

Renate Alexander begins this edition by examining what those working to assist the victims of domestic violence need to know – beyond the legal remedies which follow and which comprise the greater part of this book. She presents the current knowledge of incidence and patterns in family violence, and challenges the reader to review and reflect upon the myths regarding domestic violence as often presented in media and popular culture – that the victim has provoked the violence, that the victim is masochistic, that domestic violence is a private matter, and that, because the victim does not always or quickly leave the violent situation, she (and it almost always is 'she') only has herself to blame. Renate summarises the present state of knowledge about, and the counter responses to, these myths, and considers the various supportive, financial and emotional resources that may allow the person facing domestic violence to make and carry out a real choice.

The book presents succinctly the various remedies available under the Federal Family Law Act (1975), and examines those available under the criminal law and via the various

specific remedies in respect of domestic violence enacted across the various Australian States and Territories. For each such State and Territory, concise information regarding the nature of the protection orders available, their duration, who can apply, and how they are enforced, is presented.

Although this is a relatively small book, its information is clearly presented, and useful contact details are provided for other supports to which those working in this field might need to refer. I suspect *Domestic Violence in Australia* is likely to be a resource for the human services practitioner, advocate or DV worker – more than the legal practitioner who may find the level of legal practice detail necessitates further legal research in order to enable skilled legal representation. Nonetheless, this is a valuable resource for the practitioner in both the legal and social sciences.

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Challenging Silence: Innovative responses to sexual and domestic violence

Jan Breckenridge and Lesley Laing (eds)

Allen & Unwin, 1999

This is an interesting book of sixteen chapters contributed by authors from a variety of disciplines and research, teaching and practice backgrounds. The editors say that the impetus for the book comes from two interrelated concerns. The first is the apparent backlash against the public acknowledgment of sexual and domestic violence. The second is their interest in sharing information about innovative and creative responses with a wide audience of health, welfare and legal practitioners. These two concerns result in the book being structured after the introduction into two major parts. Part 1 explores 'structures that silence' while part 2 gives accounts of 'practices that challenge secrecy and denial'.

In an opening chapter, Breckenridge points the finger at the professions, arguing that their discourses, particularly prior to the challenging movements of the seventies and eighties, served to subjugate and silence the experience and voices of victims of sexual and domestic violence. The power of the private domain and the focus of prevailing views served most often to deny and distort the problem and very frequently to blame the victim. Frequently also remedies not only failed to provide redress, they exacerbated and perpetuated negative consequences. Medical, helping and legal professions contributed to mythologies within cultural values and beliefs which minimized concern and action for victims and at times provided excuses for perpetrators. Included in the historical account is the 'discovery' by Freud of childhood sexual abuse in his patients' histories and his subsequent shift from belief in their accounts to propounding the experiences as fantasies and wishful thinking. This set in train a longstanding, oppressive, gendered stance which dominated till some breaking of the silence occurred amid the revolutions of the

seventies and eighties. Such professionalising forces have not disappeared and the chapter ends with a set of observations seen as a backlash against the gains.

The contributions in Part 1 of the book include chapters on child sexual abuse allegations in the context of divorce; the experience of women in Court as victims of sexual assault; civil legal remedies against violent abusers, including discussion of the effects of consent orders; 'the too hard basket' investigating the connection between ethnicity, culture and access to sexual assault services; psychiatric institutional abuse ('systems that silence'); the science and the ideology of recovered memories of child sexual abuse. Within these there are many clear examples of processes which foster disbelief and suppression or rejection of the stories of victims and considerable weighing of empirical evidence around the issues and various political and ideological influences in play.

Part 2 moves on to a number of interesting contributions which provide examples of victims gaining a voice and being heard and believed. One chapter concerns a New South Wales pre-trial diversion treatment program, which involves offenders, victims and the non-abusing parent shifting the power balance within the family. Another chapter explores the issue of men as victims of domestic violence. It looks at gender differences in the use and form of violence. It concludes that women's violence is a reality but to claim equivalence of intent, frequency and severity of outcome is a fiction. Another chapter recounts the author's experience of working with adolescent survivors of sexual assault. Another titled 'The courage to hear' discusses abuse survivors suffering from dissociative identity disorder. Next is a chapter

dealing with both the heightened vulnerability to abuse of children with a disability such as cerebral palsy, and measures developed to deal with communication difficulties in responding to instances of abuse. The experience of an aboriginal worker who develops her knowledge and skills in respect to child sexual assault includes insights and practice issues for preventive work in aboriginal communities. There is a chapter on the significance of 'community' in child protection (including research on networks and neighbourhoods) and another which describes an integrated and comprehensive strategy developed by Relationships Australia to prevent violence occurring in family relationships and to resolve the effects of violence which has occurred.

The final chapter focuses directly on the issue of child protection intervention in the context of domestic violence. Based on eight years of practice experience, Chris Burke

argues for child protection intervention 'informed by a socio-political analysis of gender, power and responsibility'. This exposes the way perpetrators 'shape the beliefs and behaviours of family members' and the way some practice obscures the impact of violence on women and children.

The book would be a worthwhile addition to the shelves of workers in child protection and workers with family violence, and for the increasing number of practitioners in various fields confronted with both.

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Children's Needs – Parenting Capacity

The impact of parental mental illness, problem alcohol and drug use, and domestic violence on children's development

H. Cleaver, I. Unell and J. Algate

The Stationery Office, London, 1999

This book is yet another very useful product of the commitment of the British Department of Health to commissioning research likely to aid practice in child and family welfare and to making the results accessible to people working in the field. This report was commissioned in response to the theme which emerged strongly from the studies summarised in the 1995 publication *Child Protection: Messages from Research* that, among the families whose children became involved with the child protection system, there were high levels of parental mental illness, problem alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence.

The authors were asked to pursue this issue further and distil the evidence as to how parenting capacity is affected by these problems. There were also some additional issues for examination related to child protection investigations and intervention. Families are reluctant to disclose these problems for fear of more punitive responses and the fact that the child protection allegations and issues compound existing vulnerabilities. Social workers would also sometimes misinterpret parental behaviour as symptomatic of abuse when it was more to do with attempts to avoid disclosing these problems. There was also evidence that workers tended to evade frightening confrontations especially when they felt unsupported or alone. At times too, workers with children had limited understanding of these problems and the specific effects on parents, while workers familiar with these particular problem areas often lacked understanding of their impact and significance for children.

The book is organised in five sections. The first explores questions of definition and prevalence to see to what extent

concern is justified. The second examines the ways in which these problems affect parents and their parenting capacity. The third examines which children are vulnerable. The fourth goes into detail on the developmental implications of these problems. To aid this process the age/stage and life dimensions adopted by the 'Looking After Children' system are utilised to provide a framework for the process. The final part discusses the implications of the evidence for policy and practice. Politicians, policy makers, program planners and managers are asked to take on board the significance of comprehensive assessment and intervention; the importance of joint working (collaboration and coordination); the necessity of flexible time frames to cope with the heterogeneity of the population and the variation and fluctuation of needs over time; the importance of communication and information for children and families, and the significance of training and education to fill in knowledge gaps and to facilitate joint working.

Although there is ample need for more research, the available evidence leaves the reader in no doubt about the existence of problems which are substantial in scale where research has been done and the work gives very useful pointers for action. One additional interesting finding is about the load often borne by children who are carers of parents and other family members. Formal interest in the needs of young carers is at present much more apparent in Europe than in Australia.

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