

Young People and Domestic Violence Fact Sheet



This fact sheet reviews the research on young people's experiences of domestic violence. It looks at how young people react to violence; whether there is any research to support the theory of an 'inter-generational cycle' of violence; and what services can do to support young people.

Young people know if there is violence in their family, even if their parents try to hide it. Parents often believe that their children don't know what's going on because the violence happens at night, or behind closed doors, or while the children were outside or away from home. But as Stasiak et al report, young people "frequently recall incidents which they were not 'supposed' to have seen" (Stasiak et al, 2004).

How many young Australians live with domestic violence?

According to a national survey funded by the Federal Government almost one quarter of young people in Australia (23.4%) have witnessed their father or stepfather's violence against their mother or stepmother. The definition of violence in this research relates only to physical violence; young people's exposure to emotional, sexual, financial and social abuse is probably much higher. (Commonwealth Attorney General Department, 2001).

Children and young people are present at 85-90% of domestic violence incidents and that in about 50% of those incidents the children were directly harmed. (Department of Community Services NSW, 2002).

Based on findings from the national survey, it is estimated that 1 in 10 young people currently live in homes where the male carer uses violence against them "for reasons other than bad behaviour" (Indermaur, 2001).

Indigenous young people are more likely to report having witnessed domestic violence

than non-Indigenous groups. (Commonwealth Attorney General Department, 2001)

How often do child abuse and domestic violence overlap?

There is increasing evidence to suggest that the presence of one kind of violence in a family, such as domestic violence is a good predictor of other kinds of violence, such as child abuse (Shea Hart, 2004).

The overlap or co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse is estimated to be between 30-70% (Sullivan, 2000).

What effect does living with violence have on young people?

Young people and children who live with domestic violence can show some of the same symptoms as children who are being abused directly. The effects include anxiety, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, and substance abuse (Fraser, 1999, Evans and Sutherland, 1996).

Exposure to domestic violence affects young people's behaviour and emotional well-being. The effects can be 'internalised' behaviours, such as depression and anxiety, as well as 'externalised' behaviours, such as aggression and sudden changes in relationships. Violence can also impact on the development of cognitive abilities, which may affect school performance and social skills.

However, young people show a great diversity in their responses – whereas some will "act out" at school, others will not change or will excel at school, which is a safer and more

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predictable place than home (Humphreys and Mullender, 2004).

In some cases young people will be directly physically hurt during domestic violence, particularly if they try to intervene to protect their mothers or siblings from harm.

But they can also experience indirect or non-physical suffering through:

- Chronic levels of stress and tension in their home, leading to hyper-vigilance and emotional stress
- Isolation from their friends and family, enforced by the abusive parent
- Reduced availability, neglect and sometimes harsher disciplinary methods from parents
- Constant fear, tension and intimidation created by an awareness of their mother's stress and the possibility of further violence
- Assuming parental responsibility, for example by protecting or caring for siblings
- Life changes and events that follow violence, such as separation, missing school or work, disrupted sleep and moving away from home (Stasiak, 2004; National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2002].

The impact of exposure to domestic violence is complex rather than causal, and is mediated by a range of factors such as the young person's environment, family and individual characteristics (Wolfe, 2003). Few studies have separated the effects of violence from the effects of, poverty, for example, while many studies focus on young people living in refuge and temporary accommodation, which may affect the young person's well-being in different ways to domestic violence. More research is needed to understand the effects of domestic violence and how they interact with the effects of other life circumstances.

As individuals move through conception to birth, infancy, early childhood, adolescence

and young adulthood, they experience the effects of exposure to domestic violence in different ways. Young teenagers, for example, are more likely to try to intervene in a violent incident and may suffer injury as a result. They are also more likely to experience homelessness and educational problems as a result of violence at home.

Young people are not just passive witnesses of domestic violence.

Young people actively respond to violence and attempt to make sense of their experience. They develop a range of strategies and skills to deal with domestic violence, such as:

- finding support through their informal networks (e.g. friends, family)
- seeking help from formal networks and professionals
- finding other ways to build safety and skills, such as involvement in academic, social and sporting activities. (Irwin et al 2003)

Young people think critically about the violence they are exposed to, trying to make sense or meaning of it, and will re-visit these meanings throughout their lives. As young people get older, they understand more about the power and control aspects of violence (Stasiak, 2004).

What about the “inter-generational cycle of violence”?

Is it true that young people carry patterns of violence into their adult lives?

The theory of the intergenerational cycle or transmission of violence holds that children and young people who are exposed to domestic violence are at greater risk of perpetrating relationship violence in their adult lives. This theory is often focused on boys and young men and has strongly influenced prevention and support programs for young men exposed to domestic violence (Boyd, 2001a).

However, the evidence in relation to this theory reveals that children and young people are often responsive to and critical of their abusive father's behaviour. The majority of young men who are exposed to domestic violence do not go on to be perpetrators of violence in their own lives (Boyd, 2001a). Research suggests the figure is around 30%, leaving 70% of boys resist the use of violence in their own lives (Boyd, 2001a).

