

Reviews

CHILD PROTECTION, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND PARENTAL SUBSTANCE ABUSE: FAMILY EXPERIENCES AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Hedy Cleaver, Don Nicholson, Sukey Tarr & Deborah Cleaver

Jessica Kingsley, London, 2007.

Researchers at Child Abuse Research Australia (CARA) at Monash University were amongst the first to identify links between child abuse and domestic violence (Goddard & Hiller 1993). Since then, the literature has shown increasing complexities affecting families. In Australia, statistics show that it is not uncommon for children about whom there are protective concerns to have parents who are also involved in violent relationships and/or substance abuse (Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Queensland 2007; Department of Human Services 2002; NSW Child Death Review Team 2007; Victorian Child Death Review Committee 2007). In view of the increasingly complex cases facing social workers, the research presented in this book is useful because it presents a number of important universal issues.

Briefly, the book describes a study which is based upon research commissioned by the UK Government, primarily to explore the needs of children whose families were affected by substance abuse (including alcohol) and/or domestic violence. Data were collected from six English local authorities in order to ascertain:

- Staff awareness of protocols, policies and working practices in cases in which substance misuse and/or domestic violence were factors. In addition, relevant policy and training documents were examined across the local authorities to identify different approaches adopted.
- Working practices in each local authority drawn from the data associated with 357 cases. Half the cases were affected by domestic violence, half affected by parental substance misuse and one fifth affected by both problems.
- The experiences of families, by interviewing parents and gaining insights into supportive and hindering practices.

The first chapter of the book contains information on UK-based policies and legislation, as well as some related literature and reports. It provides a good background to the study, which is useful given that research in the UK often influences Australian research and policies. In chapter 2, the response of social services is described, including the outcomes from 'initial' and 'core' assessments (where available). The overall family situation is described, including assessments on parenting capacity and children's met and unmet developmental needs. This provides the

reader with a sense of the compounding nature of the problems affecting these families. The consequential need for housing support, health services and other support services, in addition to substance misuse and/or domestic violence services, provides an introduction to the next chapter, emphasising the importance of adopting the collaborative approach required to support multi-agency working.

Chapter 4 details the parents' perspectives and, amongst other things, highlights the importance of collaboration and accessibility of services, and the impacts of emotional and practical support on parents' satisfaction levels. The final two chapters (5 and 6) are devoted to describing the extent to which the needs of complex families were met through current inter-agency collaboration; and the knowledge and training needed by social workers/managers faced with these complex needs.

In my view, there are a number of additional issues that would have assisted in improving the book.

The first relates to providing the reader with an understanding of 'substance misuse'. This concept was unclear from the beginning and it would have been useful to understand what was meant by 'misuse' in policy documents, including frequency/pattern of drug misuse, poly drug use and timing/opportunity of use. Research generally appears to treat 'substance misuse' as a homogenous concept and this particular research appears to be no different in this respect. This is important in view of the authors' comment that it is 'important not to pathologise all families' (p.39). How different were the families whose developmental needs were all met? When was parental substance misuse not affecting their parenting capacity? It was unclear how these families were distinguished from other families by comparison.

The second issue relates to co-morbidity. According to the authors, 60 per cent of cases involved substance abuse and domestic violence. In addition, 20 per cent of cases were affected by circumstances involving parental poor mental health. In view of the established relationship between substance abuse and poor mental health in the literature, and in particular, the ability of substances to cause, mimic or mask mental health symptoms, it would have been useful to address this issue in more depth. Even though parental mental illness may have been outside the scope of the research, it would also have been useful to acknowledge the limitations of the inquiry.

Thirdly, in view of the growing literature emphasising the importance and value of listening to children in the context of child abuse (for example, Mudaly & Goddard 2006), children's views must be regarded as central to creating

child-focussed social work practice. This is particularly important in the field of child protection. Although the authors explained the difficulty of interviewing children of families participating in the study, this should have been represented as a significant limitation for the research data. A reader should reasonably expect to read about children's views as well as those of parents in a book describing 'family experiences'. Thus, 'parent experiences' might better reflect the nature of the research data presented in this book.

A further implication of not representing the views of children is the inability of the research to acknowledge the reality of the harm experienced by children in families affected by domestic violence and/or parental substance abuse. By interviewing only adults, the book describes only the harm as perceived by adults, thus giving an incomplete picture.

Although the research was not particularly novel, the book details a number of insights into the complexities of child abuse in a violent and/or drug affected environment. It highlights the importance of developing and formalising policy, and facilitating agencies to work together in an effort to alleviate some of the problems affecting these families. This is an issue that also needs to be addressed in Australia. The book is a worthwhile addition to the library as it consolidates existing knowledge in this field by example. It also highlights the need for effective social work practice in managing the issues facing these complex families. It does, however, need to be read with its limitations in mind.

REVIEWED BY

Lillian De Bortoli
Child Abuse Research Australia (CARA)
Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria

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THE OTHER SIDE OF BLUE: WHAT WE LEARN THROUGH OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

Michael Colling (editor)
Finch Publishing, Lane Cover, NSW, 2007.

It is hard not to feel emotional when reading the collection of stories in Michael Colling's book *The other side of blue: What we learn through overcoming adversity*, not just because of the sadness expressed by the writers, but because of the incredible resilience shown by the individuals who share their stories. The book presents twenty stories, collected by Michael Colling, about individuals who have overcome adversity. Ten men and eleven women (one of the stories is co-written) write their own stories, in their own words, about a difficult time in their lives. Colling, in his Introduction, indicates that they were mostly in their twenties or thirties at the time of writing, and he presents each story as a different chapter in the book.

Of course, what 'adversity' is, exactly, is different for each of us and hence is different for each of the writers in this book. Some of their experiences include depression, bullying, drug use, family and domestic violence, living with a family member with a mental illness, cancer, isolation, loss (of ability, friends, family), adoption, 'coming out' and racism. Though the stories are in many ways unique to each writer, common themes emerge including loneliness, isolation, confusion, lack of understanding, just surviving, being different and feeling shame.

I came to the conclusion that if I died everything would be good, happy and pleasant, and moreover, no-one would care. There are no words that can actually describe how broken and hurt I felt (Tina, Chapter 16, p.127).

These stories focus not just on the experience of adversity, but also on how the writers overcame their difficulties, and some tell of what they learned along the way. Sharing their stories with others was an important part of the journey for most of the writers, including sharing what they found useful and the turning points in their lives. For many it was actually asking for, and receiving, help that was the turning point. However, for some, the 'help' they needed didn't always come when first requested and, in fact, many were let down by those we are told, as children, are there to help us; for instance, teachers, family, friends, parents, counsellors, social workers and police. When the 'right' person did listen, and did 'help', a turning point was initiated.

It is worth asking for help and making the effort (Pru, Chapter 2, p.17).

For others it was the support of family and friends that they found most useful, and many gave credit to certain individuals for helping them work through their difficulties like 'Cris' (Chapter 15) who encourages anyone facing adversity to 'find their friends and hold on to them like gold' (p.122).