

Family Violence and Child Protection

Gill Callister

Director, Child Protection and Juvenile Justice
Department of Human Services, Victoria

Adapted from a speech given by Ms Callister at
'Our children our future ... domestic violence and its consequences' symposium
at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, 15 May 2002

DIMENSIONS

Family violence is a serious and widespread issue in our community. Violence between adults within the same family is a risk factor encountered by child protection workers at all points of child protection intervention. Accurately measuring the extent of family violence within the general community and within families notified to child protection is difficult, but we do know that it is an increasing aspect of the workload of Child Protection workers. The Department of Human Services Child Protection program tracks the number and types of characteristics for parents involved with Child Protection according to six categories. These categories are: psychiatric disability, intellectual disability, physical disability, family violence, alcohol abuse and substance abuse. For substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect the percentage of families with family violence noted as a parental characteristic increased from 38 per cent in 1996-97 to 52 per cent in 2000-01 (Department of Human Services 2002). The same data also indicates that for parents for whom family violence was the major parental characteristic recorded over the past five-year period, the co-occurrence of psychiatric disability increased by more than 50 per cent, alcohol abuse increased by 20 per cent, and substance abuse increased by 52 per cent.

Family violence is an issue of serious concern to indigenous families and communities in Victoria and throughout Australia. While it is difficult to document the extent of violence in indigenous families and communities in Victoria, there is a general consensus that violence is disproportionately high and increasing. When indigenous families are notified to Child Protection, family violence is cited as a risk factor in 56% of cases (ibid).

Child Protection workers working with indigenous families often find the work complex and demanding. The children are often our community's most disadvantaged. Issues may include the parents' and grandparents' own history of involvement with child welfare agencies. The requirement for Child Protection workers is to work in a respectful and

honest way with all families while focussing on the protective concerns being assessed.

The police are the professional group who make the most notifications to Child Protection in Victoria. Family violence is reported as a concern in approximately 60% of notifications made to Child Protection from police in 2001-02. Friends, family and neighbours, who make up the next biggest notifier group, also report family violence as a factor in over half of their notifications.

DIRECTIONS – INCORPORATING NEW RESEARCH

Any assessment of the impact of family violence on children must take account of the developmental stage of the child. Unborn children, newborn babies and infants are particularly vulnerable to long term harm.

Dr Bruce Perry from the Child Trauma Academy in Texas has written extensively and persuasively on the effects of early childhood exposure to violence. He speaks with considerable concern about the excessive levels of violence that American children are exposed to as part of their daily diet. He writes that neonates, newborns and infants with their malleable and vulnerable brain development are at risk of permanent harm by being exposed to violence they experience in utero and after birth (Perry 1997). The challenge for Child Protection is to become well acquainted with the implications of this type of research on Child Protection case practice. Workers need to incorporate into their broader socio-political understanding of the dynamics of family violence, a capacity to assess the potential physiological impact on the very young child.

Child Protection workers need to be able to clearly articulate to Children's Court Magistrates the risk and harm to children when family violence is present. It is currently an on-going challenge for Child Protection workers to present family violence concerns to the Children's Court, in particular if family violence is the predominant reason for issuing the protection application.

CHALLENGES OF INTERVENTION

Working with Men

Working with men who are violent and aggressive within the home poses challenges for all workers who become involved to assess or assist families where family violence occurs. Child Protection workers are often threatened, and may be intimidated by men who use violence within the family. A response to this behaviour may be that the Child Protection worker engages more directly with the women and fails to actively engage with the man. Burke (1999) states that if a child protection service does not address the perpetrator or invite his participation, then the service is inadvertently reinforcing the notion that the woman alone is responsible for the future safety of her children.

As Child Protection are mandated to work with all family members once a case is accepted for investigation, it is important that Child Protection workers have an understanding of the dynamics of family violence, the gendered nature of this violence and the power the perpetrator exerts both physically and psychologically among all family members. Child Protection workers must actively engage with men and be able to assess whether the man is likely to engage with Child Protection or another service to acknowledge and address the impact his behaviour is having on his children and partner.

Working with Women

To work effectively with women affected by family violence, Child Protection workers must have an understanding of the impact living with a violent partner may have on a woman's capacity to parent. As women adapt their parenting to compensate for, or in response to the violence with which the family are living, others may view this parenting as inappropriate, inconsistent or ineffective (Burke 1999). Child Protection may label a mother's incapacity to respond to her children's needs as a failure to protect her children from abuse. While not losing sight of the safety of the children, Child Protection workers can also be cognisant of, and sensitive to, the impact that living with family violence has on the woman's capacity to be protective, and ensure that any intervention does not further undermine the woman's parenting capacity and confidence.

Working with Children

The challenge for Child Protection workers is to assess and respond to the impact that violence and aggression between adult members of the family has on children. A wide range of research links poor outcomes for children to the existence of violence between the child's caregivers. McGuigan and Pratt (2001) state that their study indicated that an assessment of domestic violence during the first 6 months of a child's life more than tripled the odds of physical abuse occurring and doubled the odds of psychological child abuse and neglect occurring at some point during the child's first 5 years.

