The needs of children who witness domestic violence

A South Australian study

Dale Bagshaw and Donna Chung

There is now increasing recognition that child abuse and domestic violence are not separate phenomena and 'witnessing' domestic violence can seriously affect children. This paper reports on a qualitative research project undertaken by researchers from the University of South Australia from June 1998 to January 1999, as part of the Commonwealth and States' Partnerships Against Domestic Violence initiative. The focus of the research was on assessing the needs of women, men and young people who have experienced domestic violence in South Australia. The participants identified many 'effects' of witnessing or experiencing domestic violence on children, along with their needs. The findings will inform early intervention campaigns as well as broader service systems in supporting and responding to the needs of these young people.

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Children living in situations of domestic violence first became a direct focus of research and intervention in the 1980s in the United States (Peled, 1996). However, until recently, and in spite of the recognition that both child abuse and domestic violence are entrenched and pervasive forms of violence in society, there has tended to be a separation of domestic violence and child protection issues in Australia. Child abuse has been regarded as 'a health and welfare issue' and domestic violence 'regarded as a matter for police, courts, women's refuges and other women's support services' (James, 1994). There is now increasing recognition that these are not separate phenomena.

AN OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE

THE LINKS BETWEEN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHILD ABUSE

Concern for children living in families experiencing domestic violence is twofold. First, they may be sole (or primary) victims of one or both parents/ care-givers or they, along with their mothers, may be victims of violence by adult males (fathers/intimate partners/ spouses) (Featherstone, 1996; 1997; Wise 1990; Janko, 1994; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). Studies have shown a high degree of overlap between violence towards women and violence towards children (Hughes, 1986; Straus, Gelles & Steinmez, 1980; Queensland Domestic Violence Taskforce, 1988). Many studies show that both male perpetrators and female survivors abuse their children, or use severe violence more frequently against a child (Peled, 1996).

Children may also be 'secondary victims' and suffer trauma and other significant emotional and psychological effects through witnessing violence, usually directed to their mothers by male partners/fathers (Hyden, 1994; Gary, 1991). In the 1980s, various studies recognised that children living in homes where family violence was present were more likely to exhibit emotional and behavioural problems (Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981; Hershorn & Rosenbaum, 1985); have low self esteem (Hughes, 1986); have poor social problem-solving skills (Rosenberg, 1987); experience increased anxiety and/or aggression (Christopoulos et al, 1987); perform poorly at school and experience problems with social functioning (Carlson, 1984). Emery (1989) also identified that children exposed to family violence may become perpetrators or victims in adulthood. In the 1990s, figures from a range of studies in Australia and overseas indicate that a high number of children witness/experience domestic violence, ranging from abusive language to extreme forms of violence such as wife assault, threat or use of a weapon and homicide (James, 1994).

The research literature identifies that children's responses to witnessing/ experiencing violence vary by gender, age and stage of development. Other variables include the extent and the frequency of the violence, the role of the child in the family, the number of repeated separations and moves, cultural background, the personality of

the child and economic and social disadvantage (James, 1994; Peled, 1996).

BARRIERS TO INTERVENTION WITH CHILDREN

The secretive nature of child abuse and domestic violence

The primary focus of child protection in Australia is within the family (Lawson, 1993; Smith & Saunders, 1995; Kelley, Grace & Elliott, 1990; Benedict, Wulff & White, 1992; Tymchuk, 1992). The family has traditionally been regarded as a source of support and nurturance for children and this has led to an element of denial of abuse at both a community and an individual level. Other forms of violence within the family, such as spouse abuse, are also often viewed as a private matter, adding to the complexity of the problem. Parents may try to hide the violence from the outside world and from their children. Their 'fights' may not be identified as 'domestic violence' by either of the parents or the child, even though the children commonly report feelings of fear and terror, and/or the children may not feel free to disclose the violence (Peled, 1996).

