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Supporting Children & Young People to Heal from the Trauma of Family Violence

Supporting Trauma Responsive Parenting



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The Australian Childhood Foundation acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional custodians of this land and we pay our respect to their Elders past, present and future.



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Learning Outcomes

- Review a shared platform for understanding family violence and how we construct our understanding of its impact.
- Explore a framework that supports recovery for children, in the context of safety, reconnection, and nurture with their parents and carers.
- Consider how we support parents to provide relationally reparative contexts in the aftermath of family violence.
- Practical ideas to support reconnection and recovery.



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Children “Witnessing” family violence

Witnessing family violence includes when a child or young person is exposed to:

- Seeing the impact of the violence (bruising, distress, damaged property etc.)
- Witnessing their mother/father lying about how the mothers injuries occurred
- Sensing their mother’s fear
- Living with the effects of violence on the health and parenting capacity of their mother
- Having their possessions destroyed. (*The Lookout.org.au*)



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Perpetrator involving the child

A child or young person may be used by the perpetrator as a way to maintain power and control. Tactics include:

- Using the child as a hostage or as a means of ensuring the mother returns/stays home
- Forcing a child to watch or participate in assaults
- Interrogating or involving the child in spying on mother
- Undermining the mother by encouraging negative opinions of her abilities, character or appearance. (*The Lookout.org.au*)

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Impacts of family violence on children

Behaviours: fight, flight, freeze or submit activation can lead to a range of behaviours.

Development: developmental delays

Relationships: impacts on attachment to primary caregiver

Emotions: heightened fear response and poor attachment to secure base can impact on child's sense of self, their emotions and mental health

Learning: heightened fear response impairs a child's ability to learn

Cognitions: impaired when in a constant state of fight or flight.

Physical health: psycho-somatic (Brain-body) symptoms caused by stress response can lead to physical ailments; potential injury from exposure to violence.

Cultural identity: fractures connections to family and culture

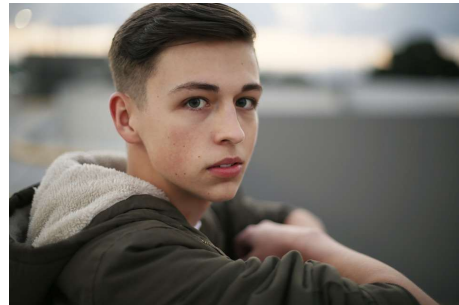
1800Respect.org.au

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Impacts on young people

- Depression and/or anxiety
- Violent outbursts
- Low academic achievement
- Eating disorders
- Absconding from home/school
- Risk taking behaviours
- Substance use.
- Violence in their own intimate relationships.

The Lookout.org.au



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Impact on parent – child bond

- Diminishes capacity for mother to be present for her child
- Often preoccupied with the perpetrator
- Little capacity to provide nurturing or strengthen attachment with child
- Mother likely to have a diminished sense of self
- Perpetrator often sabotages relationship with the child
- Perpetrating parent, who should be a source of safety is their source of fear



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Impacts of family violence on parent-child relationship

- Reliance on self protection when safety is not provided
- Reliance on self-soothing when co-regulation is not available
- “irresolvable paradox” – biologically primed for dependence on the parent who is the source of terror (perpetrating parent) or unable to protect (non-offending parent)
- Parent locked into stress response (hyper or hypo-arousal) – unable to tune into and respond to child’s cues, states and needs
- Role reversal – instrumental and/or emotional parentification

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Beliefs a child or young person may hold as a result of family violence

- My needs are not important
- This is what relationships look like
- I have to look after others
- Its my fault
- It’s mum’s fault – she is crazy (Maternal alienation)
- This doesn’t happen to anyone else
- I must be bad
- I can’t get close to anyone or I will get hurt



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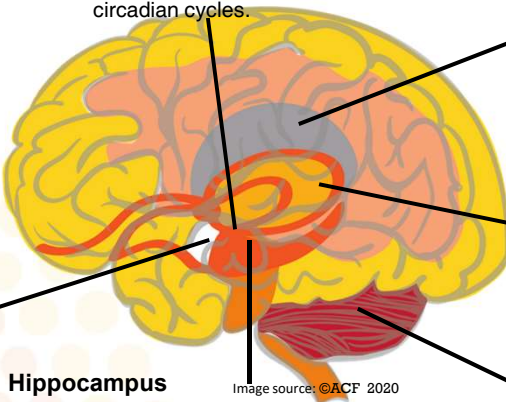
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Impacts of family violence during pregnancy

