Violence in families – the experience and needs of the child

Emma Craigie

New Zealand is no different from many other countries in the levels of violent and abusive behaviour within households. Most practitioners working within the social services sector will be confronted regularly with the multifaceted dynamics that arise from complex and violent relationships between family members. In fact, the prevalence of violence within families is such that, whether through a professional or personal role, each of us will have been touched by the issue in some way.

"Intimate violence is a pervasive experience, colouring all aspects of family life for those directly or indirectly involved" (Denzin, 1984, cited in Goldblatt, 2003, p. 533). It is within this context that social workers are often engaged to support those family members who are involved. However, it is the role of the child protection worker to ensure the wellbeing of those children and young people who are living with violence in their family. Through that child maltreatment lens, this article explores effective responses to family violence when focused on the protection of children and young people.

Defining violence in families

It is easy to name a variety of terms referring to the violence that occurs in families, for instance: 'domestic violence', 'inter-parental conflict', 'family violence', 'intimate partner violence', and 'abuse'. Essentially they all encapsulate the same thing – that someone in a close relationship is being harmed by the behaviour and actions of another. The nature and extent of that harm can take a range of guises, for example the control of friendships and finances, verbal aggression, physical violence or even a vindictive form of anxiety-provoking silence. The impact of these actions is highly individualised, the physical and psychological consequences of which can vary from intense and immediate to cumulative and long lasting.

What underlies this is a perpetrator whose behaviour controls and dominates the lives of others in some way.

In New Zealand, the legislative context for this issue is primarily provided by the Domestic Violence Act 1995, which defines violence within family/whānau or 'domestic relationships'. The Act further specifies what 'violence' means (i.e. physical abuse, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse, including intimidation, harassment, damage to property and threats of abuse) and what might constitute psychological abuse against a child. In addition to the definition of the relationship involved, the Act is also explicit about the impact of violence in families on children and young people, specifically when a child is at risk of seeing or hearing violence in domestic relationships. The vulnerability of children is firmly reflected in the law. Later in this piece we will consider how that vulnerability can be addressed in the interface between support services and the children involved.

The dominant pattern within 'family violence' is men perpetrating violence against women. This strongly resonates in the language that surrounds it. Masculine terms are applied to the perpetrators of abuse and feminine words are used in the discourse around victims. Despite this, it is important to recognise that other patterns exist in family environments, including those where children and young people live, for instance domestic violence within same-sex relationships, men abused by women, parents abused by a child and violence between siblings.

Points to reflect on:

In thinking about one of the families you know or have worked with where violence is an issue, consider:

- In what way was the violence perpetuated? Who was affected by it?
- How does the legal definition of violence in domestic relationships compare with your understanding of what violence in families looks like?
- How does your own experience of violence influence the way you think about and work with families in your professional role?

The prevalence of family violence in New Zealand

> *"The most significant challenge in responding to children and young people affected by domestic violence lies in recognising that this is a widespread, chronic and serious social problem"* (Humphreys & Houghton, 2008, p.7).

In 2008, 44 New Zealanders died due to a family violence related incident. In the same year, 88,545 family violence incidents were recorded by the police, equal to 200 a day, or one every seven minutes. Of those 88,545 reports, 74,000 children and young people were present when the police visited (New Zealand Police, cited in Campaign for Action on Family Violence, 2011). More startling is the estimate that only 18% of family violence incidents are reported to the police. Whilst some of the remaining 72% will be referred to other services working in the family violence sector, a significant number of children and young people will be living in households where violence is taking place and there is no access or interface with organisations to support them.

Between July 2009 and June 2010, Child, Youth and Family received 124,921 reports of concern, nearly half (46%) of which were reports made by the police because of a family violence related incident. These figures indicate the level of family violence that exists in our communities and the extent to which children and young people are involved. The figure also indicates a strong correlation between violence in families and concerns about child welfare and wellbeing. The nature and extent of this relationship from a research perspective is explored a little further in this piece.

Key messages from research

Research on the area of family violence continues to grow, providing us with a valuable resource from which we can better understand the issue and utilise the key messages to shape policy and practice. The next section focuses on the impacts and consequences of family violence for children and young people and what social workers need to be cognisant of when working with them. In particular, the focus is on the key areas of:

- the impact of family violence on children
- cumulative harm
- what constitutes effective intervention for children and families.

Children and young people's experience of violence in their families

Family violence and child maltreatment are directly linked. Research on this relationship began to emerge during the 1980s and 1990s when "a child's exposure to domestic violence in the home [had] increasingly been framed as a child protection issue" (Connolly, 2007, p. 34). The prevalence data indicates that, whether directly or indirectly, children and young people are fundamentally enmeshed in the conflict in their homes.