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Child witnesses as 'secondary' victims

Children are often not included in feminist analyses of domestic violence (Yllo & Bograd, 1990) and their lower social and legal status has a direct impact on service provision. Staff in women's shelters were amongst the first to report the emotional and behavioural problems of child witnesses of violence (Prout & James, 1990). Women's shelters have provided important services to children with limited resources, but Peled (1996) and others have identified ideological barriers to the effective provision of protection and support to these children. The domestic violence movement was created to respond to the needs of women victims, and children are seen as a secondary target group, not the primary victims of male violence.

The attribution of responsibility for child protection to mothers

Overall, mothers are held responsible for maltreatment of children, whether or not they are primarily or solely responsible. Korbin (1989), Milner (1993), Stark and Flitcraft (1988), and D'Cruz (1998) comment on the phenomenon of 'responsible mothers, invisible men' where cultural and patriarchal expectations of mothering by professionals operate to focus attention on the mothers and the males responsible for abuse become 'invisible'. Mothers' responsibility for child maltreatment is informed by expectations that they should protect their children from adult males' violence, even where they may be victimised themselves (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). This becomes a major concern when considering children as 'secondary victims' of the violence towards their mothers. The mothers' denials that they are experiencing violence for fear that their children will be removed from their care, may be perceived by professionals as a failure to protect their children. The professionals may then intensify state surveillance and regulation of the mothers to ensure they protect their children (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Milner, 1993; Korbin, 1989; D'Cruz, 1998).

There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that women's treatment of their children is affected by their own victimisation (Peled, 1996). However, Peled (1996) highlights the dangers of sacrificing the rights and safety of children when working to uphold the rights of their mothers, or when working towards the 'empowerment' of mothers. At the same time we need to avoid the common injustice done to women by attributing to them sole responsibility for children's protection and well being. The 'invisible' fathers should also be held accountable.

Definitions of abuse and perceptions of need

Prout and James (1990) and Hendrick (1990) discuss the changing social and political status of the child over time and place, and related public policy responses to the treatment of children in private and public domains. Within the Australian context, the meaning of child protection is interpreted differently according to the race, ethnicity, aboriginality, gender, age, ability and social class of the child (van Krieken, 1991; Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997; D'Cruz, 1998). The statistical indicators of 'need' in relation to domestic violence and child abuse represent only the events brought to the attention of agencies of the State and professionals employed by them, within particular official definitions of abuse. They do not tell us about the many experiences of children that are not brought to public attention or about the abuse of children which is assessed by professionals as not worthy of investigation.

Lack of adequate knowledge, skills and resources

The opportunity to help child witnesses of domestic violence in the health, education and welfare systems is often missed. For example, Peled (1996) identifies that police and social services do not always identify or respond to the specific needs of children who are witnesses of domestic violence, in part due to a lack of specialised knowledge, skill and time. Other inhibiting factors include insufficient and ambiguous legislation, an under-funded, over-whelmed and overworked system, and resistance by advocates of women victims who focus exclusively on the needs of the mother (Echlin & Marshall, 1995).

Difficulties in engaging children and developing trust

Some studies have found that traditional one-on-one counselling approaches have not been as effective in engaging children as other approaches, such as group therapy (Shiffer, 1984). In a Western Australian study children who had witnessed violent incidents reported that the most useful support they received came from friends and family who they knew and

trusted, with only half finding individual counselling useful (Curtin University School of Social Work, 1992). Group work models which include other members of the child's family, such as the mother (Burke, 1994) or siblings (Frey-Angel, 1989) have enhanced supportive family relationships, reassuring the children that they are not alone. For younger children creative approaches, such as play therapy, stories and plays, have been found to be useful (Tutty & Wager, 1994).

AN OVERVIEW OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA RESEARCH

This section reports on a qualitative research project undertaken by researchers from the University of South Australia from June 1998 to January 1999, as part of the Commonwealth and States' Partnerships Against Domestic Violence initiative. The focus of the research project was on assessing the needs of women, men and young people who had experienced domestic violence. The research team conducted a phone-in involving half hour interviews with more than 120 anonymous participants who rang in from rural and city areas, followed by focus groups with victims, survivors, perpetrators and service providers in a range of settings. All parents involved in the research were asked about the needs of children who have experienced domestic violence, including children whose families were in rural and remote areas, in same-sex relationships, or from indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The perspectives of adolescents who had experienced domestic violence were ascertained through a focus group. The young people who participated in the focus group were all users of a youth health service where they attended a peer support group for young people who had experienced domestic violence. Some of the young people were still living in situations of domestic violence and others had left the family home where there had been violence.

