

How can Professionals support children who live with family violence at home?

Living with family violence at home affects as many as 20% to 40% of New Zealanders at some stage during their childhood. By the time they reach young adulthood up to half of these children may have lived with ongoing violence for long periods of time,¹ and between 30% and 70% of these children and young people may also have been physically or sexually abused within the household.²

Growing up exposed to physical, sexual or psychological violence can have profound effects on children's development lasting into adulthood. These effects may include attachment difficulties, emotional trauma, anxiety and depression, inflammatory conditions, and social exclusion.³

There has been much discussion about the role of social and statutory services in supporting the children of family violence victims and perpetrators.⁴ Although some children are well known to local police and crisis intervention services by virtue of these services' contact with their parents, relatively few will receive direct services. There are a variety of reasons why, including a shortage of funding and programmes and a lack of adequate pathways giving access to services focused specifically on the needs of children.

Even when crisis services do intervene in family life, it may take months or even years for the family to become safe, if it happens at all. By the time children are old enough to extricate themselves from the parental home the damage has already been done. However, most children living with violence at home never come to the attention of the authorities or family violence services, and children do not readily disclose that they are living with violence, in fact they are often very careful not to.

Deborah Yates of the Waitakere Children and Family Violence Project asked young people who lived with violence as children what kind of support might have helped. They would have appreciated:

- Being able to tell an adult they could trust, who would have asked the child what s/he wanted them to do (thus giving the child some control over the outcome).
- Being told that family violence is not ok and not their fault.
- Having family violence talked about at school in a way that made them feel more accepted.
- Having a counsellor to talk to or being able to attend group therapy with other children.
- Being given skills to help them cope with the violence.
- Learning to talk to their safe family members about the violence.

These young people's replies indicate that family violence services working with adults are not the only avenue through which children may access help and support; families, communities and professionals working with children have key roles to play.

At WAVES Trust we recognise the need for multiple or 'both/and' approaches to children living with violence at home. So whilst making home safe for victims and their children is vital, we encourage other professionals, family members, and bystanders to recognise the signs of children affected by family violence and act to support these children.

Are you a professional working with children or with adults in relation to parenting and family life? Have you considered what role you can play in supporting children living with violence at home? You can learn the signs of their distress and how to respond sensitively, read our fact sheet attached.

You could also consider incorporating into your practice (if you do not do so already), the following principles:

- If you know a family is in distress or hear a disclosure of violence ask 'how are the children?'
- Know the family violence and children's services in your area and make referrals to these.
- When you follow up with adult clients remember to ask about their children's wellbeing.
- Support protected persons to get their children into programmes.
- Refer children to other therapeutic options with competent professionals.

Recommended Reading:

Boshier, Peter and Wademan, Jennifer (2013) *Domestic violence and the impact on children's lives* Paper presented at 6th World Congress on Family Law and Children's Rights

Laing, Lesley (2010) *No Way to Live: Women's experiences of negotiating the family law system in the context of domestic violence* Univ of Sydney.

Margolin and Vickerman (2007) *Post-traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents Exposed to Family Violence: I. Overview and Issues*. See p.615:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2811337/>

Read, John; Hammersley, Paul and Rudegear, Thom (2007) *Why, when and how to ask about childhood abuse* <http://apt.rcpsych.org/content/13/2/101.full>

Van Horn and Groves (2006) *Children exposed to domestic violence: making trauma-informed custody and visitation decisions* <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1755-6988.2006.tb00114.x/abstract>

Yates, Deborah (2012) <http://www.waves.org.nz/network-services/projects/waitakere-children-who-witness-fv/>

For more information and links to resources visit our website: www.waves.org.nz

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Notes

¹ David Fergusson and L. John Horwood, 'Exposure to Interparental Violence in Childhood and Psychosocial Adjustment in Young Adulthood', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 22, 5, 1998, 339–57; Judy Martin, John Langley, and Jane Millichamp, 'Domestic Violence as Witnessed by New Zealand Children', *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 119, 1228, 2006.

² Stephanie Holt, Helen Buckley, and Sadhbh Whelan, 'The Impact of Exposure to Domestic Violence on Children and Young People: A Review of Literature', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 32, 2008, 797–810; Sherry Hamby, David Finkelhor, Heather Turner, and Richard Ormrod, 'The Overlap of Witnessing Partner Violence with Child Maltreatment and Other Victimization in a Nationally Representative Survey of Youth', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34, 2010, 734–41.

³ Fergusson and Horwood; Holt, Buckley and Whelan; Andrea Danese, Carmine Pariante, Avshalom Caspi, Alan Taylor, and Richie Poulton, 'Childhood Maltreatment Predicts Adult Inflammation in a Life-Course Study', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 104, 4, 2007, 1319–24; Abigail Gewirtz and Jeffrey Edleson, 'Young Children's Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence: Towards a Developmental Risk and Resilience Framework for Research and Intervention', *Journal of Family Violence*, 22, 2007, 151–63; David Russell, Kristen Springer, Emily Greenfield, 'Witnessing Domestic Abuse in Childhood as an Independent Risk Factor for Depressive Symptoms in Young Adulthood', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34, 2010, 448–53.

⁴ See for example Clare Murphy, Nicola Paton, Pauline Gulliver, and Janet Fanslow, 'Understanding connections and relationships: child maltreatment, intimate partner violence and parenting', *Issues Paper 3*, New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2013.