

THE CHILDREN'S BOOK **WHAT IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?**

A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Aim

To provide an opportunity for children to discuss with their non-abusing parent/care giver or practitioner the ways in which they have experienced and been affected by domestic violence.

Purpose

To increase a child's awareness of the types of abuse that constitute domestic violence and for them to develop an understanding of the ways in which they may be affected as a result of the abuse. The primary focus is for children to feel supported during this process.

Rationale for the book

It was decided that the book should be for children of Primary School age (7-12 years) because of the lack of resources generally available for this age group. The age group nominated is a guide only. Due to the complex life situations of children from immigrant/refugee backgrounds the age range may be extended or limited dependent on the child's cognitive and emotional developmental level.

The book is available in major libraries throughout Australia including the Immigrant Women's Support Service library – West End or by accessing the Immigrant Women's Support Service web site available at: www.iwss.org.au. For the latter, go to the link named the Diversity Training Project. The book is available in an interactive format on the web-site in five languages: English, Tagalog, Bosnian, Vietnamese and Spanish.

Format of the book

The book follows a simple explanation of the legislative definition of what constitutes domestic violence. For example the book explores physical abuse, financial abuse, cultural/spiritual/racial abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, and child abuse. Furthermore it addresses issues surrounding the child and mother/care giver leaving home and provides a national list of domestic violence, legal, translating and interpreting, and immigrant women's services.

Each type of abuse is explored with a picture image and a text prompt for the child to respond to. Practitioners and/or care givers are encouraged to allow the child to respond in a way and at a level that they are comfortable with. There is a note for parents section on each page that is specifically designed to provide information about the different types of abuse and the effect it may have on their children.

Physical abuse:

The prompt says - "When I see my parents fighting and my mum gets hurt I feel...?"

Children may or may not have directly witnessed their mother being hurt; however, many children may hear the abuse and can be adversely affected as a result. It is also likely that if this is the case the mother/care giver of the child may not know that the child been exposed to the violence thinking instead that they have protected them against it.

It is also important that if the child talks about being negatively affected by the violence that they are supported and listened to. Children should also be reassured that they are not alone, they have someone to talk to and someone to support them. Practitioners will need to bear in mind that if the child is exhibiting a significant amount of distress that a referral to a specialist agency may be needed. Refer to the "Working with children" or the "Effects of domestic violence on children" modules for details of appropriate agencies.

Practitioners can use this prompt to assist children to develop safety plans and discuss stranger danger strategies. Refer to the "Stranger danger" work sheet section of the resource manual for further information. Practitioners can also refer to the "Effects of domestic violence on children" module for information relating to the influencing factors that contribute to the way in which children cope with domestic violence. It also explores the way in which practitioners can foster resilience in children exposed to domestic violence.

Verbal abuse:

The prompt says – “When he shouts at mum I feel...?”

Verbal abuse is also emotional abuse, children are likely to be negatively affected when their mother is verbally abused, taunted, put down, or called derogatory names. Children may also be directly verbally abused as well; children from non-English speaking backgrounds in mixed race relationships may find that they are called racist names and put down or ridiculed for the colour of their skin or ethnicity.

Children may have difficulty finding the right words to explain how verbal abuse affects them. Practitioners may like to incorporate a play or creative activity to encourage the child to explore how they feel when their mother is verbally abused. The work sheet section of the resource manual provides many activities to increase children’s self-esteem including an “All about me – workbook” and also has face masks and finger puppets that can be used to discuss different types of emotions. There is also a section in the “Working with children: A practical perspective” called “Persona dolls” and “Puppet Play” which provides an opportunity for the child to transfer their feelings and emotions onto a doll or puppet rather than owning the painful memories themselves.

Cultural/racial/spiritual abuse:

The prompt says – “Some women and children are stopped from practicing their beliefs, or attending religious and cultural festivities. If this happened in your family how would you feel?”

For mixed race families this issue may be significant. It also may be an issue in families with differing religious beliefs and customs.

Children may not be able to attend their place of worship or attend religious or cultural festivities for many reasons, one of which may be because they are in refuge. The family’s safety is paramount and if they attend they may place themselves at risk especially if their particular religious community is small. Practitioners can assist women and children in this situation by being responsive to the family’s cultural and religious needs. For example, they may be able

to find alternate places of worship to attend such as ethnic community centres. Alternatively practitioners may like to explore various options with the family that take into account specific safety considerations.

There are several modules in the resource manual that may assist practitioners to be responsive to a child’s cultural and religious needs. Refer to the “Working in a cross-cultural context”, “Accessible and equitable service delivery” and “Working with children: A practical perspective”.

