

Integrated Family Violence Services Practice Forum

A practice forum held on 31 July 2007,
Melbourne Town Hall

Dr Jenny Higgins

Professionals in the child protection and domestic violence fields agree there is an urgent need to respond to, and minimise, the negative impacts of domestic violence on children. In order to protect children from domestic violence—that is violence between partners—it is essential that services across the welfare spectrum work together to address these issues in a coordinated and collaborative way.

With this goal in mind, the Victorian Government Department of Human Services, supported by the Department for Victorian Communities and the Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre presented the Integrated Family Violence Services practice forum.

The forum brought together experts from the child and family welfare sector, including domestic violence and child protection services staff, policy and government workers, and professionals working in the legal sector, to discuss critical issues and develop new directions and ways of working together to minimise the prevalence and impact of domestic violence on children and young people. As a sign of hope regarding awareness within the sector of domestic violence and the need to work together to better support families, the forum was attended by more than 700 participants.

The forum commenced with Joy Murphy Wandin, an Aboriginal Elder of the Wurundjeri people, conducting a Welcome to Country ceremony. Joy was followed by the Hon. Lisa Neville, MP, Minister for Children, Victoria, who officially opened the forum. The Hon. Jacinta Allen, MP, Minister for Women's Affairs, Victoria, closed the day's events.

The forum featured a number of keynote speakers, including:

- Cathy Humphreys, Professor of Child and Family Welfare, University of Melbourne, Victoria;
- Robyn Miller, Principal Practitioner, Child Protection and Family Services Branch, Office for Children, Victoria;
- Joanna Bock, Regional Director, Northern Region Berry Street, Victoria;
- Julie Boffa, Project Manager, Children's Protection Society, on behalf of the North East Metropolitan Child and Family Services Alliance, Victoria; and
- Mark Glasson, Executive Director, Family and Domestic Violence Unit, Department of Families and Communities, Western Australia, with Arina Aoina, CEO of Starick Services, Western Australia.

The keynote speakers resoundingly reinforced the urgent need to develop effective strategies to protect children from the damaging and often long-term impacts of domestic violence, and highlighted the importance of perpetrators, who are mostly men, taking responsibility and being held accountable for their own violence.

Cathy Humphreys cited statistics showing that, although domestic violence is perpetrated by both men and women, women are the victims in the vast majority of cases, and are significantly more likely to suffer serious injury and be subject to more incidents of violence than men.

Robyn Miller and Julie Boffa highlighted the need for men to be held accountable for their behaviour by services such as child protection and the court system, and for men to take responsibility for

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their behaviour rather than women being held accountable for ensuring children are not placed at risk of exposure to domestic violence.

Mark Glasson and Arina Aonia discussed the findings of their research project that reviewed procedures in the domestic violence, child protection and legislative fields to assess the safety of women who reported being victims of domestic violence, service responses to domestic violence reports, and the accountability of these responses. The presenters also interviewed staff who were considered to be doing their jobs well and who adhered to the policies and procedures of their organisation. The purpose of interviewing these staff members was to determine whether, based on the experience of these workers, their practice enhanced the safety of women who were victims of domestic violence. The researchers found that workers did not have the autonomy to choose how to intervene with families. Instead, clients were “fitted” into processes that aligned with the role and services for which the organisation was funded. The administrative processes prescribed ways of thinking about practice in child protection and law enforcement.

Following presentations from each keynote speaker, six concurrent workshops, facilitated by an expert panel, were held on topics including:

- family violence and legal responses to children;
- assisting men to have non-violent relationships with children;
- creative engagement with mothers and children affected by the trauma of family violence;
- a child’s view of working with Indigenous children affected by family violence;
- what family services and family violence services bring to each other; and
- directions for good practice in child protection and family violence.

A summary is presented below of the views put forward by the panel speakers in the child protection and family violence workshop.

Child protection and family violence workshop

Child welfare reform

The capacity for services to work with families to address issues prior to the child’s birth allows for preventative and proactive interventions.

Shane Wilson (Child Protection Domain Manager, Intake, Investigation Community Partnerships, North and West Region) talked about changes to child welfare reform in Victoria, in particular the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, which was implemented on 21 April 2007. A significant change is that the new legislation permits notifications to be made on unborn infants, rather than waiting until the birth of the child. The capacity for services to work with families to address issues prior to the child’s birth allows for preventative

and proactive interventions, such as linking parents to anger management and assessment services before the newborn arrives. Previously, a notification could not be made until the child was born and this sometimes led to child protection workers attending the hospital to discuss protection concerns with mothers upon the delivery of their baby.

