



Support Help & Empowerment (SHE) Inc.
Submission for Commissioner for Children (Tasmania)
2016

Family and Domestic Violence- Its impacts upon children and Young People in Tasmania

About Support Help & Empowerment (SHE)

Support Help Empowerment (SHE) is a not-for-profit organisation that provides specialist counselling services for people who have experienced domestic and family violence (DFV). SHE was established in 1989 in acknowledgement of the long term effects of violence on women's lives. As a feminist service, SHE believes people are disadvantaged by gender roles, cultural, social and historical inequalities. We work towards the elimination of abuse and violence by providing an integrated response to family violence. We recognise that community change will not come about without social inclusion, education and opportunities for growth.

The majority of SHE's client are women who have experienced family violence perpetrated by male partners or former partners. In this context, we are using the term 'she' to refer to the person experiencing DFV and 'he' to refer to person using abusive behaviour. However, we acknowledge that family violence occurs in same-sex relationships and that men can experience family violence from a female partner. Quotations from clients have been provided with client permission and have been deidentified.

How are Tasmanian children and young people affected by family and domestic violence?

The experience of family violence in childhood can have profound negative impacts that resonate across the lifespan and even intergenerational impacts (Courtois, Ford, & Cloitre, M, 2009). The vast

majority of family violence is committed by men against women (ABS, 2012). Children are very often present during family violence incidents (ABS, 2012).

Family violence is recognised as a form of child abuse according to the *Children Young Persons and their Families Act 1997*: “Children are exposed to family violence if they: see or hear an incident of family violence; help to clean up after an incident of family violence; or comfort or assist a family member after an incident of family violence” (Tasmanian Government, 2015, p.35).

The experience of family violence can impair children and young people’s physical functioning (including brain development), behaviour; emotions; cognitive development and social adjustment (Adams, 2006; Perry, 2001). The experience of family violence can be viewed as a form of complex trauma. Complex trauma refers to “traumatic stressors that are interpersonal, that is, they are premeditated, planned, and caused by other humans, such as violating and/or exploitation of another person’ (Courtois, 2010, p.1). The impacts of trauma are particularly damaging when repetitive and cumulative traumas are experienced in childhood (Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012). Perpetrators may directly or indirectly disrupt the secure attachment between a child and the non-offending parent (Hooker, Kaspiw & Taft, 2015). Without this secure base to explore the world, children may develop severe disturbances in their ability to self-regulate their emotions, their sense of self, and their capacity to engage in healthy relationships (Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012).

SHE often observes women reflecting on the impact of their own experience of family violence in childhood with statements such as, “*I grew up thinking if something went wrong, it was my fault, that I was bad and useless. Now I still keep try to get it ‘right’ even when he makes that impossible*”.

The experience of family violence can have significant negative impact across the lifespan. The World Health Organisation highlights the ongoing impact of childhood abuse: “some children from households where there is intimate partner violence may exhibit increased rates of behavioural and emotional problems that can result in increased difficulties with education and employment, often leading to early school drop out, youth offending and early pregnancy” (WHO, 2010, p.5). Young people may also have an increase in health-risk behaviours such as drug and alcohol misuse and dependence (WHO, 2010). Young people who experience violence at home are at risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence in their own dating relationships (Flood & Fergus, 2008).

Many women who have experienced family violence describe how they spend an enormous amount of time and energy trying to meet the unrealistic demands of an abusive partner. Very often, women’s safety may depend on it. The perpetrator’s sense of entitlement and controlling behaviour often impacts on mothers’ opportunity to interact with their children in their preferred way. For example, mothers describe their partners acting with jealousy when she expresses affection and delight with the children. She may then be directly or indirectly prevented from activities such as cuddling the children and reading a bed-time story. For example, a client reported “*when we were at home I wasn’t*

allowed to play with [child] because he wanted to be the favourite parent so if I was trying to spend quality time with [our child], he would say 'isn't there jobs for you to go and do'" (SHE client, 2016)