Of the120 people interviewed in the phone-in, 94.3 per cent reported that their children had been affected in some way by the experience of domestic violence. Most women in the focus groups had children who were living in the household and who experienced the violence either directly or indirectly. Many mothers reported violence from their partners involving:

- abuse of the mother in front of the children ranging from verbal abuse and 'put-downs' through to serious physical violence (some involving weapons), sometimes with children being caught in the fray;
- torture or killing of children's pets by kicking, strangling, hanging or with weapons such as knives and guns, often in front of the children;
- obsessive control over what the children eat and when they eat, including locking food in cupboards – some mothers reported that they and their children were regularly starved of food; and
- unreasonable control over children's outings and friendships and rudeness to visitors to the home.

The parents' reported experiences suggested that domestic violence introduced complex tensions into the family that affected the relationships between children and their parents and between siblings.

CONCERNS EXPRESSED BY PARENTS

Behaviour problems exhibited by children

It was clear from interviews with parents that most children do suffer some consequences from living in a domestic violence situation. A major concern expressed by women in the focus groups was the fear and terror which children experienced through witnessing abuse, or being direct victims of abuse from the perpetrator, or from witnessing the abuse of their pets. Most perceived that the experience had a detrimental impact on:

- family relationships – including relationships with parents, relationships between siblings and adult partnerships;
- sociability and educational attainment – including lack of motivation, poor achievement at school, social withdrawal and aggression towards peers; and
- personal characteristics and behaviours – manifesting in enuresis, psychosomatic illnesses, anxiety, anti-social behaviours and emotional problems in young children, and alcohol/drug abuse problems, suicide attempts and low self-esteem in adolescents.

While it appears that many children who witness violence experience various problems in the short term and some in the long term, this is neither universal nor inevitable.

Domestic violence as a model for violent behaviour

A number of participants in the focus groups were concerned about the impact that the modelling of violent behaviour could have on children. For example, one child was told by her father before he hit her mother, 'I'm sorry I have to do this to your mother, your mother needs this' and, 'I feel sorry for you – look at your mother'. The child, a seven-year-old female, now speaks openly about the violence she observed against her mother and is acting violently towards her mother, although she does not appear to be using this behaviour towards school friends. Some participants reported that their children were violent and abusive to other siblings or other children, and some reported that their children were also violent towards them (the non-offending parent).

A common view about the effects of domestic violence on children is that of the inevitability of an inter-generational transmission of violent behaviour. This view is often promoted in media reporting of domestic violence research. Many parents did report that their children were either violent in their own relationships or were victimised in later relationships, however this was not

always the case. An important and interesting challenge to the dominant discourse emerged from some participants' stories which demonstrated that their children had not grown up to be either perpetrators or victims of domestic violence. They did not, therefore, view domestic violence as an inevitable consequence of social learning or modelling. A few participants were uncertain whether the children were affected by the domestic violence because it always occurred late at night or not in front of them. One caller stated proudly that despite living in a violent home, her children did not have problems in their adult lives. While it appears that many children who witness violence experience various problems in the short term and some in the long term, this is neither universal nor inevitable.

Children as 'bargaining chips' and a means for extending control

A number of callers reported children being used as a 'bargaining chip' in what were already unequal relationships. This commonly occurred both during the relationship and following the separation around residence and visitation issues. A related concern was that children became a means through which the perpetrator could exercise control over the woman's life. For example, one participant had a daughter with multiple disabilities. Whenever she tried to leave the relationship, the perpetrator threatened to withdraw consent and financial resources for the child's treatment. Others threatened to harm the children or to make access to the children difficult if the mother left the situation.

