



Responding to and Preventing Family Violence

EMILY MAGUIRE- CEO,
Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria

The following article is adapted from a speech given by Emily at the Community Child Care Association AGM 29 October 2015. We thank her for her contribution to our AGM and to this edition of Roundtable.

It's a tragic reality that many of the people you have daily contact with through your work are likely to be impacted by violence in some way.

Violence against women is too prevalent in Australia. On average, not only is one woman per week murdered by a current or former partner, but 1 in 3 women have experienced physical violence, 1 in 4 have experienced emotional abuse and 1 in 5 have experienced sexual violence from a current or former partner since the age of 15. Because many of these women also have children, one in four Australian children have experienced, witnessed or heard violence against their mother or stepmother (Our Watch, 2016).

If we are ever to reverse these statistics, we all need to play a role. Those of you who work in the education and care services are in the unique position of having regular contact with children and their families, many of whom may have experienced violence. It's therefore important to be aware of some of the signs that someone might be experiencing family violence, and to know how to talk to and support the women and children who come through your service.

Common warning signs that children may be experiencing or witnessing violence:

- Complaining about feeling sick, having a stomach ache or headache more than usual
- Trouble concentrating on tasks at school or at home or suddenly having difficulty with friendships
- Trying to 'cope' with the violence by acting out or by withdrawing
- Acting in a 'mean' or even violent way towards their peers which can come from having witnessed the fact that violence is used to control their female carer.

Common warning signs that women are experiencing violence:

- Seeming afraid of their partner or always being anxious to please them
- Becoming unusually quiet, or seeming anxious or depressed
- Not having control over the finances, for example not being able to sign an excursion form or indicating that their partner is the only one able to pay childcare fees
- Physical injuries, which may be accompanied by unlikely explanations of how they occurred
- Talking about her partner being 'jealous', 'bad tempered' or 'possessive', or saying that he frequently puts her down.



If you think a woman (or their child) might be experiencing violence, it's important to talk to them and ask what you can do to support them or their child. Women living with violence often say that having just one person notice what's happening in their lives, or saying they are worried about their child gave them the courage to seek out support from a specialist service. For advice about how to broach the issue in a sensitive and supportive way, have a look at some of Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria's online resources at www.dvrc.org.au > Help & advice.

But we have to do more than just respond to violence; we have to all take whatever action we can to *prevent it from happening in the first place*.

Start by making sure you know what causes violence against women. The research is clear that individual factors alone don't have much of an impact on the prevalence of family violence at a population level. The most recent global and national research shows that violence is most likely to occur in societies where:

- Violence against women is condoned or ignored
- Men have control of decision making
- There are limits to women's independence in both public and private life
- There are rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity
- Male peer relations emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women.

(Our Watch, ANROWS, VicHealth 2015)

What that means is that if we are ever to end violence against women, we have to start talking about gender, masculinity, respect and equality and take action that addresses those norms, attitudes and behaviours that make violence against women possible in our society. But how can you play your part in this?

1. Make sure that all educators and other staff at your service know how to recognise and respond to family violence appropriately.
2. Put supports in place for staff who may be experiencing violence and need flexibility at work.
3. Model respectful, equitable behaviour with the children, with their parents and with each other. For example, try to use language that doesn't reinforce gender stereotypes and model appropriate ways of dealing with frustration or conflict.
4. Make sure the physical environment is safe and encourages children to engage in diverse types of play regardless of their gender. Be proactive in creating opportunities for boys and girls to play with all sorts of toys and engage in non-gender stereotypical play.

We all have a part to play, and by taking action – whatever action we feel comfortable with – we can have a positive impact not only on women and children who are living with violence but ultimately on eradicating violence against women completely. ◀

REFERENCES

Our Watch (2016) *Facts and Figures*, viewed 5 February 2016, <http://www.ourwatch.org.au/Understanding-Violence/Facts-and-figures>

Our Watch, ANROWS and VicHealth, (2015) *Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*, viewed 5 February 2016, <http://www.ourwatch.org.au/getmedia/0aa0109b-6b03-43f2-85fe-a9f5ec92ae4e/Change-the-story-framework-prevent-violence-women-children-AA-new.pdf.aspx>