- High levels of toxic stress in pregnant mothers
- Elevated cortisol is transmitted across the placenta mimicking stress in the foetus.
- The infant is then born with an altered stress response.
- Low birth, premature labour and miscarriage
- Maternal substance abuse and smoking
- Maternal depression/anxiety/post-natal depression

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Trauma and the brain



Prefrontal cortex
Responsible for executive functions, such as judgement, reasoning, and self awareness. PFC development and integration impacted by chronic trauma/stress

Amygdala
Survival response centre within the limbic lobe that becomes enlarged and more sensitive the more it is activated through responding to threats

Hypothalamus
Links the nervous system to the endocrine system via the pituitary gland. It synthesizes and secretes hormones to control body temperature, hunger, thirst, fatigue, sleep, and circadian cycles.


Hippocampus
Consolidates memory by providing the context/ sequential data for episodic memories. Goes offline if trauma overwhelms and disrupts cortex.

Corpus Callosum
Bridge between the 2 hemispheres. Chronic stress can damage and thin down this bundle of neurons

Thalamus
Sensory receptor within the diencephalon. Receives and passes on sensory data to be further processed by other areas of the brain. Chronic trauma can lead to sensory processing difficulties

Cerebellum
Balance and coordination, motor skills may be impacted by trauma

Image source: ©ACF 2020

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Dys-regulated Arousal

Fight or Flight hyper-vigilant, action-orientated, impulsive, emotionally flooded, reactive, defensive, self-destructive

Freeze Physically immobilized, frozen, tense musculature

Submit Collapsed, weak, defeated, flat affect, numb, empty, helpless, hopeless

Ogden, Minton, Pain 2006

AROUSAL

Sympathetic Hyper-arousal

↑

Window of Tolerance

↓

Parasympathetic Hypo-arousal

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Impact of trauma on arousal

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Creating safety – discussion

In groups, discuss:

- How can we support a child and their parent/carer to experience felt safety?
- How would we know that a child is beginning to feel safe? What might we see?



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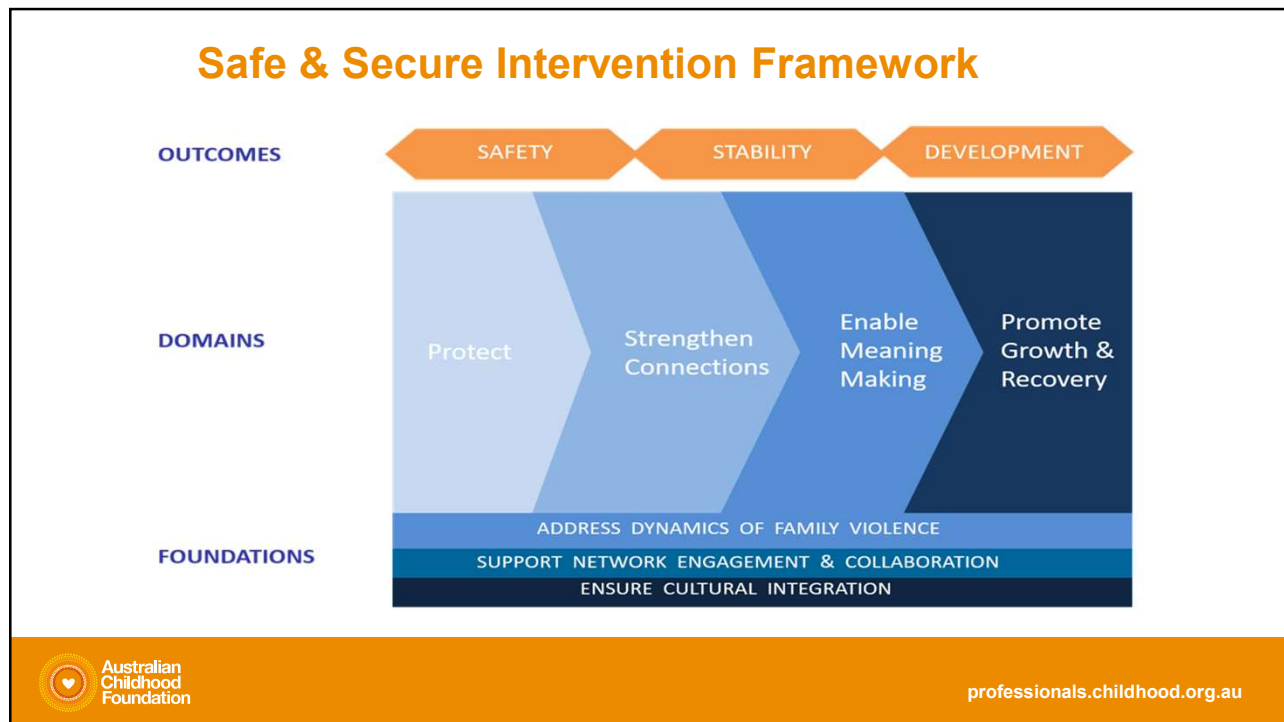
Trauma and loss

