

## Exposing children to domestic and family violence - Key Literature

### Australia

**Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [Personal Safety, Australia, 2016](#), ABS cat no. 4906.0 (2016).**

This release presents information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) 2016 Personal Safety Survey (PSS).

The survey collected detailed information from men and women about their experiences of violence since the age of 18, as well as experiences of current and previous partner violence, stalking, physical and sexual abuse and harassment, abuse before the age of 15, and general feelings of safety.

Approximately 50% of women 'who had children in their care when they experienced violence by a current partner reported that the children had seen or heard the violence'. Further, almost 70% of women who had children in their care when they 'experienced violence by a previous partner reported that the children had seen or heard the violence'. Approximately 60% of men 'who had children in their care when they experienced violence by a previous partner reported that the children had seen or heard the violence'. See Tables 17-18 for further detail.

**Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, [Research summary: The impacts of domestic and family violence on children](#) (2nd ed., ANROWS, 2018).**

This summary outlines the major issues identified in ANROWS research relevant to children, the factors preventing effective service delivery, and the policy and practice changes recommended by the researchers.

Some key points include (pp 1-2):

- > there is a greater likelihood of "impaired parenting" (e.g. parent irritability or inconsistency/low parenting efficacy) in homes with domestic and family violence;
- > children are more likely to experience physical and verbal parental conflict after their parents separate;
- > a significant number of mothers found that their children had started copying abusive attitudes and behaviours; and
- > child protection agencies were less likely to investigate cases reported for domestic and family violence vs. reports for other matters.

**Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. *Violence against women: Accurate use of key statistics* (ANROWS, 2018).**

This short resource includes a summary of information from the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey on the numbers of pregnant women and children exposed to family and domestic violence (p 6). It states that an estimated 187,800 women who have experienced violence by a current partner have been pregnant during the relationship (and of these women, nearly one in five experienced violence during pregnancy). For violence perpetrated by previous partners, this percentage increased significantly: nearly half of women who experienced violence by a previous partner and were pregnant at some point in that relationship experienced violence during their pregnancy. Additionally, 65 percent of women who had children in their care when they experienced violence by a current or former partner reported that the children had seen or heard the violence (p 8).

**Bromfield, Leah, et al, '*Issues for the Safety and Wellbeing of Children in Families with Multiple and Complex Problems: The Co-Occurrence of Domestic Violence, Parental Substance Misuse and Mental Health Problems*' (National Child Protection Clearinghouse Issues Paper No 33, Australian Institute of Family Studies, December 2010).**

This literature review cites statistics from a US study collected from household census data from over 20,000 households (G. Fox and M. Benson 'Violent men, bad dads? Fathering profiles of men involved in intimate partner violence.' In R. Day & M. Lamb (Eds.), *Conceptualizing and measuring father involvement*. (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2004)):

- > 37% of children were accidentally hurt during domestic violence;
- > 26% of children were intentionally hurt during domestic violence;
- > 49% of mothers were hurt protecting children;
- > 47% of perpetrators used the child as a pawn to hurt mothers;
- > 39% of perpetrators hurt mothers as punishment for children's acts;
- > 23% of perpetrators blamed mothers for perpetrators' own excessive punishment of children.

**Flood, Michael, and Lara Fergus, *An Assault on Our Future: The Impact of Violence on Young People and Their Relationships* (Report, The White Ribbon Foundation, 2008).**

Drawing on statistics from the National Crime Prevention Survey (2001) this paper reports that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were significantly more likely to have witnessed physical domestic violence against their mother or step-mother than other young people (42%, compared to 23% for all respondents) (p11).

**Hart, Amanda, 'Children Exposed to Domestic Violence: Undifferentiated Needs in Australian Family Law' (2004) 18 *Australian Journal of Family Law* 170.**

This article points out that children may find it difficult to disclose violence because of a fear of not being believed and the possibility of making the situation worse. The article notes that children need to be included in determinations of what is in their best interests (p174).

**Hooker, Leesa, Rae Kaspiew, and Angela Taft, *Domestic and family violence and parenting: Mixed methods insights into impact and support needs: State of knowledge paper* (ANROWS, 2016).**

This comprehensive state of knowledge paper is the first of a three part mixed-methods research project addressing parenting and abuse tactics. This paper presents the current state of knowledge on parenting in the context of DFV by examining the following four research questions:

- > What is the prevalence of DFV among parents?
- > How does DFV impact on parenting capacity?
- > What are the methods and behaviours that perpetrators use to disrupt the mother---child relationship?
- > What interventions exist to strengthen and support a positive and healthy mother--child relationship?