Children living in rural/remote areas

Twenty per cent of the callers in the phone-in came from the country, as did a significant number of parents in the focus groups. All participants who had lived in rural areas stressed that they are poorly serviced, and they therefore have to travel long distances at considerable cost to get professional help. Services for children in rural areas were reported to be scarce or non-existent, making these children especially vulnerable. In addition, confidentiality issues make it difficult for these children to discuss their situation with extended family or other people in the community. Rural social networks were closed and often conservative, making it hard to seek help. For many women the level of disruption in relation to relocation and visitation issues were barriers to leaving violent relationships.

The needs of people in migrant groups are influenced by specific cultural beliefs and practices and the success of services in catering for these needs will often depend on whether or not they are culturally appropriate.

Indigenous children

Service providers to indigenous families were interviewed about the needs of young people who experience domestic violence. They reported that children in indigenous families do not necessarily experience violence directly, but often witness the abuse of women by male relatives and suffer emotional effects from this experience. One service provider observed:

> It does affect them, emotionally – little boys particularly. Depending on the level of violence at home the little boys will treat mum the same way. We had one little four-year-old who was talking to mum the same way as her partner – you could imagine from the things that she told us that the little boy was doing the same thing. Away from the dad, the little boy was taking on the same role – put down stuff. Little girls are very quiet, withdrawn and really scared.

The emotional effects of family violence can emerge in other sorts of behaviours as well. A worker provided this example:

> One eight-year-old boy went berserk in a classroom. He did damage to the classroom and then to the cars outside and when asked why he was so destructive he said that when his Dad hit his Mum he says that he's going to get into trouble for this, so he might as well do a good job. He was doing the same thing.

These and other stories reinforce the value of understanding the way violent and abusive behaviour can have a carry-on effect for other members of the family and others in the broader community. Similarly, one service provider noted that women who are the victims of abuse will sometimes 'take it out on the kids'.

Children with parents from non-English speaking backgrounds

Interviews were conducted with nineteen service providers with considerable experience in working with a wide range of non-English speaking background (NESB) migrant communities, including Vietnamese, Filipina, Greek, Italian, former Yugoslavian, Polish, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Cambodian, Iraqui, Iranian and Hungarian communities. These interviews confirmed that for some sections of the South Australian community, the experience of domestic violence is further complicated by the problems associated with migration. The stress of migration increases the risk of violence and makes it harder to report. The needs of people in migrant groups are influenced by specific cultural beliefs and practices and the success of services in catering for these needs will often depend on whether or not they are culturally appropriate. The needs of children in NESB communities cannot be adequately addressed unless these sorts of barriers are taken into account.

Children's needs can influence the behaviour of parents, particularly mothers. For instance, in Vietnamese communities, social status is linked to family standing within the community. There is a strong stigma attached to single motherhood and this can have long term consequences for children's marriage and career prospects. Sometimes couples who have been maintaining separate relationships will re-unite prior to a child's marriage. Considerable influence is exerted by the extended family, even from Vietnam, and women are generally encouraged to preserve the family unit at all costs.

There is evidence that children from NESB communities who grow up witnessing/experiencing domestic violence can be deeply affected by the experience. Similar to other children, some children (male and female) from NESB communities grow up to become abusive to their mothers. This can be reinforced by patriarchal attitudes about the status of male children in some NESB communities, where it is common for mothers and sisters to become subjected to violence from teenage sons. However, one worker in the Italian community noted that many women do not leave abusive relationships until the children are older. Often by then, however, the daughters have married abusive males and the sons have become abusive in their relationships. Mothers attempting to leave in these circumstances may find that it is the male children who are supportive, while the female children urge them to stay, believing that violence is a part of women's experience in marriage.

There is one specific support service for migrant women experiencing domestic violence in South Australia. Workers from this service find the absence of culturally specific counselling services for women, men and children from NESB communities to be a consistent limitation. Often the only strategies they can offer women and their children are emergency support and accommodation. Services for all children are limited – there are long waiting lists – and to compound the problem, generic workers are often unaware of the special issues for children from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Children living with a lesbian parent

Nineteen women from one lesbian community in Adelaide that had coalesced around a Women's Community Health Service participated in the research. There are commonalities in the experience of all children living with domestic violence, however, where abuse occurs in a lesbian relationship, there are some particular complications for children.