Family violence can lead to experiences of loss on multiple levels for children. These include a loss of:

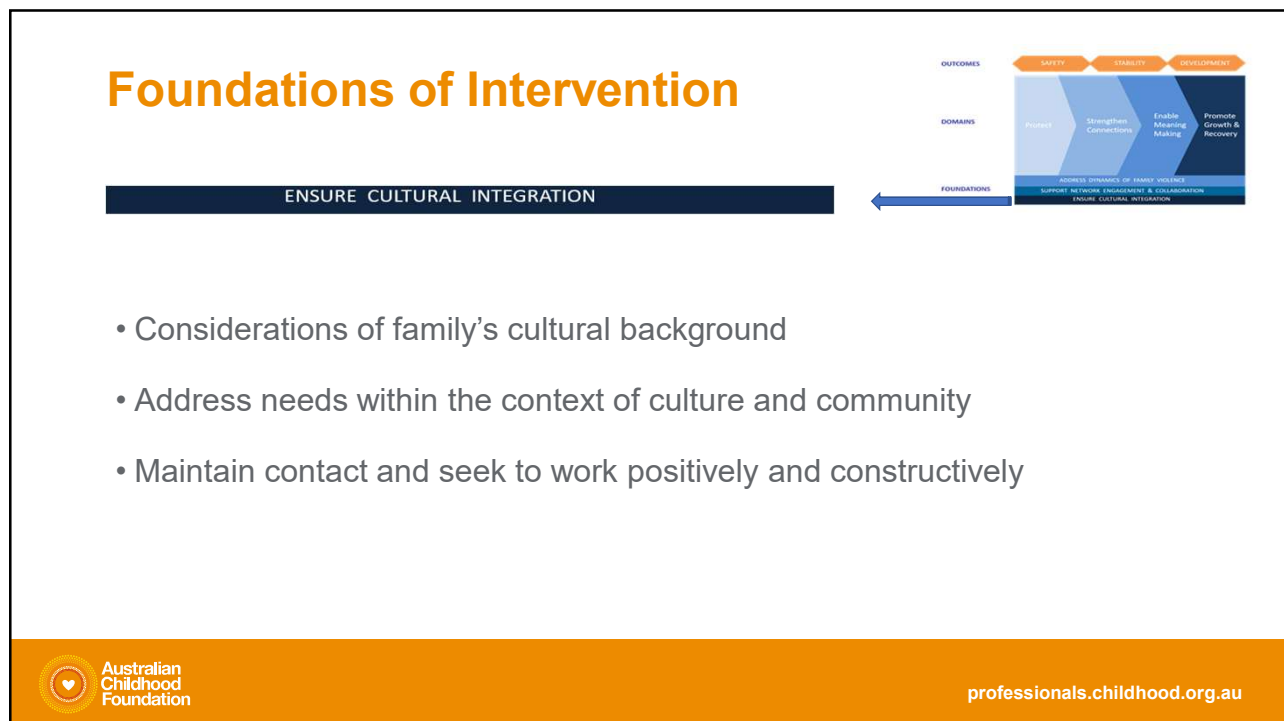
- sense of safety and connection
- predictability and familiarity
- contact
- Routines
- belongings
- Connection to culture, belonging & identity



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Foundations of Intervention

ENSURE CULTURAL INTEGRATION



Principles of Healing Practices & Models (SNAICC 2010)

- Safe Space – Physical and Relational
- Ownership
- Holistic and Relationship Worldview
- Flexible
- Imparting cultural knowledge and pride
- Strength based approaches – ‘prevailing strengths’
- Address Causes