Another significant legislative change is a three-week Temporary Assessment Order (TAO) that can be issued when a family refuses to work with professionals to address family violence issues. The new act also allows police to apply for an Intervention Order on behalf of a child. This legal innovation reduces the pressure on mothers to take responsibility for their partner’s violence by having to take out an Intervention Order against them, and instead makes fathers accountable for their own violent behaviour. Child protection professionals are also having an increased presence in Family Court proceedings, either by responding to requests by court staff or family members to attend hearings, or by attending on their own initiative, which allows child protection professionals to have input into Family Court proceedings to ensure the safety of children in violent households.

Shane highlighted differences in perceptions of risk between services relating to domestic violence issues. For example, child protection sees the separation of a couple as a de-escalation of risk because one of the parents will leave the family home, thereby reducing the children’s exposure to violence;

whereas police see separation as an escalation of risk because most women are at increased risk during separation due to reprisals from their violent partners for leaving the relationship. A major problem for parents and professionals is how to mitigate risk for children when a couple separates. After separation, men are often given unsupervised access with their children, which makes ensuring their safety difficult. Shane pointed out that it is hard to be both a bad (i.e., violent) partner and good dad, because the father's violence toward the child's mother also has a negative effect on the children. However, he sees this dichotomy as a trap the child protection system has fallen into—assuming that the father's violence can be separated out from the broader family dynamics—and argues that this approach undermines the mother. He points out that fathers often have a sense of over-entitlement and an egocentric attitude toward their abusing behaviour, using excuses such as “she made me” act in a violent manner.

The impact of domestic violence on children

Noel Macnamara (Manager, Child and Family Services, Hume Region) spoke about the shifting emphasis in child protection and domestic violence services from family relationships to the impact of domestic violence on children. Noel also reiterated the importance of holding men accountable for their violent behaviour, arguing that, traditionally, men have been seen as playing an insignificant role in child welfare, and mothers have been the focus of intervention in most circumstances. Mothers with violent partners have, at times, been placed by authorities in the untenable positions of monitoring their children's contact with their fathers and protecting them from harm. Mothers therefore have often been blamed for family problems, while men remain invisible. One of the explanations for the misplacement of accountability, Noel believes, is that child protection workers may be reluctant to engage fathers because the system is often staffed by inexperienced female workers who may feel threatened by violent men or find the men unwilling to engage with workers. Workers then often try to engage the mother in intervention strategies to manage the father's behaviour, for example, by encouraging the mother to persuade him to attend anger management classes. Noel stated there had been a failure of the system to hold men accountable, responsible and visible at every stage in the child protection process.

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However, with the focus shifting to ensuring the safety of children, there is an opportunity to look across disciplines for solutions by bringing together services to address the complex problems these families face, such as mental health issues, housing and marginalisation. Further, Noel argued that we need to understand the child's experiences, or the “child's view”, and consider the cumulative impact of harm to children in a home characterised by family violence.

Karen Sutherland (Manager, Child Protection Gippsland Region) talked about the effects on children of exposure to various forms and degrees of family violence, in terms of cognitive, behavioural and emotional problems. How children react to domestic violence can place them at risk, particularly in relation to physical violence. For example, whether they respond to domestic violence by intervening, distracting the offender, or distancing themselves from the violence will determine the degree to which they may place themselves at risk. Children exposed to domestic violence are also vulnerable to using physical and verbal aggression themselves, and there is an increased risk they will become perpetrators of physical or sexual abuse when they are adults. Children also have a tendency to blame themselves when conflict involves them, such as when parents argue about the child.

Factors that protect children include professionals establishing safety by: identifying which parent is the offending and non-offending parent; engaging the non-offending parent in a constructive, non-blaming way; being mindful of the impact of violence and trauma on the mother; and clarifying issues of responsibility for the violence. For the mother, they need to assess her capacity to protect while not blaming her, and for the father, they need to assess his capacity to take responsibility for his violence while also including him in a safety plan.

Professionals could also gather information such as the nature of the violence, the history and pattern of the violence, and the nature of the child's relationships with others, such as teachers and peers at school, extended family and significant others. Important assessment questions include: Does the non-offending parent have the capacity to ensure the safety of the children? Do they understand the impacts of family violence on children? Do they have a history of acting protectively? What enabled them to act protectively and what got in the way?

