female to male violence, while 4 were male to male. Eight (8) identified fighting and argument between parents, rather than as perpetrator and victim. Five (5) of the responses involved multiple perpetrators and victims, sometimes intergenerational and 2 people used the term "Everyone on everyone". One mother was victimised by 4 men, including family and non-family members.

Perpetrator/victim	Number	Percentage
Male to female violence	17	58.6
Female to male violence	3	10.3
Male to male	4	13.7
Fighting between parents	8	27.5
Multiple perpetrators/victims	5	17.2

Table 1: Identification of who was violent towards whom in respondents' families (N=25)

Age at the time of the violence (Example and comment space given – open answers)

There was also a wide variety of ages of the participant when the violence took place, though 13 said it happened over most or all of their childhood. For 8, it happened during their middle childhood years only, and 2 during their teens only, while 4 recalled single incidents or short phases when they were younger than 10. Two did not reply.

Age at time of violence	Number	Percentage
Most of childhood	13	44.8

Only younger than 10	4	13.8
Only during middle childhood	8	27.6
Only during teens	2	6.9
No reply	2	6.9
Total	29	100%

Table 2: Age of respondents at time of violence (N=29)

How did you feel about this? (12 options plus an ‘other’ box given)

Of the 29 participants, 25 said they were frightened and 23 said they were sad. A total of 22 (75.8%) felt worried - fourteen (14) about their safety, 20 for other people and 15 for the whole family. Nineteen (19) felt angry/frustrated, 16 felt depressed, 13 felt *hoha* (despondent) and 9 felt *whakamaa* (ashamed), while 10 felt confused. Five (5) said they were glad it wasn’t them (receiving the violence) and 4 said they weren’t bothered by it, one of these stating that ‘when it happens so much it seems normal’.

Other feelings recorded were ‘afraid I was going to lose my Mum’, ‘unworthy’, ‘neglected’ and ‘lost’.

Feelings experienced	No	Percentage
Frightened	25	86.2
Sad	23	79.3
Worried	22	75.8
Angry/frustrated	19	65.5
Depressed	16	55.2
Hoha/despondent	13	44.8
Confused	10	34.5
Whakamaa/ashamed	9	31.0
Glad it wasn’t me	5	17.2
Not bothered	4	13.8

Table 3: How respondents felt about the violence at the time (N=29, Multiple choice)

Are you still affected by witnessing this violence? (14 options plus ‘other’ box given)

Later in the survey participants were asked this question and given 14 options, 9 of which could be classed as negative effects, 4 as positive and one as neutral (‘it does not affect me now at all’). They were encouraged to tick as many as applied to them, even if this resulted in a mix of negative or positive.

Interestingly, 17 gave a mix of negative and positive effects, including 1 who said she was not affected at all. Five (5) others said they were not affected at all, 1 of whom stated other positive effects. A more poignant response in this group said they were not affected at all but were using alcohol and other drugs to cope. Seven (7) gave negative effects only.

The positive effects seem clear indications of resilience and learning acquired through life experience, rather than any recommendation of family violence as a positive experience! They included 12 ticks for ‘I have more understanding of life than other young adults’ and 12 for ‘I am strong and sensible as a result’, 9 for ‘I won’t accept violence in my family’ and 6 ticks for ‘I have stronger family relationships as a result’ (one specified this was with his mother, while his relationship with his father had broken down).

The negative effects were fairly evenly spread, and more alarming. Ten (10) stated that their memories of the violence come back and upset them and 9 use alcohol and drugs to help them cope. Eight (8) experience mostly negative feelings, 7 space out when stressed and 6 are fearful and jumpy around anger and sudden movement. Three (3) women and 1 man stated they choose violent and/or bullying partners and 6 (4 male and 2 female) bravely admitted to being violent and/or bullying towards others. Two (2) of these (1 female and 1 male) were both bullying and bullied. Curiously, two males who admitted to bullying stated they were strong and sensible as a result of the violence, while none of those bullied said this.

Two women made statements about the effect on them, one saying:

Growth and healing has taken place. I am now more aware and empathetic of other people and realise sometimes situations in my own relationships may mirror those that had taken place with my parents.

This young woman had had support from a neighbouring family throughout her ordeal.

The other stated:

In some ways the sadness never goes away but on the positive side I have never accepted that sort of behaviour from men in my life and have no problems leaving a relationship or saying no to violence.