Perry (1997) states:

any child exposed to chronic intrafamilial violence will develop a persisting fear-response. Because there are marked gender

differences in this response with females more likely to dissociate and males more likely to display a classic 'fight or flight' response, more males will develop the aggressive, impulsive, reactive and hyperactive symptom presentation.

All children exposed to serious family violence must be assessed for the immediate impact the exposure has had on their development and provided with an appropriate therapeutic response which may include individual play therapy, family therapy or group work with other children and families.

Dynamics of Family Violence

As a statutory program with time limited intervention parameters, the phases of child protection intervention can at times mirror the phases of the cycles of violence. If police notify Child Protection when they visit a family late at night, by the time the Child Protection workers attend, either later that night if a Central After Hours Child Protection Service crisis response is required, or a day or two later, the immediate crisis may have passed. The family may have closed ranks and the children may appear safe. It can be difficult to maintain grounds for intervention, particularly if there is no pattern or history of similar concerns. Similarly, even if the concerns are substantiated and Child Protection remains involved for a period of two or three months, we may still mirror a broader cycle of an episode of violence, remorse and forgiveness. Cases are often closed, as limited evidence exists to take the matter before a Children's Court Magistrate, yet workers can often predict a recurrence of violence, which may lead to another notification.

Working with Other Service Systems

When family violence occurs, families may become involved with a range of different services including police, family violence services, child protection, family counselling services and the courts. Each of these systems has developed its own set of program and policy responses. It can be challenging for services to work together with the same family when approaches are often derived from different philosophical frameworks.

Service systems may have a somewhat limited understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities. Misconceptions and stereotypes abound, leading at times to fractious relationships, based on encounters at times of crisis. Over the past 10 years, however, the extensive focus on the importance of interagency collaboration has led to a tangible willingness on the part of all service systems working with family violence to better understand each other's role.

While different philosophical frameworks are necessary and healthy, it has been heartening for child protection to see both the police and the family violence services sector move towards recognising the particular and unique needs of the children within a family where violence is occurring. And, in turn, Child Protection has developed and continues to build upon an informed case practice for families where family violence occurs.

DIRECTIONS FOR FAMILY VIOLENCE IN CHILD PROTECTION

Within the Child Protection program in Victoria there are a number of existing initiatives to guide practice and support workers to respond to family violence. These include:

- A 2-day training program offered to all child protection workers. The curriculum of this program includes up-to-date research and information on how to present family violence in court, how to work with men, women and children and an overview of the broader family violence service system. In response to workers' need for information to hand out to families on the effects of family violence on children, the Child Protection branch has recently produced information sheets for workers to leave with families – one for men and one for women. They have a two-fold benefit: to provide men and women with information on the impact of family violence on children and places to go for help, and to provide a basis for discussion between Child Protection and the parents with whom they work.
- Each region has a High Risk Infants program and Specialist Infant Protective Workers (SIPWs) who offer advice, support and direct casework with infants. SIPWs have developed specific expertise around the impact of family violence on infants.
- The Victorian Risk Framework (VRF) has a Specialist Assessment Guide, available to workers on the intranet, which guides workers through assessing the impact of family violence. The Specialist Assessment Guide provides workers with a summary of up-to-date research on the impact of family violence, and strategies for assessment. It includes the latest brain development research. The VRF guides workers' assessments to ensure that, as well as a clear risk assessment of the current incident or event being assessed, a comprehensive risk analysis occurs to incorporate the pattern and history of harm.
- Child Protection has developed a cooperative and positive relationship with the Victorian Police Family Violence Unit and has co-developed a laminated information sheet which has been placed in all police stations outlining what to report and where to report in relation to family violence.

In summary, family violence is a major issue for our community and therefore a major issue for the Child Protection service in Victoria. We will continue to examine ways to ensure that the experience of children is recognised and responded to, and that children are adequately assessed and protected from the pervasive harm of family violence. We will continue to work with the community and professional support services to ensure that this work is undertaken collaboratively. ♦

REFERENCES

- Burke, C. (1999) 'Redressing the balance: Child protection intervention in the context of domestic violence', in *Challenging Silence: Innovative responses to sexual and domestic violence*, J. Breckenridge and L. Laing (eds), Allen & Unwin.
- Department of Human Services (2002) *An integrated strategy for child protection and placement services*, Community Care Division, Victoria.
- McGuigan, W.M. & Pratt, C.C. (2001) 'The predictive impact of domestic violence on three types of child maltreatment', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, (25), 869-883.
- Perry, B.D. (1997) 'Incubated in terror: Neurodevelopment factors in the 'cycle of violence'', in *Children, Youth and Violence: The Search for Solutions*, J. Osofsky (ed), Guilford Press, New York.