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Foundations of Intervention

SUPPORT NETWORK ENGAGEMENT & COLLABORATION



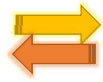
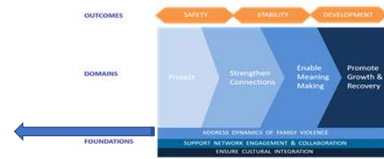
- Children and young people benefit from a collaborative approach by agencies
- Shared understanding of the issues
- Build a platform for communication and coordination of responses
- Mediated and run through structures such as care teams



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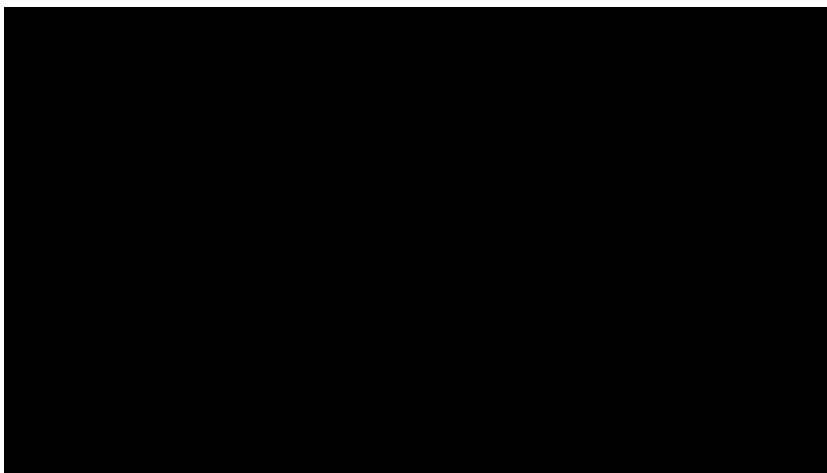
Foundations of Intervention

ADDRESS DYNAMICS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE



- Specific underlying dynamics that lead men to engage in violence
- Men’s psychological, attitudinal, social and cultural issues need to be addressed
- Strategies which hold men accountable for their violent behaviour

Don't cross the line....



Nike what are girls made of....



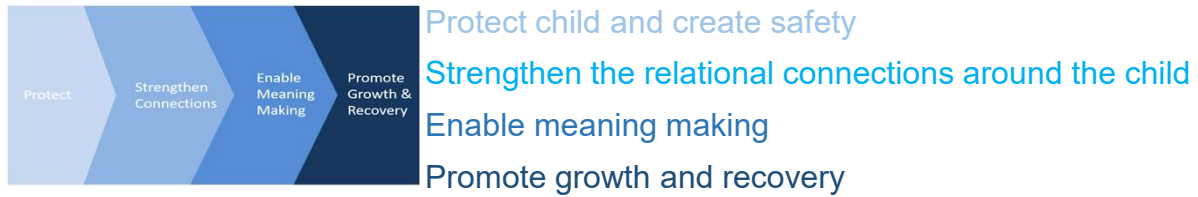
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Domains of Intervention

- The domains of intervention specifically relate to work that is undertaken directly with children, their mothers and important adults in their network.
- The domains are:



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Domains of Intervention

Protect Child and Create Safety

- Children’s recovery starts with being afforded safety, and **feeling safety** reverberating through them.
- Safety is a shared experience between children and their mothers.



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Neuroception

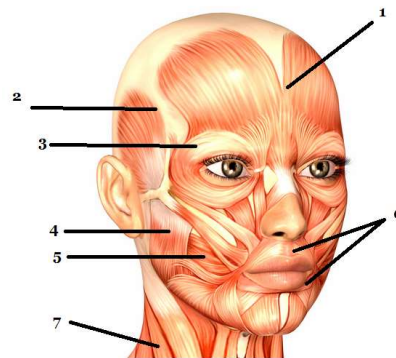
- “The removal of threat is not the same as the presence of safety” (Porges, 2014)
- We need to help children who have experienced trauma detect more features of safety in their environment.