Some studies have found evidence to support the theory of inter-generational violence. Whitfield et al for example found that the use of bullying and aggression is higher amongst children who are exposed to violence compared with children who are not exposed (Whitfield et al, 2003). However, researchers identify that there are many factors affecting the transmission of violence, such as the frequency of violence and the young person's relationship to the abuser parent and the victim parent.

Witnessing domestic violence must not be understood as a singular or causal predictor of adult violence. A range of other factors mediate the long-term impact of exposure to domestic violence, such as the severity of abuse, access to personal support, community and cultural attitudes toward violence. National research on young people and domestic violence, exposure to intimate partner violence can shape young people's attitudes and beliefs about the acceptability of that violence, however there was no evidence to suggest that such attitudes necessarily lead to violent behaviour (Commonwealth Attorney General Department, 2001).

The majority of offenders and victims are from non-violent homes, suggesting again that the relationship between exposure to violence and personal use of violence is complex, not causal (Humphreys & Mullinar, 2004).

What's wrong with the theory of inter-generational transmission of violence?

Young people who live with family violence often experience a "double-labelling": that is, they are not only seen as the children of violent fathers – a stigma in itself – they are also targeted by services as potential offenders and sometimes potential victims (Boyd, 2001b). The powerful influence these stereotypes has on support services and the general community can often restrain young people's ability to critically reflect on their experience and develop their own understandings of violence.

The focus on young people as potential offenders can also shift the focus away from the social, political and structural causes of domestic violence. Services and researchers may target individual or family dynamics instead of addressing the structural inequalities that allow perpetrators to use violence or at least fail to hold them accountable for it. Boys who live with domestic violence are certainly not the only boys who "receive training in dominant masculine (violent) ways of being", yet most initiatives to prevent domestic violence do not yet target our whole society (Boyd, 2001a).

What do young people know and think about domestic violence?

According to recent national research:

- Young people are most likely to attribute the causes of violence to alcohol and learned behaviour (that is, the inter-generational cycle of violence);
- Female children and older children are more likely to show awareness of the effects of domestic violence in their home;
- Young people identify threats, bullying and control as violence, even though there is no definite physical harm involved (Commonwealth Attorney General Department, 2001).

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What do young people think about domestic violence services?

Children and young people often think that support services don't understand or represent them. They have felt that agencies, such as the police and court professionals, were not sensitive to their needs. "They wanted to be noticed, to be listened to and believed, to have their opinions taken seriously and to be supported" (Stasiak et al, 2004: 4).

Young people attach great importance to being listened to and believed by people who are significant in their lives, such as extended family members. They want these people to act on their concerns and, sometimes, to act on their behalf (Stasiak et al, 2004). Young people often see their mother as a primary support or resource. They regret the loss of connection with extended family if they are forced to move away from home (Sullivan et al, 2000, Laing, 2000).

There are particular problems for young people from ethnic, migrant and refugee communities. For example they may be reluctant to contact a support service for fear of breaching the "secrecy" of their family issues or reinforcing negative stereotypes about their community. They may also have a distrust of authorities and non-ethno-specific services to protect them (Fraser, 1999). Children may especially dread being forced to leave their home because they are protected from racism there and have good access to culturally-appropriate services and extended family.

Young people want to be involved in making decisions

Rather than being 'protected' from adult discussions, young people want to be included and involved in decision-making and told what is going on. They are willing and able to talk about what they are experiencing, and would like to be involved with adults in developing strategies to reduce their exposure

to violence. They are also willing to talk about their experience when their safety has been re-established, which is known to be important in mitigating the effects of witnessing violence.

Children and young people need to be consulted and participate in decisions that have major impacts on their lives (Irwin et al, 2003 p.18)

What can we do better for young people?

The fact that young people have needs and interests that are separate and different to their mothers has only been recognised recently. There are a number of assumptions and generalisations that get in the way of addressing violence and considering young people's specific needs, voices and individual responses to exposure (Shea Hart, 2004). These include:

- the view that family dynamics are a private matter
- the idea that family is a source of nurturing and support
- a belief that the abuser is or can be a good parent
- narrow definitions of domestic violence
- definitions of domestic violence as conflict 'between parents' or as an 'adult issue'.

In addition, there is a shortage of resources amongst support services for working specifically with young people. Professionals can often doubt that they have adequate skills and training and may even continue to deny or avoid the impact of violence on young people (Stasiak et al, 2004).

Some of the strategies practitioners can use to support young people include:

- Show young people that we appreciate the complexities of disclosing violence;
- Avoid falsely reassuring them that nothing bad will happen;
- Allow them time to assess and build trust, safety and respect with their workers;

- Name the perpetrator as responsible for violence without demonising him, especially because young people may continue to have a relationship with him;
- Avoid conflating their needs with their mothers', but avoid distinguishing them completely;
- Assist them to negotiate potential conflicts between their mothers' and their own interests and needs (e.g. the right to safety vs relationships with family);
- Avoid medicalising, pathologising or stigmatising the young person's responses to violence, and instead recognise their individual and emotionally complex response; and
- Incorporate exposure to domestic violence into how we understand the "best interests of the child" in court cases.

(Fraser, 1999; Shea Hart, 2004]

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