

“It should be about the kid  
having a good life...”

Children’s lived experiences of  
family and domestic violence

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# Acknowledgments

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- The children who have contributed to our understanding of FDV (from their viewpoint)
- Conference organisers



# In this presentation we will:

- Consider the tensions for adults and children in negotiating children's understandings and experiences of FDV
- Think about children's lived experiences with family and domestic violence and its impact on their lives
- Pose some questions about how we might help children to cope with their situation in an effective way

# Tensions exist in a number of areas

- First:
- The concept of a child's 'best interests'
  - Which differs to reflect the specific interests of 'adults in charge':
    - Family Law: 'meaningful relationship'
    - Child Protection: focus on keeping the child safe
    - Juvenile Justice: little direct reference to young people's best interests (Coppins, Campbell & Casey, 2011)
- Concepts of children's 'best interests' are fluid, subjective and open to broad interpretation (Campbell, 2008)

# What do children think about their 'best interests'?

- “...children's best interests, what really are they, it's kind of so unbelievably general...I think that in best interests is not really the children's opinion at all, it's what other people think is best for them. So it's kind of making the decision for them and not listening to what they have to say...” (13-year-old male)
- “...some kids don't know what's best for them,...” (9-year-old female)
- “...everyone I know always knows what they want...I think maybe you should talk to your children about this...” (13-year-old female)  
(Campbell, 2008)

- So how do adults define the ‘best interests’ of a child who has been exposed to domestic violence?
  - ‘Best practice’? What about objective viewpoints?
  - Research findings? Are these consistent?
  - Legislation (the list of matters to be considered)? How ‘foolproof’ is this?
  - Parental concerns?
  - Children’s own views...or wishes?

# Second tension: the child's wishes or views?

- Definitions:
  - A wish: a 'desire' or 'hope'.
  - A view: a reference to refer to "opinions, beliefs and ideas" (Campbell, 2013).
- Problematic: What do we (adults) want to know from children?
  - Family Court judgments are still referring to children's wishes despite changes to the law
  - WA Children and Community Services Act 2004 refers to both 'wishes' and 'views' – potential to confuse?

- The tension:
- At law: how can a child's 'views' assist a decision-maker to reach an appropriate decision about the child's best interests?
- Is it better to simply ask them what they wish for?

- Do all children want to express a wish?
  - Fear of consequences
  - Loyalty to each parent
  - Concern about what expressing a wish will mean for them
  - Children will, however, talk about how they feel, and what they have experienced: their views and concerns.

# Children's and young people's concerns about their experiences of

## DFV

- Feel responsible for the violence
- Worry about siblings
- Bullying (from other children)
- Keeping safe
- Unpredictability of parents' behaviours
- Ongoing fear
- A question about why this happens

» Cossar, Brandon & Jordan (2011); Bagshaw et al (2010); Hines (2015)

- Question:
- How might these views be useful in helping children to cope with their experiences; or in making decisions about their future post-FDV?

# Third tension: the construction of children

- Many constructions; two perhaps more relevant for our purposes:
  - Children as innocent, vulnerable
  - Children as independent social actors in their own right

# Innocence and vulnerability

- Innocence can be constructed as “not guilty” or as “not knowing” or “not understanding”.
- Not guilty: of what?
- Children do report “feeling personally responsible” for their parents’ behaviours
  - Both for causing the violence and for their inability to stop it from occurring
- Is a construction of “not guilty” appropriate?
- - (potential for blame?)

- Vulnerability suggests open to harm or attack; and in need of protection.
- Children are at risk of both these events.
- They report feeling “scared”, “not safe”, “worried”. They sometimes blame their parents for not watching over them.
- The violence also travels with the child; it’s ever-present
- Evidence that they also try to protect **themselves; and their parents** (Hines, 2015)

- Children protect themselves by running away, locking their bedroom doors, pretending they're not hearing what's happening; become super-vigilant, think 'happy' thoughts
- They 'protect' their parents by trying to behave perfectly, get between the parents during arguments, agreeing to do things for the perpetrator to keep him calm, calling the police, yelling for the violence to stop...

# Tensions in this

- When adults construct children as 'innocent' and 'vulnerable', they can deny the child's own agency to protect themselves.
- They can also assume responsibility for 'keeping the child safe' through trying to shield them from the reality of what is happening (a 'happy families' approach)

- A further construction of children: lacking the competence to care for themselves and to understand 'adult' matters such as FDV
- BUT: children say they are aware of the violence within their families, even if they are not present when it occurs
- Question: how does not addressing the situation with children keep them safe?

- What do children and young people say they need to help them cope with their experiences?

- **Safety and security!**
- Someone trusted with whom they can talk
  - Including friends/family and professional people
- Adult role models (e.g., parents) who are coping (Hines, 2015)
- Help to build appropriate coping mechanisms
- Information: clear, appropriate and understandable

# Children say:

- They want to be believed
- They want to be heard
- They want to be treated with respect (and not dismissed)
- They want the violence to stop!
- They want both Mum and Dad
  - (Hines, 2015)

# Coping (Hines, 2015)

- Developing and implementing safety plans;
- Intervening when the violence is happening;
- Attempting to protect family members;
- Actively seeking support (friends, neighbours, police);
- Trying to solve the problems themselves;
- Hiding: a quiet place, bedroom, outside the house;
- Using fantasy and detachment: e.g., a diary;
- Diversions: e.g., sport, reading; talking to pets
- Talking to school professionals: teachers, counsellors

# Conclusions

- These tensions suggest that attending to children's concerns can be difficult.
- Determining a child's 'best interests', deciding on how to act in their 'wishes' and 'views', and providing appropriate and effective safety for them, without including them, seems inadvisable.
- But how do we best include them?

# Three (professional) approaches

- Child centred
- Child focused
- Child inclusive

# Group or individual?

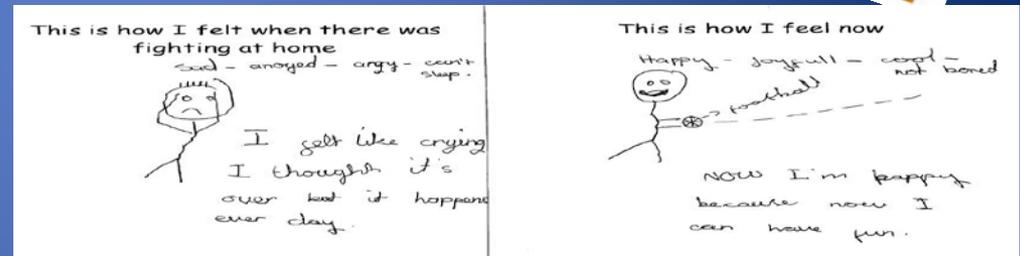


# Some approaches

- Children have said they value just
- talking...
  - (Campbell, 2008)
- To adults; Other children; Puppets



- Drawing; art work



- Performance





THANK  
YOU

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