Ongoing negative effects	No	Percentage
My memories of the violence come back and upset me	10	34.5
I use alcohol and/or drugs to help me cope with the negative effects	9	31.0
I have mostly negative feelings – anger, sadness, depressed, feel like a loser	8	27.6
I space out when stressed and don't get my act together	7	24.1
My family relationships are not strong	7	24.1
I am fearful and jumpy around anger and/or sudden movement	6	20.7
My schooling has been badly affected	6	20.7
I am violent and/or bullying towards others	6	20.7
I choose violent and/or bullying partners	4	13.8
Ongoing positive or neutral effects		
I have more understanding of life than other young adults	12	41.4
I am strong and sensible as a result	12	41.4
I won't accept violence in my family	9	31.0
It does not affect me now at all	7	24.1
I have stronger family relationships as a result	6	20.7

Table 4: Ongoing effects (positive and negative) of childhood family violence (N=29, multiple choice)

Results: Getting support

Asking respondents about whether they sought or received help, and what stood in their way as well as what they would have liked to have happened is the main focus of this survey.

Did you tell anyone? (Comment box only given)

A total of 18 participants told no one about the violence and three didn't reply to this question. The remaining 8 told a friend or a cousin (3), a counsellor (3) and parents (1). One told but didn't say who.

Who did you tell?	Number	Percentage	Helpful	Unhelpful
Told no one	18	62.0		10
Told a friend or cousin	3	10.3	2	1
Told/talked to a counsellor	2	6.9	1	
Told cousin, then counsellor	1	3.5	1	
Told parents (about cousins' violence)	1	3.5	1	
Told but didn't say who	1	3.5		
Didn't answer question	3	10.3		
Total	29	100.0		

Table 5: Who respondents told and indications of helpfulness and unhelpfulness as a result (N=26)

Comments included:

- 'No (I didn't tell) Too scared.'
- 'It just felt normal'
- 'I didn't mind keeping a secret, I'd rather people didn't know.'

What help did you get? How did it help you? (Comment box only)

Of those who told, one accessed services as a result and was supported through this by her friend's family, who were neighbours. Two got tips from friends and another was supported by a cousin's presence. Two of the people who told counsellors found this useful. Two found it useful to talk to the perpetrator/s. The family of one (who didn't tell) got access to Women's Refuge.

Of these 29 people, only three spoke of counselling, presumably referring to their experience as children as more than this may have been seeing a counsellor at school or privately at the time of the survey.

What wasn't helpful? What was more harmful? (Examples and comment box only)

Twelve (12) didn't answer this question or put n/a, and one didn't know. Nine (9) named not telling or keeping it a secret, one said 'it not stopping' and one said 'not knowing how to stop it'. Not receiving much support from agencies was cited as was 'tension' and 'the silent treatment' at home.

Other Comments:

- 'Didn't receive much support from agencies until I started counselling. Was handled in the extended family. This could have been improved.'
- 'I kept it a secret and bottled it up'
- 'Parents separating.'

What help would you have liked and could be useful to other children or young people in your situation? (9 options and an 'other' box given)

All the participants ticked options for this question, 20 ticking 3 or more, which was interesting considering that some had claimed they weren't bothered by the violence.

In terms of family violence being talked about or disclosed, 21 would have liked a safe adult to tell 'who would listen to what you would like them to do, or not do, about it'. Eighteen (18) would have benefitted from being told that family violence is not OK and not their fault and 12 would have liked 'family violence talked about more openly at school and feeling accepted and supported there'. Seven (7) would have liked to know they could call the Police but only 3 would have wanted CYF to step in to make them safe, with some reacting strongly to this suggestion.

In terms of services offered post disclosure and despite possible resistance to participating in recovery services, 13 would have appreciated having a counsellor to talk to about the effects of the violence, 12 would have liked to attend a group for children 'in the same boat', 12 would have appreciated being given skills to help them cope and 12 would have liked to learn to talk about the violence with safe family members.

Comments included:

- 'Someone to teach us what love really is.'
- 'Having it talked about when I was younger so I felt I was accepted and could seek help from teachers etc.'
- 'I would have liked to live in a society where these events were acknowledged and clearly constructed as wrong and inappropriate.'