- The abuse is hidden:
  The hidden nature of the abuse when a parent has not 'come out' means that the children are silenced, or feel unable to acknowledge the impact of the abuse on them, for fear of publicly compromising their birth parent's relationship.
- Homophobic attitudes:
  Even when their parent is open about their lesbian relationship, children are aware of the possible negative reactions from teachers, friends or the parents of their friends.
- Limited access to extended family:
  Children can be cut off from potential support from their extended families because their mother has been alienated. This serves to compound their difficulties.
- No public or legal recognition of the consequences of separation:
  Children also have to deal with social attitudes about lesbianism after their parents' relationship ends. Workers noted that the general community does not perceive the break-up of a lesbian relationship in the same way as a break-up in a heterosexual de jure or de facto marriage. It does not elicit the same level of concern and sympathy and is not recognised by the legal system or the Family Court.
- People don't recognise that a child who is brought up by two women loves both of these women as parents, and that when the relationship breaks up and one of them disappears, they've lost a parent.
- Parenting issues:
  Within lesbian relationships it cannot be assumed that the birth parent is the primary care-giver of the child. In cases where the abuse comes from the birth parent, not only does the child lose a parent, but they also lose a sense of safety and security when they lose the primary care-giver (who has no legal rights) and are left with the abuser.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Eleven young people (ten females and one male) from northern metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia, participated in a focus group to discuss their experiences of domestic violence and related needs. The participants ranged in age from 16 to 22 years – the mean age was 18 years. Many of the young people's feelings and reactions to domestic violence were similar to those of adult survivors, such as a sense of worthlessness, living in constant fear and feeling powerless. As with women survivors, they reported that mental and emotional abuse were more devastating and long lasting in their impacts. However, this research found that young people were resilient and able to lead lives free from violence, again challenging assumptions about the inevitability of intergenerational effects of domestic violence.

Trust and confidentiality

'Having someone to talk to who cares' was identified by young people as a strong need, but few knew an adult they felt they could trust when they were children. The youth service they now attended met their need to have someone to trust and talk to about their experiences because the workers:

- were able to relate to young people;
- were not viewed as being in positions of authority;
- demonstrated an understanding of the situation; and
- instilled in the young people a sense of having power over their own lives.

Some participants did not feel comfortable talking to teachers because they represented a form of authority. This was especially the case when they had previously been in trouble at school.

Participants felt that having people similar in age to talk to was valuable, as their peers knew the unique difficulties that they faced and could explain things in ways that they understood. It is important that service providers

recognise the lack of trust and the confidentiality issues that young people identify as major barriers to reporting domestic violence to adults.

The effects of mandatory notification

Mandatory notification requirements affected who young people chose to tell about their abusive situation. One young person in the focus group highlighted the trust issues:

> With mandated notifiers sometimes this makes the situation worse. You need to trust this person not to tell unless it won't make things worse. When FACS [Family and Community Services] got involved things got worse. You need to be in control of who else gets told.

Some young people in a violent situation felt they had no control or power over what happened to them. They were aware of teachers being mandated notifiers of child abuse and therefore did not want to disclose their situation and be responsible for the family breaking up. Similar wariness about telling social workers was also reported. The young people therefore continued to live in violent and abusive situations and continued to experience an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and isolation.

SUMMARY OF CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

There is considerable evidence in the domestic violence literature, confirmed by our research, that children are frequently directly and indirectly abused or maltreated in situations of domestic violence. However our research was too broadly targeted to be able to identify in depth all of the special needs of children who witness domestic violence. Parents involved in the research found very little help that was effective for their children. The lack of relevant services for children was also reflected in the data collected from service providers on the needs of children in rural, indigenous, NESB and lesbian communities.

We need to understand more about the way in which children interpret and attribute meaning to violence in the family (Hyden, 1994). This would include how children access formal, public services – such as telling school teachers, social workers or police (Hyden, 1994), or access informal, private assistance – such as telling relatives or friends.