Child protection workers need to consider the complexity of the relationships between the offending and non-offending parent, which is often characterised by love as well as violence. There is also the need to assess the child and determine what the child's experience has been, the meaning of the experience for them, how they understand the experience of violence and how the child has responded to the violence. Finally, an assessment of the offender is central to any work to understand and minimise domestic violence. A challenge for child protection services is to train workers about victims, children, how the offender works and operates, and how to engage them in treatment, as well as encouraging the offender to take responsibility for their behaviour.

Protecting Indigenous families

Kylie Laidlaw (DHS Project Officer, In Home Support for Aboriginal Families) talked about Indigenous children and an approach to working with Aboriginal families. Kylie drew three overlapping circles to indicate the nexus at which child protection work can protect Indigenous families. One circle encompassed new legal practice in responses to changes in the Act, the second circle comprised local Aboriginal knowledge, and the third circle incorporated the broader service system. The circles can support good practice as follows.

The legal practice circle

Culturally competent child protection responses include Aboriginal family decision-making; and if a protective or intervention order is taken out, statutory services working with Lakidjeka to ensure the child/ren's safety.

Kylie advised that good practice starts at intake, by identifying Aboriginal children and then advising the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) and consulting with them regarding case planning directions. Culturally competent child protection responses include Aboriginal family decision-making; and if a protective or intervention order is taken out, statutory services working with Lakidjeka to ensure the child/ren's safety. This would also include Aboriginal family decision-making, working in accordance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle and developing a cultural support

plan for the child. Kylie highlighted the importance of non-Indigenous workers receiving generalist training about working with Indigenous families at the Child Protection Services' Beginning Practice training for new workers, as well as more specific Cultural Respect training.

The local Aboriginal knowledge circle

Kylie advised that each Aboriginal organisation has its own way of working, based on their own cultural stories, knowledge and connection with land. Further, Aboriginal people place more emphasis on family ties and on extended family and community connections, and there are expectations attached to those obligations that need to be considered when working with Indigenous families.

Another important consideration when working with Indigenous families is having an understanding of the widespread impact of the past welfare practice of removing children from their families, referred to as the Stolen Generations. One in 5 families were directly affected by removal policies, and others argue that every Aboriginal family has been affected to some degree by this policy. This has led to Aboriginal people experiencing fear and trauma in response to child protection issues, and having negative responses to contemporary child protection processes. While Kylie pointed out that basing current attitudes on past welfare practices is not always reasonable, they nevertheless often lead to low engagement with child protection services out of fear for what will happen. For many Aboriginal people, the fear of welfare intervention is greater than living in a violent relationship.

Kylie provided some useful good practice tips for professionals when working with Indigenous families:

- Ask all clients if the child is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- Don't rely on one contact person in the community.
- Never enter an Aboriginal person's home without an invitation.
- Be prepared to share your own story, particularly if you are gathering information from others.
- Use open questions and take time to listen to the answers.
- Don't use negative questions (e.g., "He didn't do this?").
- Read back what has been said and be prepared to explain the process in greater detail.

Broader service system circle

Kylie advised that the best way of working with Indigenous families is by fully utilising Aboriginal workers in the service sector. She said that people know what Indigenous services are available, and the Indigenous personnel who are available in non-Indigenous services. Kylie believes that having Indigenous positions in mainstream services for discrete developmental stages of the child, as well as for specific issues, would enhance outcomes for children.

The workshop provided a valuable opportunity for participants to broaden their understanding of the complex nature of the impact of domestic violence on family members. The range of presenters and workshops gave participants the opportunity to gain deeper insights into how they can work in more holistic ways to protect children from the harmful effects of domestic violence. By sharing knowledge and skills, practitioners from both sectors can work together to strengthen families and enhance outcomes for children who are affected by domestic violence.

At the time of writing, **Dr Jenny Higgins** was a Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Promising practices in out-of-home care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers, children and young people

Strengths and barriers

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, on behalf of the Australian Council for Children and Parenting, commissioned the National Child Protection Clearinghouse to undertake a project examining the strengths and barriers to the recruitment, assessment, training and support of carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The project resulted in seven summary papers, which can be downloaded from: www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/promisingpractices/summarypapers/menu.html

Paper 1: *Why is there a shortage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers?*

Paper 2: *Barriers, incentives and strategies to enhance recruitment of Indigenous carers*

Paper 3: *Why standard assessment processes are culturally inappropriate*

Paper 4: *Training carers*

Paper 5: *Supporting carers*

Paper 6: *Children with complex needs*

Paper 7: *Voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in care*

