

Discussion Paper: No 22

Safe and Secure: Working with children and families involved in Family Violence

Introduction

Family violence has an impact on children and young people as a traumatic experience and may have significant effects on their development. An increased understanding of family violence and its impact allows us to shine another light on our current assessment of children and their responses to the trauma of family violence which can be seen in their behaviour. As a consequence, educators are able to provide them with responses that are supportive and appropriate to the context in which they, and the educator, find themselves.

This paper will discuss some specific aspects of family violence, and suggest some strategies using the SMART framework for consideration in the educational setting. Some questions for discussion about the specific nature of family violence and its impact on children and young people are provided at the conclusion of this paper.

An Overview of Family Violence

Definition

For the purpose of discussion in this paper, the following definition of family violence is used:

Family violence is a form of child abuse, whether children experience the violence directly or not. It affects the safety, stability and development of unborn children, infants, children and young people, and causes them developmental, neurological,

relational, physical and emotional harm. The level, nature and impact of this harm depends on their individual experiences of family violence, on their own needs and strengths, and on the care, support and healing opportunities they are offered by adults.

(Department of Human Services Victoria, *Assessing children and young people experiencing family violence: A practice guide for family violence practitioners*, 2013)

Some Family Violence Facts

In 2009–10:

- One quarter (25%) of family violence clients were adolescents or children aged 17 years or younger, with the majority aged less than 15 years.
- One in five (20%) of family violence casework clients were children or adolescents under 18 years (12% aged 15 years or less).
- More than half of the women seeking assistance for family violence through a specialist family violence court had children in their care, and one fifth included a child on their intervention order application.
- Police and court data shows perpetrators of violence against adult female victims were overwhelmingly male (91–95%), while adult male victims were subject to violence from both male and females (40 – 60 %respectively)

(Victorian Family Violence Database Volume 5: Eleven Year Trend Analysis, 1999–2010)

Family Violence and Its Impacts

In a healthy family environment, children experience nurturing and stability which enhances their social, emotional and physical development through relationships within the family and the extended family. Safe and secure attachment relationships are able to develop when one or both parents are attuned to the child's needs and the child develops "physiological and emotional regulation, self-reliance, social competence with peers, empathy, communication and language skills and self-integration and self-worth." (Hughes, 2009). Children who have lived in this environment are more likely to develop a positive sense of self and so are better able to adapt to changes in their social environment, to make and sustain friendships, and engage in learning activities.

In a violent family environment, children may experience disruption to development as the connected relationships which are crucial to optimal brain development are restricted by experiences. Parents who engage in prolonged conflict and violence are less able to provide the secure attachment base a child needs to explore and to return to seek comfort and reassurance. In this environment, a child learns to passively avoid their parent, or they may perceive the parent to be both comforting and frightening. For example, the child may see their father as “large and overwhelming... and unpredictable... and a monster”¹, and see the unavailability of their mother as she attempts to manage herself and has little capacity to protect, care for and soothe her children. Parents who are involved in prolonged conflict and violence have less capacity to meet their own needs, the needs of the child and may be unaware of the harm that has occurred for the child, and in some cases unable to acknowledge the harm they have caused their child.

Family violence can also disrupt development because of its effect on school attendance, housing security and social connectedness. The consequences of family violence may include having to move house, perhaps several times, leaving friends, schools and neighbours in order to be safe. Children may have to leave favourite toys, clothes and possessions, and live in temporary or refuge accommodation which may also change several times to maintain safety. They may also experience being separated from their family for safety reasons.

Family violence is founded and perpetrated on fear, and children and young people who have experienced family violence over an extended period of time may develop a range of coping strategies based on that fear, especially in social environments such as the educational setting. However, in that setting their coping strategies are often inappropriate as they adapt to situations which pose a potential threat.

Observable impacts of family violence on school age children include rebelliousness, defiant behaviour, irritability, physical abuse of others, lack of interest in social activities, poor social skills and performance at school, few or no friends and frequent illness involving absence from school. Older primary and adolescents may also demonstrate criminal behaviours, eating disorders, substance abuse and risk taking behaviours.