What help would you have liked (and could help others) in terms of FV being talked about or disclosed	Number	Percentage
Feeling you could tell a safe adult who would listen to what YOU would like them to do, or not do, about it.	21	72.4
Being told that family violence is not OK and isn't you fault	18	62.0
Having FV talked about more openly at school and feeling accepted and supported there	12	41.4
Knowing you could call the Police and how to	7	24.1
Having CYF step in to make you safe	3	10.3
In terms of services offered post disclosure		
Having a counsellor to talk about the effects of FV on you and your family	13	44.8
Going to a group for children in the same boat	12	41.4
Being given skills to help you cope e.g. keeping yourself safe, handling the feelings, solving problems	12	41.4
Learning to talk about it with your safe family members	12	41.4

Table 6: Types of help respondents would have found useful at the time (N=29, multiple choice)

Discussion

These young people and their responses speak for themselves. Even though half of the questions required only ticks in boxes, they were moving to read as the young people clearly put

effort and thought into their answers and, in their written replies, spoke from their hearts, often poignantly. Although I was not able to ask them, I do hope that completing the survey would have been cathartic for some, at least. I am told there are many many more of these young people in West Auckland.

These young adults are telling us what we cannot deny: that children in West Auckland (perhaps especially Maori and Pacific ones?) are not getting the professional help they need to a) disclose and b) recover from the trauma of family violence. The 16 and 17 year olds were only 6 and 7 ten years ago. Can we honestly say there has been a significant improvement in the response to children exposed to family violence since then?

That 21 out of 29 did not get to tell useful adults and only 2 or 3 got professional help at the time (i.e. in the last 5 to 15 years) is extremely alarming. The bulk of them seem to have been left to fend for themselves, most with no adult support on the topic whatsoever. And that all of them chose services they would have found helpful, even while in some cases denying the violence had affected them, indicates that these services are sorely needed.

That so few would have wanted CYF to step in to make them safe perhaps indicates the negative image CYF has in the community. Perhaps CYF were used as a threat of family breakup, or as the 'bogeyman', should the children tell anyone.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the fairly small sample, I believe that these findings demonstrate the need for opportunities for children exposed to family violence to:

- a) discuss and safely disclose family violence (without losing all control of the upshot) and to feel accepted and cared for in their school and other communities
- b) benefit from targeted services in which they can:
 - access support and be made safe or
 - learn skills to help them cope and keep themselves safe
 - process their feelings and the effects of the violence on them
 - build their resiliency in the form of the ability to recover or rebound from stress
 - learn to develop positive, non-violent love relationships and protective parenting roles as they get older

As a result of the research undertaken since September 2011 and these very corroborative findings, I recommend that those developing the Children's Action Plan acknowledge that children exposed to family violence make up the largest client group in current child abuse statistics and that they therefore become a central focus of the Plan i.e. Children's Directors, Children's Teams etc.

As a result of the findings I support the proposed legislation to make other Ministries (Education, Justice and Health in particular) responsible for children and their outcomes, so that they are obliged to take a more proactive approach to children living with violence and are more receptive to them and their need for disclosure, protection, therapy and resiliency support.

I also support the plan for all public sector employees working with children to receive training in talking to children about abuse and neglect by 2015.

The combined findings also highlight the absolute need for Children's Teams to be seen as totally separate from CYF, and not administered from their offices or by them in ANY way, if they are to effectively reach and support children, young people and their families.

I recommend that the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) look at funding services for this group, particularly those not under Protection Orders. Funding for NGOs that work within schools also needs considerable boosting, whether from MSD or the Ministry of Education (MoE), if it is to reach significant numbers of CEFV. The Ministry of Justice's (MoJ's) Protected Persons' Programmes need to be made more widely and openly available for children and young people throughout their youth and into adulthood. Parents need to be supported in getting their children to programmes.

I specifically recommend that the Waitakere family violence sector take the combined findings on board and set out to significantly improve their response to these children. This can be done in many ways, but I believe coordination and collaboration are crucial.³ Such an approach could provide opportunities for information and training, coordinated screening and referral, access to the latest research in terms of effective programmes for children and the possibility of developing a funding stream. Training to professionals in negotiating and supporting children and young people through the risks of disclosure is also much needed. Such a concerted response could help to ensure that children are not left, as these young adults were, to cope alone, afraid and hurt.

To give Carroll-Lind et al the last word, I quote theirs: "Adults must assume responsibility to reduce our children's exposure to violence because New Zealand cannot afford the devastating effects of failing to protect its children."

³ See (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/domviolence/collaboration/>) for examples and details.