Similarly, the meanings of events need to be more clearly understood from the perspective of each parent. Whilst professionals may legitimately be concerned for the lives and well-being of children, professional definitions, perceptions of problems and approaches to intervention may not achieve the goal of protecting children in families experiencing domestic violence. Instead, their mothers may resist professional intervention for fear of the consequences of acknowledging their male partners' violence, either to themselves and/or their children. These consequences may include increased risk to their safety, to their children's safety, or the loss of their children to their partners or into public care.

MISOGYNIST

Slap me in the face
You are a disgrace
Feelin' kinda he-man
You do 'cos you can

(Chorus)
Misogynist
Slapping every woman you meet
Take a seat
Stop beat
Woman hater
Its getting dark, turn out the lights, hear the dog bark.

Come home
Act normal
Slap her in the face
Laugh and laugh
She sits there crying
You're always lying
This is Domestic Violence
Its a bad case

(Chorus)

Misogynist you womaniser
You woman hater
Can't be a man
Just wait till she gets power
Ha! Ha! You're biggest fan.

(Chorus)

Lyrics of a song sent to us by a 10-year-old boy who witnessed his father's violence towards his mother.

Furthermore, understanding the perspectives of the persons responsible for abuse, whether male and/or female, may allow for the development of more appropriate services.

Within these constraints we identified some needs in relation to children who are affected by domestic violence, which are summarised in the next section.

THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Culturally appropriate and timely support

The number of services for children who have experienced domestic violence is small. Generic counselling services for children often have long waiting lists and may not always address the children's behaviours within the context of domestic violence. Often children did not wish to be referred to counselling. Those parents whose children had used counselling found it to be ineffective and inappropriate for three reasons. Firstly, the children perceived counselling to be a punishment. Secondly, referral to a counsellor inferred that they, not their parent, were 'having a problem'. Thirdly, participants indicated that counsellors' responses were frequently focussed on the anti-social behaviours of the children and not on what parents saw as the underlying experience of domestic violence that had precipitated these behaviours. There was a general view that the long-term impact of fear on children was not adequately understood or dealt with by existing services.

In this context, it is pertinent to consider measures to ensure that children do not develop an identity that is tied to the experience of domestic violence. This is particularly crucial in a cultural context where the 'inter-generational transmission' explanation for violent behaviour is reproduced and reinforced. Interpretations of children's needs should be balanced against the objective of providing forms of support that are positive and constructive and which children themselves find acceptable and helpful.

The ineffectiveness and scarcity of services for children were seen as issues to be addressed through developing responsive intervention systems and improving access to expert professionals.

Support and understanding from teachers/counsellors at school

Both parents and young people stated that it would be of great benefit if teachers and counsellors were more aware of the effects of domestic violence on children at school. This would assist teachers to make sense of students' behaviour and to provide appropriate support. From the research findings it seems that whilst some teachers have demonstrated an understanding of the effects of domestic violence, it was not a universal experience.

Early intervention and prevention

Parents identified a pressing need for all young children in our community to learn about respectful relationships and how to be assertive in relationships without resorting to violence. The need for conflict resolution skills to be taught to children from an early age was also identified by service providers as an area requiring urgent attention. Suggestions included a 'whole school and community' approach to relationship education, involving children, parents and the community to ensure a holistic approach to change.

Confidentiality and trust

In order for young people's needs to be met it is imperative that services can assure young people of confidentiality within clearly defined limits. The evidence suggests that mandatory notification may significantly inhibit young people from reporting domestic violence to teachers and others for fear of breaking up the family. This complex area requires further research.

Ongoing support during legal processes

Some young participants who had been involved in court cases related to their experiences of violence talked about having the 'courage to make a statement and press charges'. One participant described the added difficulty of having to 'go over and over the events months later'. This requirement meant that they did not feel free of the abuse, regardless of the time since they had separated from the perpetrator, a situation also reported by women survivors. There is a need for ongoing support that extends beyond the period of crisis-oriented assistance.