Research consistently confirms that children and young people are involved to a much greater extent than we realise. In England and Wales, 2002 statistics illustrated that 750,000 children were living with violence in their family (Walby & Allen, 2004). Similarly, research involving 5000 young Australians showed that 25% of them said they had witnessed violence against a parent (Indermaur, 2001) and research in England

found that up to 86% of children were either in the same or adjoining room to where a family violence incident took place (Humphreys & Stanley, 2006).

Children and young people experience two main consequences of living amidst the dynamics of violence in their families.

Firstly, the impact of hearing, seeing and being around violence within the family directly impacts on their physical and psychological health and disrupts their daily lives.

This can lead to anxiety, stress, depression, impaired brain development, illness in babies, disrupted attachment, erosion of the parent–child relationship, educational disruption, poor sleep and trauma (Humphreys, Houghton & Ellis, 2008; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990). Further, studies have compared the degree of impact of witnessing family violence with the actual experience of abuse (Mertin & Mohr, 2002). This is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Secondly, studies suggest the likelihood of physical and sexual abuse occurring increases where there is family violence (Cawson, 2002; Edleson 1999; Farmer & Pollack, 1998). Although care must be taken, this finding provides us with further understanding of the impact of violence within families for the children and young people involved.

Intervention often focuses on addressing the inter-parental conflict, securing safety by removing the perpetrator and engaging the victim in support. When focusing on issues of child protection, the effectiveness of interventions can at times become compromised when a parent continues in a relationship with the perpetrator, perhaps through fear or a desire to preserve the family environment despite its inherent trauma and conflict. Connolly and Harms (2009) suggest child protection involvement can focus on the separation of the adults without recognising the lack of 'synergy' this approach has with the needs of those involved. This perspective provides insight into those factors at play within the family dynamic that can perpetuate the cycles of violence.

Best practice in child protection in a situation where there is family violence works from a child-centred approach that looks beyond the issue of family violence and conflict to the impact of that violence upon the needs and safety of all the children involved – *what does it mean for the child?* Being mindful of the coexistence of violence in families and child abuse reminds us of the importance of looking beyond the inter-parental or adult conflict, even when the incident leading to notification appears to pose a low or moderate risk to the children.

Clarifying the child's experience within the family violence dynamic is an important part of ensuring their needs are identified and appropriate interventions are put in place at an early stage. Assessment work with children, young people and their families has been discussed elsewhere in this journal, as have approaches to building safety such as those proposed by Turnell and Edwards (1999). Building safety in this way places the child at the centre of the intervention by crystallising the impact and consequences of the violence for them whilst capturing a clear sense of what an improved, safer future looks like for them. Involving children in their plans of support provides a vehicle through which they can be heard and their needs identified. Social workers need to heed children and young people's reality and understand how they perceive their own safety and wellbeing within their circumstance, for; "children are neither 'untouched' by the violence, nor merely passive bystanders within the abusive family system" (Buckley, Whelan & Holt, 2006, p. 14).

The cycles of abusive behaviour and inter-generational transmission can mean that adults who experienced abuse in childhood and are subsequently abused as adults are more likely to maltreat their own children (Dixon, Brown & Hamilton, 2005). However, it should be noted that whilst there is an increased likelihood of a child experiencing maltreatment when their

parent or caregiver has also been abused, many adults who have experienced abuse do not go on to perpetrate abuse or violence against others (Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991).

Research has considered these characteristics, and conditions of families where violence and abuse takes place, from an intergenerational perspective (Bentovim, 1992; Sheinberg & True, 2008). Within their social context, family systems become traumatised when people with similar difficulties or experiences come together, perhaps in the belief that their shared experience will benefit the quality of their partnership. What transpires is the development of relationships that become organised by the trauma of the individuals within that family system, or "trauma-organised family systems" (Bentovim et al, 2009, p. 67). The trauma is transposed to the reality of the current system and the cycle perpetrated.

Impact of exposure to violence on child development and wellbeing

As discussed earlier, the prevalence of violence in families in New Zealand is significant. The proximity of the violence to a child will vary: a child's 'involvement' could be witnessing, hearing or being victim of the abuse. Humphreys and Stanley (2006) argue that children and young people are highly likely to know that violence is occurring in their families, despite the protective measures their parent(s) believe they are putting in place. The impact of that exposure can be far reaching for children in relation to their immediate safety and wellbeing. This includes their ongoing physical and psychological health, development, relationships, self-esteem and ability to attend and engage with schooling.