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Detecting safety – A face, voice, heart connection

- Middle ear muscles
- Facial muscles
- Muscles of mastication
- Laryngeal and pharyngeal muscles
- Head turning muscles
- Eyelids
- Heart rate



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Domains of Intervention Protect Child and Create Safety

Safety for children is experienced in:

- The predictability of their routines
- The felt experience of their physical environment
- Attuned relationships with their mothers and other important adults
- No longer fearing that the violence will return
- Having their needs understood and responded to

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Domains of Intervention Strengthen Connections

- Relationships that are committed, nurturing, acknowledging and responsive
- Strengthen the connection between the child and important carers

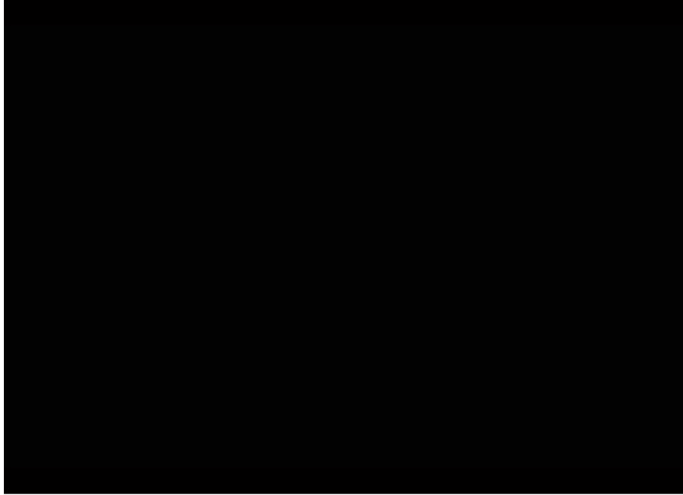
Some helpful guiding frameworks & models:

Theraplay ®	Circle of Security ®
Dan Hughes – PACE; Parenting Systems	Bringing up Great Kids
Dan Hughes – DDP ®	Mothering from the Inside Out
Coherent Narrative	Lighthouse Parenting ®

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P.A.C.E – Playful, Accepting, Curious, Empathic



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Relationships that support recovery and healing in children:

- Are tuned into children's needs
- Show children that they are understood
- Offer comfort and resources for co-regulating children's internal arousal system
- Give children a sense of being understood
- Define violence and threats of violence as unacceptable

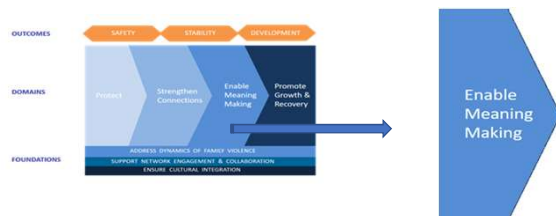
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Developing relationships (Kim Golding 2007)

- Repeated experiences of safe and predictable relationships
- REPAIR after ruptures
- Caregiver can contain big emotions
- Caregiver understands impacts of trauma
- Opportunities for social development (community, school, friendships)
- Ongoing connection to biological family (non offending family members)



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Domains of Intervention Enable Meaning Making

- Multiple opportunities, in collaboration with safe adults
- Development of stories between children and safe adults
- Learning how the body responds to sensations of stress & arousal
- Supporting children to access strengths within their culture or beliefs
- Helping children create & hold onto meanings that incorporate safety and hope

If we share
our story with
someone who
responds
with empathy
and
understanding,
shame can't
survive.
-Brene' Brown

www.CapstoneTreatmentCenter.com

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“My family” – drawings from therapy



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Domains of Intervention Promote Growth and Recovery

- Support traumatised children to address developmental needs and delays
- Includes referral to specialist services
- Support children to consolidate, translate and generalise the progress they are making

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Domains of Intervention Promote Growth and Recovery

Incorporate strategies that focus on:

- Facilitating the achievement of developmental milestones
- Consistent and stable patterns of soothing and regulation
- Cognitively and emotionally re-shaping early relational patterns
- Reinforcing children's emerging sense of self

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Resource List

- Brown, Brene (2012) Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead.
- Coffey, D (2009) Parenting After Violence: A guide for practitioners. Institute for Safe Families. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Hughes, D and Baylin, J (2012) 'Brain Based Parenting- The neuroscience of caregiving for a healthy attachment'.
- Hughes, D (2006) Building the Bonds of Attachment: Awakening Love in Deeply Traumatized Children
- Odgen, P (2006) Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy. WW Norton and Co: US
- Porges, S (2014) The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-regulation. WW Norton and Co: US
- Siegel, D (2007) The Mindful Brain. WW Norton and Co: US
- Siegel, D & Payne Bryson, T (2011) The whole-brain child. Scribe Publications: Australia