(Department of Human Services Victoria, Assessing children and young people experiencing family violence: A practice guide for family violence practitioners, 2013)

¹ Client communication, 2011

As children who have experienced family violence enter the educational environment, the SMART Practice Framework is useful in responding to them in the educational setting.

SMART Practice Framework

The SMART PRACTICE framework provides educators with a framework for considering family violence and its impact on children. The framework guides a range of strategies which aim to support the transformation of trauma impacts for children and young people.

Predictable

Traumatised children and young people perceive any change as potential threat. Children who have experienced family violence and its consequences may have moved house often and without warning, in order to preserve their safety. This disrupts routines which are important in creating safety and stability. They may also be changing houses as a means of having access with both parents. At times, they may be moving between two houses as they have access with the perpetrator. Transition times such as these are times children who've experienced violence need extra support.

Example: Provide plans for the day/week that a child can rely on may create a sense of predictability, with the consequence of a sense of safety.

Responsive

Children who have experienced family violence may not have had experience of an adult who is responsive to their experience. Educators who are able to respond to children in a way that shows the relationship is the priority, even when a child's behaviour is challenging, are providing the child with an experience that when repeated helps the child to trust relationships.

Example: Providing the opportunity and a safe space for the child to "cool down" and then support the child in talking about what has occurred, discussion that separates the child from their behaviour.

Attuned

Children need experiences with adults who are able to recognise and acknowledge the child's feelings. An element of family violence is that the parents may be 'unavailable' to the child because of their own responses to the trauma of the violence. Adults who are able to see the pattern of stressors for the child and who are able to communicate this awareness to

the child are providing the child with experiences of understanding and responding to feelings rather than behaviour.

Example: Show an interest in the child and their feelings and model your own feelings appropriately.

Connecting

As a response to their experience of family violence, children may be disconnected from their feelings and their sense of who they are. Educators may consider activities which help a child build their vocabulary around feelings and help the child find useful ways of responding to their feelings.

Example: Using activities such as 'bear cards' to explore feelings and situations in which feelings may change. Modelling of feelings language by safe adults is the best possible way for a child to experience congruent feelings based language and action.

Translating

The experience of family violence may make it difficult for children to interpret the experience of violence itself, and their current experiences. They need support with remembering and creating their 'story.'

Example: Create opportunities to review their day/week and talk about how and why things changed in that day/week.

Involving

The experience of family violence limits the child's experience of connected relationships and interrupts the development of their sense of self, making it difficult for children to develop and keep friendships. Educators can support them to be involved in positive activities

Example: Use a buddy system to involve children in activities based on their interests

Calming

The experience of an ongoing violent environment results in a child staying in a state of arousal, leaving them unable to engage in activities around them as they scan for potential threat. Their experience of relationships may provide them with limited resources to manage their emotions, and they need to be with adults who are able to be calm themselves and to

help the child to regulate their emotions through repeated experiences of calming and calm responses.

Example: Develop a 'calm down' strategy with the child that they can use to develop mastery of having a safe place and an activity or an anchor to reduce their arousal level.

Engaging

The violent family environment children have experienced diminishes their experience of relationships with adults on which they can model their own relationships. Educators are well placed to offer the opportunity for supportive adult – child relationships.

Example: Model boundaries and your expectations of the relationship. Make time for play - and silly play!

Questions for Consideration

- Consider your own values about parenting and family violence.
- What are the values of your school about children who have experienced, or are experiencing family violence?
- What does it mean for you to engage with the parents of children that you know are experiencing family violence?
- How do you, and your school, support children who have experienced, or are experiencing family violence?

References

Department of Human Services (2013) Assessing Children and Young people experiencing family violence: A practice guide for family violence practitioners http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/761379/Assessing_children_and_young_people_family_violence_0413.pdf Accessed November, 2013.

Hughes, D. (2009) *Attachment Focused Parenting: Effective Strategies to Care for Children*. Norton, New York

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