A range of factors can influence the nature and extent of that impact, such as age, the intensity and duration of the experience, the care previously provided or the availability of support networks (Bentovim et al, 2009, p. 31). So, whilst a number of children may live with family violence, some within the same sibling group, the way in which that experience impacts their world, their wellbeing and development will vary. Holistic and comprehensive assessment work with children and young people is important in terms of capturing what that experience has meant for each child or young person involved.

The emotional and psychological effects are perhaps those that are most hidden and challenging to assess.

For children living with violence, evidence indicates an increased likelihood of depression and anxiety (McClosky, Figueredo & Koss, 1995), experience of trauma-related symptoms (Bermann & Levendosky, 1998) and behavioural and cognitive issues (O'Keefe, 1995). Studies have explored the impact of exposure to emotional and physical violence upon the development of a child's brain. We know that stable, nurturing, loving, secure home environments, where children are respected and their needs met, provide the best circumstances for their growth and development. Conversely, living with violence creates a sense of constant anxiety and stress, meaning children exist within a state of hyper-vigilance and arousal, persistently prepared for flight, even where there is no actual or immediate threat (Glaser, 2000).

More specifically, stress responses influence cognitive functioning. This potentially inhibits some of the more sophisticated areas of brain activity associated with the registration of experience, in favour of those involved with anxiety and trauma (Bentovim et al, 2009). Persistent experience of heightened awareness and arousal can mean children are highly sensitive to their environment and may struggle with processing information, for example being attentive to school work. Translating this learning to the world of the child, adapting to school life, coping with peer relationships, attending to and processing new information are likely to present great challenges to them. In comparing the brain images of children who have experienced maltreatment with those who have not, De Bellis et al (1999) found the former cohort showed less well developed connection between the left and right sides of the brain and smaller overall brain mass. The level of impairment to

the brain's development also correlated with the duration of the abuse.

> *"Exposure at any age can create disruptions that can interfere with the accomplishment of developmental tasks, and early exposure may create more severe disruptions by affecting the subsequent chain of developmental tasks"* (Rossman, 2001, p. 58).

Further, children exposed to violence can develop cognitive behaviours that focus on the non-verbal cues of others within their world, or as described by Perry (1996), 'use-dependent' learning. These children will be more focused upon the behaviours and environment around them, having learnt to pay attention to those signs that might indicate a risk or danger coming their way. Within the context of the family, this might include the facial expressions between Mum and Dad, a dinner thrown across the room, or those subtle but powerful indicators that signal their vigilance is required (ibid).

Cumulative harm

Family violence literature is increasingly drawing our attention to cumulative harm or "the existence of compounded experiences of multiple episodes of abuse or 'layers' of neglect" (Miller, 2007, p. 1). When the occurrence of violence is ongoing, at any level of perceived severity, the impact for children and young people is accumulative – the consequences can build or 'layer', translating to profound harm. Children who live with violence in their family often do not come to the notice of statutory child protection until the harm or threats have reached a significant level. When presenting issues appear to be of a low level, statutory child protection services are not involved. However, knowing the danger of cumulative harm means that early intervention is critical to mediating the risks of ongoing exposure to violence (Miller, 2007). An incident-focused approach can mean social workers fail to assimilate the relevance of previous episodes, patterns of behaviour and apparent escalation. Being attentive to the layering of repeated experiences of violence at home or the potential for cumulative harm is fundamentally undermined when events are seen as isolated or dismissed as 'low level'.

Earlier in this piece, we discussed the coexistence of family violence with child abuse. Placing this coexistence within the context of our knowledge about cumulative harm provides helping agencies with the imperative to respond promptly and robustly to what might on the surface present as 'low level' violence.

Early intervention that looks beyond the presenting picture of parental arguments, to explore the history of the conflict and how the exposure is accumulating for the child, are key areas for social workers to be attentive to.

Parenting capacity and the child–parent relationship

In addition to threats to emotional wellbeing and cumulative harm, a child's psychological wellbeing can be at risk when the dynamics of family violence curtail a parent's ability to meet their child's needs. The nature and quality of the parent–child relationship is fundamental to a child's development. Their sense of security and ability to explore their world from the base is dependent on a secure attachment to a caregiver significant to them. Family violence is often underpinned by an uneven balance of power and control where one adult seeks to dominate and control the existence of another. Within the context of family violence, a child's safety and their development is affected by how the family violence interferes with the parent and child's ability to form and sustain an attachment (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks & Semel, 2002). Further, studies have shown that women subject to family violence experience high levels of anxiety and depression, potentially limiting their parenting capacity. Further, their focus can be diverted to meeting the needs of the man rather than the child (Mullender et al, 2002; Irwin, Waugh & Wilkinson, 2002; Humphreys & Stanley, 2006).

Effective interventions – What works, what can social workers do?