This review identifies that DFV may impact negatively on women and children and the parenting capacity of both perpetrators and victims is affected. Altered mother--child relationships may occur due to deliberate undermining of the mother's parenting, and children are often used by perpetrators as tools to abuse mothers and exert control and coercion (p 2).

The report points out that violence does not end when couples separate. It specifically identifies the legal system as a tool of abuse used by perpetrators, and that poor understanding by legal professionals can heighten the risks for women and children (p 2).

Although there is limited information on the parenting style of abusive fathers, abusive men as fathers have been characterised by researchers and victims as authoritarian, under-involved, self-centred and manipulative. These men also engage in high levels of substance abuse. Children exposed to partner violence in the home by their father/stepfather are at heightened risk of child maltreatment including child sexual abuse (p 2).

The report suggests that supportive care includes improved understanding and collaboration between child protection, family law, and domestic violence advocacy services (p 2).

The report also identified issues with forced contact through court:

- > Shared parenting can leave mothers and children exposed to continuing abuse (p 26).
- > Post-separation matters, including negotiation of property, parenting and child support can be used by

abusive ex-partners to maintain power and control (p 27).

- > Women feel pressured by lawyers to agree to co-parenting arrangements even though children's safety may be at risk, or make decisions in an environment of fear, pragmatic concern, and family ideology (e.g. perpetrators playing on guilt about "breaking up" the family) (p 28).
- > Awareness amongst court staff in screening for family violence and safety concerns still remains problematic, despite legal and policy reform (p 28).

**Humphreys, Cathy and Lucy Healey, *PATHways and Research Into Collaborative Inter-Agency practice: Collaborative work across the child protection and specialist domestic and family violence interface: Final report* (ANROWS, 2017).**

PATHways and Research In Collaborative Inter-Agency practice (the PATRICIA Project) is an action research project focused on the collaborative relationship between specialist community-based domestic and family violence support services for women and their children, and statutory child protection organisations.

The study found that even when domestic and family violence was the focus of an initial child protection report, it was poorly addressed—for example, no link being made between an abusive father's patterns of behaviour and the barriers they caused to the healthy, daily functioning of the family (p 12). The study also found that collaborations between child protection and domestic and family violence services showed a lack of engagement with the family law system. Evidence of the impact of abuse on children was rarely adequately recorded in child protection files, and family law issues were rarely addressed in ways that would enable the protection of children from ongoing contact with an abusive father (p 14).

**Kaspiew, Rae, et al., *Domestic and family violence and parenting: Mixed method insights into impact and support needs – Final report* (ANROWS, 2017).**

This report focused on:

- > inter-parental conflict (IPC) in families and impacts on the emotional health and parenting behaviours of mothers and fathers and child functioning;
- > how domestic and family violence (DFV) experienced before separation, after separation, or both affects parents' emotional health and parent-child relationships; and
- > mothers' experiences of engagement with services in the domestic and family violence, child protection, and family law systems in the context of DFV.

Overall, it found that any exposure to IPC or DFV is associated with poorer wellbeing outcomes for mothers and children in both intact and separated families (compared with families where such exposure does not occur). Sustained exposure to IPC and DFV is particularly damaging (p 13). The impacts of DFV on mothering and mother–child relationships are multiple and often continue post-separation (p 10).

The findings also show that for a significant proportion of families, exposure to IPC and DFV is sustained after separation, and it escalates for some (p 12).

The results point to the importance of early reduction in family conflict, and the need for approaches post-separation that prioritise the reduction of exposure to IPC and DFV. This includes the need for approaches to help women and children repair relationships that have been damaged as a result of DFV (p 14).

**Kaspiew, Rae, et al., *Domestic and family violence and parenting: Mixed method insights into impact and support needs – Key findings and future directions* (ANROWS, 2017).**

In interviews with 50 women across Australia with experience of family violence, the study found that controlling and coercive behaviours were the most common tactic of abuse used by abusive fathers, which included setting rigid routines and/or having unreasonable expectations about children’s behaviour. Out of the 50 women interviewed, 45 described direct abuse toward their children, including psychological, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as witnessing abuse or being a direct victim of incidents that targeted the mother at the same time (p 3).

The report identified negative fathering behaviours occurring before and after separation, in addition to behaviour that was directly abusive to children. This includes (p 5):

- > inattentive and inconsistent fathering;
- > manipulative behaviours that had the effect of undermining relationships between mothers and children (often through the use of material resources);
- > the exertion of controlling tactics in relation to mothers and children; and
- > the manifestation of behaviours and negative attitudes to women in general and the mothers in particular, including abusive and denigrating attitudes that were adopted by some of the children (also, e.g. playing the “good” parent”).