Informal peer support and education

Young participants identified a need for friends to listen and support them when they are in violent situations and after they have left. In exploring effective models of service delivery, they emphasised that priority should be given to peer support groups and the further use of peer education.

Interpretations of children's needs should be balanced against the objective of providing forms of support that are positive and constructive and which children themselves find acceptable and helpful.

Inclusive school curriculum

As with other groups involved in this research, young people argued that domestic violence and child sexual abuse should be discussed in schools as part of the curriculum in order to raise children's awareness of the issues. They also advocated the need for relevant information about these issues to be made publicly available for all children.

Safe accommodation and support

Young people emphasised the need to feel safe in their temporary environment once they had left an abusive situation at home. Services for young people escaping situations of domestic violence were seen to be inadequate. In particular, there was not enough safe accommodation that specifically addressed their immediate needs. Youth shelters were not viewed as responsive to their needs and were often full. The young people reported that they often experienced fear and concern that they would have to return to abusive situations because of their transient existence.

Increased awareness and information

Young people reported the need for public awareness to be raised that violence and abuse are not acceptable in relationships, including dating relationships. In particular, they emphasised that community education campaigns need to include a component that specifically targets children and young people.

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Children from rural and remote areas

Parents and service providers highlighted that there is only a small number of services in rural areas, and therefore there is a need for generic and specialised services to develop inter-agency practices, protocols and agreements that facilitate access to services. Where there is domestic violence there is a particular need for access to relevant information and support in terms of income and legal matters, so that women and children are not forced to remain in unsafe situations or return to them. More research is needed to ascertain appropriate ways of meeting these and other needs in rural locations.

Indigenous children

Indigenous service providers are concerned that Aboriginal cultural studies are disappearing from the curriculum in schools. They believe that early and ongoing intervention is needed to educate indigenous and non-indigenous children about traditional Aboriginal culture in order to boost the self-esteem and status of indigenous children in the school system. They also stress that indigenous children (and others) also need to be introduced to a range of strategies for resolving conflict from an early age.

Identifying positive role models for indigenous children living in abusive situations is a priority. One indigenous researcher cited the Uncle/Nephew program established in Alice Springs as a good example of a community initiative which seeks to reverse some

of the negative influences experienced by young indigenous men. This scheme fosters a mentor relationship between young boys/men and older men who are 'good role models' and are able to 'relate stories of their lives or the community.' It was noted, however, that initiatives such as these may not work in all communities, and programs need to be generated and supported by local communities.

Children from non-English speaking backgrounds

Service providers identified an urgent need for culturally appropriate services for children from NESB families. Their migrant status and the fact that they culturally and linguistically differ from the mainstream community compound their sense of vulnerability. The limited availability of generic services for children is exacerbated by the fact that workers in generic services are often unaware of the special issues for children from non-English speaking backgrounds. Generic workers need additional training and there is a need for specialised services for these children to be provided within a culturally appropriate context.

Children of lesbian relationships

Children whose parents are involved in an abusive lesbian relationship need particular consideration and understanding. Many are isolated from extended family and mainstream sources of support, in part because of homophobic attitudes, and require access to culturally aware counsellors. Issues of residence and contact after separation are particularly complex for the children of lesbian relationships. Children generally reside with the birth parent after separation, even if she is the perpetrator, and they need help to cope with the loss of their other parent and to deal with issues of abuse. This situation is particularly problematic where the abuser is the birth parent and the primary care-giver is the non-abusive partner. The legal system needs to recognise and address this problem.

CONCLUSIONS

The research undertaken by the University of South Australia corroborates the findings of many previous studies with regard to the effects of witnessing domestic violence on children. In addition, this research examined the experiences and identified the special needs of diverse communities of children and young people. It is evident from the range of needs identified that a multiplicity of strategies, aimed at various levels and segments of the community, are required to prevent domestic violence and its impacts on children. This research provides some indication that the 'intergenerational transmission' of abuse is not inevitable. With appropriate and timely support, children are not irreparably damaged by the abuse and can go on to lead violence free lives. □

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