In practice, we often see cases where families are referred to statutory child protection agencies due to incidents at home when arguments and violence have taken place. Responses can be incident- and adult-focused with an expectation that children will be protected by addressing the parental conflict. This approach has merits in engaging the adults to consider their behaviour, but it lacks a focus on the children, which risks overlooking their individual protection.

The dynamics of conflict, power and control in some families can drown out the voice and experience of children. Intensifying our efforts to ensure the strengths and needs of children are understood and responded to is a core objective of frontline practice. This is particularly pertinent when we consider cumulative harm, the coexistence of physical and sexual abuse with family violence, and the significant impact of living with violence on a child's physical, developmental, social, educational and health-related needs.

Children suggest that being safe and talking with their mothers, siblings, wider family and friends are of significant importance to them (Mullender et al, 2002; McGee, 2000). Children experiencing violence in the home may be mistrustful of professionals. Working to engage and build relationships is key to the effectiveness of subsequent work in assessing risks, needs, strengths and developing plans of support. An eco-map is a tool that can capture and explore the relationships a child has within their world and identify those people and places who offer positive support for them.

Opportunities to develop strengthened support will look subtly different for every child.

Literature reviews have underlined the importance of involving and listening to children who are affected by violence in their family – in both understanding the impact of the situation for them and making plans about what happens next.

This active participation is central to how they cope with their experience of family violence. Social workers need to sharpen their focus upon the child's experience, what safety looks like for them, and how they see their support. Risk assessment and building safety continue to play a principal role in responding to children living with violence. Social work intervention seeks to establish safety and enduring wellbeing through assessing needs and developing plans of support that provide children and young people with more robust effective responses.

Part of this approach is concerned with taking account of the child or young person's strengths and resilience. The individual circumstances, living environment, and broader familial, social and cultural context are factors that can determine impact. Coupled with these external factors, a child or young person's own internal resources and strengths assist in bolstering their resilience to adversity and trauma. Through comprehensive assessment work, the child's strengths can be identified and capitalised on when working out the most effective plan of support for them.

Translating the learning to social work practice

Violence within families is harmful. It causes distress and has far reaching consequences for those who live amongst it. Family violence threatens children and young people's safety. It affects their psychological and physical development and wellbeing and impacts upon educational achievement, self-image and confidence. Family violence has the power to threaten a child's likelihood of a safe and secure childhood and a functioning adulthood.

For child protection social work this means first securing immediate safety and sticking with the children and young people to better understand what is happening in their life. Recurrent exposure to violence poses a range of serious threats to a child or young person's wellbeing and development. In practice, repeated episodes of seemingly low level violence can fall into a 'no response', 'further incident' followed by 'no response' pattern. To address the risks of

Points to reflect on:

When working with children in families where violence occurs you need to be mindful of the importance of looking and assessing beyond safety and understanding the needs of the child across their world of health, wellbeing and development. Consider:

- In your role, how can the needs of the child be fully explored as part of securing their safety and their enduring wellbeing?
- How can the child be supported to safely tell their story about the impact and consequence of family violence on their day-to-day life?
- Reflecting on how living with violence can affect a child or young person, what can you do differently in the future?

cumulative harm, early intervention assists in our understanding of what is happening for the child and this is critical to mediating against the adverse effects on their psychological wellbeing and development. Identifying strengths and those relationships where the child or young person is valued and where there is a sense of trust is particularly important in building safety and working towards enduring wellbeing. This can mean people within the wider whānau, community members, peers or friends.

Opportunities to address the risks of cumulative harm are presented when families are repeatedly referred to organisations due to violent incidents. Differentiating the response to these repeat referrals and intensifying efforts to engage with the children and their families is important for developing robust plans to protect and foster the conditions where enduring wellbeing can be achieved. Working in collaboration with a range of partners in the field of family violence is critical. Advocating for, and facilitating, a child-focus within a multi-agency context will assist the development of plans where the child is a core consideration within the adult conflict.

Conclusion

We know violence in families has the potential to seriously harm a child or young person and affect the course of their lives. Whether that harm is high risk and immediate or accumulates over time, the consequences on their wellbeing and capacity to function as an adult are likely to be far-reaching. Intervening effectively in such a complex, private dynamic is a challenge many social workers and other professionals face on a daily basis. This article has explored what research identifies as the most critical consideration for practice and how we shape social work intervention to assist children, young people and their families to find the right pathways of support to improve their life outcomes.

Family violence can touch us in many different ways, either through a personal or professional experience. If you have concerns about your own safety or want to know more about how to get support, talk to someone you trust and know. There are people who can help. At Child, Youth and Family this could be your manager or the Employee Assistance Programme. The Government's family violence website also has helpful links: www.areyouok.org.nz

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