The study found that courts give limited capacity to women to challenge the ongoing parenting role of the abusive parent due to priority placed on “meaningful relationships” and women’s concerns that they may be seen as an “alienating” parent (p 5).

The findings from the longitudinal quantitative analysis in the study showed that children who live with such violence are more likely to have a range of health, development and social problems (p 4).

**Meyer, S, Reeves, E, Fitz-Gibbon, K. [The intergenerational transmission of family violence: Mothers' perceptions of children's experiences and use of violence in the home.](#) *Child & Family Social Work.* 2021; 1– 9.**

Abstract: Intimate partner violence (IPV) on average affects one in four women, with the majority of victim survivors identifying as mothers in national survey data. Children experiencing parental IPV are now equally understood as victims. Extensive research documents the short- and long-term impacts of children's experiences of IPV on their safety and wellbeing. More recently, research has started to examine adolescent children's use of violence in the home as adolescent family violence (AFV). Contributing to this emerging body of research, we draw on narrative interview data from mothers who participated in a larger study on IPV, help-seeking and the perceived impact on children to better understand how mothers make sense of children's use of violence in the home. Mothers identified an emergence of AFV in male children with childhood experiences of adult IPV. Although mothers' experiences of adult and adolescent violence highlight their dual victimisation, mothers frame their abusive children as victims rather than perpetrators. Implications for future research, policy and trauma-informed practice are discussed.

**Powell, Anastasia and Suellen Murray, 'Children and Domestic Violence: Constructing a Policy Problem in Australia and New Zealand' (2008) 17(4) *Social and Legal Studies* 453.**

This article discusses the relationship between domestic violence responses, child protection responses and family law responses, where a child witnesses or experiences domestic violence. It identifies that (p467):

'Where domestic violence responses, child protection responses and family law responses collide, a mother may simultaneously be constructed as being responsible for protecting her children from the influence of an ex-partner's violence, in need of support and protection herself, and responsible for facilitating the other parent's contact with children.'

'Similarly, children may be simultaneously constructed as primary 'victims' in need of protection from exposure to parental violence, as secondary victims who can be protected from exposure to a father's violence by supporting/protecting the mother, or as 'witnesses' of parental conflict who will benefit most from equal contact with both parents. Domestic violence itself is understood differently throughout these contested discourses...'

**Richards, Kelly, '[Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence in Australia](#)' (2011) 419 *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* 1.**

This paper presents a helpful overview of relevant literature. It identifies that children who live in homes characterised by violence between parents, or directed at one parent by another, have been called the 'silent', 'forgotten', 'unintended', 'invisible' and/or 'secondary' victims of domestic violence.

It summarises the research that demonstrates that witnessing domestic and family violence can involve a broad range of incidents, including the child:

- > hearing the violence;
- > being used as a physical weapon;
- > being forced to watch or participate in assaults;
- > being forced to spy on a parent;
- > being informed that they are to blame for the violence because of their behaviour;
- > being used as a hostage;
- > defending a parent against the violence; and/or
- > intervening to stop the violence.

It summarises research on the impact of domestic and family violence on children in the aftermath of violence including:

- > having to telephone for emergency assistance;
- > seeing a parent's injuries after the violence and having to assist in 'patching up' a parent;
- > having their own injuries and/or trauma to cope with;
- > dealing with a parent who alternates between violence and a caring role;
- > seeing the parents being arrested; and
- > having to leave home with a parent and/or dislocation from family, friends and school.

**Sety, Megan, 'The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children: A Literature Review' (Report, Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, 1 August 2011).**

This review identifies that:

- > Children experience serious emotional, psychological, social, behavioural and developmental consequences as a result of experiencing violence.
- > Infants and young children are especially at risk.
- > Perpetrators often attack or undermine the mother-child relationship and use children in committing violence, such as threats to harm the children.
- > Children continue to be at risk from the effects of violence during and after parents' separation.
- > Children experience significant risks in shared parenting arrangements when the arrangement involves substantial shared time with the violent parent.



- > The evidence shows that false allegations of domestic violence and child abuse are rare. There is, however, evidence to suggest that perpetrators often deny or minimise their use of violence.