Mothers who have experienced DFV express concern that perpetrators places unrealistic demands on the children, such as demanding that a child does not cry or punishing a child if they seek comfort. Mothers also describe using more strict disciplinary styles themselves when the perpetrator is present to try protect the children, such as stopping the kids from playing when their father is due home. Following separation, mothers often report having more positive interactions with the children, for example, *"Every bump in the road was a big deal [when perpetrator lived with us]. Now I don't have to worry about what will happen if the kids don't do their jobs around the house"* (SHE Client, 2016)

Family violence does not always stop after separation. Perpetrators of family violence may use the children as a means of gaining ongoing control and/or act as if the children are possessions. Women commonly describe a process by which the perpetrator undermines them. For example, telling children things that are untrue about their mother such as suggesting that their mother is having an affair, is 'crazy' or has taken all the money. Children who have experienced family violence have a complicated relationship with the offending parent. The child may love the parent and desire an ongoing relationship with him, however, contact can be a source of emotional pain and disappointment. Women describe former partners repeatedly letting children down and telling the children that it was their mother's fault that he was not able to keep his promise.

Tasmanian children and young people affected by family and domestic violence need:

- To be free from family violence and abuse
- To be safe, to be heard and to be believed.
- To understand that they are not responsible for the family violence
- To have timely access to on-going support with emotional regulation skills
- To have support to strengthen attachment relationships with the non-offending parent
- To have access to programs that provide education regarding respectful relationships
- To have the impact of abuse acknowledge across all service interactions, such as court, police and other correctional responses
- Initiatives that aim to eradicate the primary drivers of family and domestic violence and break cycles of abusive or violent behaviour
- Initiatives that address cycles of poverty, disengagement with education and poor employment opportunities
- Their protective-parents to be assisted and supported to recover from the impact of abusive and violence

How can Tasmanian services and organisations best respond to the needs of children and young people affected by family and domestic violence?

Services and organisations can best respond to children and young people affected by family violence by using a whole-of-family focus with an understanding that the experiences of children and young people do not occur in isolation from the experiences of other family members. SHE advocates a joined-up approach across services to deliver consistent, supportive responses to the whole family. Organisations can respond with programs that support the protective parent with strategies to strengthen the family unit, increase resilience and facilitate relational repair. Offending parents also need opportunities to participate in programs that allow them to learn skills and behaviours that will benefit their relationship with their children and other family members.

The safety of children and young people must remain paramount. Services need to be aware of safety risks if the child or young person is still living with abuse. Very often, perpetrators of violence continue to use children as a way to exert power and control over their partner or former partner. Children who are currently experiencing abuse may require other support before a therapeutic approach can be used.

Service provision must be paced in a way that promotes safety and stabilisation. Trauma-informed care and practice (TICP) framework provides a strong understanding of the biological, psychological and social effects of abuse and family violence on the individual. TICP emphasises physical, psychological, and emotional safety and provides an approach for rebuilding a sense of safety and empowerment. TICP uses an explicitly non-pathologising approach that ensures that the experiences and behaviour of children and young people are placed within the context of family violence.

Research suggests that therapeutic responses must acknowledge the relational world of the child and attempt to understand the experience the child or young person has of their familial environment (Bunston, Paylidis & Cartwright, 2016). Practitioners must be mindful of the complexity of attachment relationships and the complicated grief/loss associated with family violence.

Combined approaches with mothers and children may be more effective than individual treatments alone (Hooker, Kaspiw & Taft, 2016, p.36) and may provide mechanisms for more secure attachment (Campo, 2015). One such example is the Circle of Security (COS) program. COS is an attachment-based early intervention program designed to enhance attachment security between parents and children (Hoffman, Cooper, & Powell, 2006). The program enables earned security by facilitating an attainment of a coherent perspective on childhood experiences and provides positive modifications of parenting styles.

Services should strive to maximise children and young people's choice and facilitate them to be an active part of counselling and other processes.

It is also important that primary prevention activities are provided. Primary prevention activities focus on knowledge and attitudes around gendered violence, challenging gender stereotypes, gender equality and healthy relationships (Our Watch, 2015) and may potentially interrupt intergeneration cycles of violence.

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