**Tomison, Adam M, 'Exploring Family Violence: Links Between Child Maltreatment and Domestic Violence' (National Child Protection Clearinghouse Issues Paper No 13, Australian Institute of Family Studies, June 2000).**

This article reviews the research about the relationship between domestic violence and various forms of child maltreatment. In particular it points to the high proportion of cases of emotional abuse of children identified by child protection workers in families where there is domestic and family violence and to the mild association between presence of domestic violence and a higher than expected proportion of children sustaining injuries. Pages 8-9 of this article discusses the variety of ways a child may be exposed to domestic violence, including as a hostage to ensure the mother's return home and forcing a child to watch assaults.

## International

**Edleson, Jeffrey L, 'Children's Witnessing of Adult Domestic Violence' (1999) 14(8) *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 839.**

In this foundational article, the author reviews 31 research articles published since 1989. As a result of the review, the author attempts to 'expand common definitions of how children witness adult domestic violence by showing how children not only see violence but also hear it occurring, are used as part of it, and experience its aftermath' (p16). A variety of behavioural, emotional, and cognitive-functioning problems among children were found to be associated with exposure to domestic violence. The author identifies factors that appear to moderate the impact of witnessing violence (eg whether the child was also abused, child gender and age and time since last exposure to violence).

**Holt, Amanda, 'Adolescent-to-Parent Abuse as a Form of "Domestic Violence": A Conceptual Review' (2016) 17(5) *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 490-499.**

This article discusses adolescent-to-parent abuse (APA), varied forms of abusive behaviour perpetrated by a child toward a parent (p 490). Mothers are more likely to be victims of APA than fathers (p 490), and correlations have been identified between APA and abusive behaviours within a young person's dating relationships (p 491). As a distinct form of abuse, it is not necessarily appropriate to approach APA within a traditional domestic violence framework (p 496). Responding to APA raises issues separate from youth crime and domestic and family violence more broadly:



- > Parental responsibility orders are inappropriate in cases where the burdened parent is a victim of the perpetrator's APA, as such orders may cause revictimisation (p 492).
- > Attitudes that place responsibility or blame on the victim parent must be avoided, as they may lead to victim blaming in cases of APA (p 493).
- > The gendered focus on these issues should be reduced in APA cases, in order to properly engage with the child-parent abuse dynamic (p 495).

**Jane E M Callaghan et al, 'Beyond "Witnessing": Children's Experiences of Coercive Control in Domestic Violence and Abuse' (2015) *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (online).**

This article investigates children's experiences with domestic and family violence (DFV), through interviews with 21 children who have been victims of DFV (p 7). The results indicate that children are aware of patterns of coercive control, and the impacts of such abuse (pp 10-3). Such experiences result in an increased sense of constraint, which children may develop specific strategies to cope with (pp 14-6).

Significantly, the article raises children's direct agency in coping with, and responding to, DFV, highlighting the inaccuracy of treating children as merely passive witnesses (pp 17-20). Accordingly, the authors recommend that professional responses to DFV better recognise children's agency, moving beyond perceptions of them as passive witnesses, and tailor strategies for children as direct victims (pp 22, 23-4).

**Jofre-Bonet, Mireia, Melcior Rossello-Roig, Victoria Serra-Sastre, *The Blow of Domestic Violence on Children's Health Outcomes* (City University London, London School of Economics, 2016).**

This study examines the effect of domestic violence on children's health outcomes. Drawing results from the UK Millennium Cohort Study, the authors found that 'there was a strong negative externality of household violence on children's health outcomes'. Children living in a household where there was domestic violence appeared to be between 55% and 61% less likely to have their health rated as Excellent'. This paper 'not only sheds light on the negative impact of domestic violence on children's health but provides a robust quantification of this effect'.

**Simon Lapierre et al., 'Difficult but Close Relationships: Children's Perspectives on Relationships With Their Mothers in the Context of Domestic Violence' (2018) 24(9) *Violence Against Women* 1023-1038.**

Despite a recent focus in the literature on mother-child relationships, there is a limited understanding of children's perspectives on their relationships with their mothers. This article reports the findings from a participative and qualitative study involving Canadian children who experienced domestic violence, and focuses on their perspectives on their relationships with their mothers under those circumstances. 46 individual interviews were conducted with children to gather their experiences. Results showed that women's and children's victimisations are inextricably linked. Notwithstanding the negative effects of domestic violence on mother-child relationships, the participants' mothers played a significant role in their

children's lives and had close relationships with them. Communication was also found to be an important element in mother-child relationships. However, several participants stated that the communication with their mothers was limited whilst they lived with the domestic violence perpetrator. As the participants experienced domestic violence alongside their mothers, the results also revealed a dynamic of mutual protectiveness. Overall, the findings emphasised the need for policies and practices that support mother-child relationships in the context of domestic violence, as well as programs that support mother-child relationships or facilitate mother-child communication.