Financial abuse:

The prompt says – “Sometimes a person controls his family by not giving them enough money. If this happens in your family how does it affect you?”

This prompt whilst valuable for those experiencing this kind of abuse may be difficult for children to relate to. Some children may interpret the lack of having new toys and clothing as abuse when in actual fact it may be a financial impossibility for a non-abusive parent to provide with limited finances. Therefore it is important to explore this question with a very clear understanding of the difference between genuine financial hardship and that of controlling women and children through financial deprivation when funds are available.

In some cases children can feel responsible for creating conflict when they ask for things like school books, clothing or basic necessities. Preferring instead to deny their own needs to keep the peace or avoid conflict situations that may endanger their mother. Practitioners can assist children to understand that they are not responsible for the actions of another. There are several activities throughout the “Working with children: A practical perspective” module or alternatively, refer to the work sheet section specifically the “stranger danger” work sheets and the fact sheets “What is domestic violence” and “Children’s survival tips”.

Child abuse:

The prompt says – “How would you feel if you were the child in the picture?”

The interface between child abuse and domestic violence is well documented and it needs to be explored in a cultural context.

Children are exposed to violence at different levels whether it is verbal, physical, financial, sexual, or cultural/racial/spiritual. Each of these types of abuse affects the child on an emotional level.

The book attempts to discuss violence directed at children in a non-confrontational way so this prompt is deliberately a little vague. The picture however, shows a child clearly in distress, in the dark and scared. Practitioners can encourage the child to explore the emotions the child in the picture may be experiencing and then ask the child if they have experienced similar emotions, and in what context they were experienced.

The key here is for practitioners to be guided by the child’s level of response. If the child is not responsive an activity can be incorporated to lessen the fear or apprehension they may be experiencing. For example, there are several work sheets designed to encourage the development of rapport with the child such as “Playdough - expressive play”, or “Creative play” - with mediums such as glue, paper, painting, cutting out and collage.

Practitioners should be clear about their obligations and the agency policies should the child disclose abuse. Refer to the “Accessible and equitable service delivery” section of the resource manual. Practitioners need to explain that in Australia there are laws to protect children and that physical abuse of children is not acceptable under the law.

When reading the book to the child the parent may be present; this can be an ideal time to broach the subject of parenting. Practitioners may like to set a time with the mother/care giver to discuss parenting techniques and discipline.

Sexual abuse:

The prompt says – “It’s okay to tell your mum or a person you trust if someone is touching or tickling you somewhere private. Do you have someone you can tell if this is happening to you?”

Domestic violence occurs on a continuum and an extreme end of the continuum is sexual abuse. Children may be exposed to direct sexual abuse or may witness their mother being sexually abused. Practitioners will need to be aware of their obligations and duty of care according to their agency policy and procedures should sexual abuse be disclosed.

This is a sensitive and painful topic for those who have been abused and talking about it may cause the child or mother great distress. It can be particularly difficult if the mother is unaware that the sexual abuse of her child/children has been happening. Dependent on the skills of individual practitioners it may be appropriate to refer the child/parent to a sexual assault service if the child discloses abuse (Refer to the “Interface between domestic violence and child abuse” module for details of sexual assault services). However, practitioners may find that they are able to offer comfort and support to mother and child at this time by listening and validating their experiences.

The objective is to inform children that unwanted sexual touching is not OK and to assist them to identify whom they can talk to if it is happening to them. Refer to the work sheet called the “Safety tree” which is a protective behaviours exercise that assists children to identify the people the child can trust. The focus is not solely on the child to say “NO” as it is believed that there is too much pressure on the child with this approach. For example, what if the child says “No” and the adult continues? Which is often the case. Instead, the manual advocates that practitioners provide the child with some basic protective behaviour skills (including how to say “No” to unwanted touching) which inform them of their rights, allows them to make choices and give them the skills to seek help.

Refer to the “Working with children”, “ The effects of domestic violence on children” “Working in a cross-cultural context” and the “Interface between domestic violence and child abuse” modules of the resource manual for further information on the issues and barriers to disclosure for women and children of non-English speaking backgrounds.

Moving house:

The prompt says – “Sometimes it is safer to leave home than stay with a person who is violent. But it can be difficult when you have to leave your home because?”

Many women and children who live with domestic violence try to leave and sometimes do leave the violent home. This can be a traumatic time for the whole family. However, children’s needs at this time can often be overlooked. Therefore practitioners need to spend time with the child to find out how they are feeling about living in a strange environment and how they are coping with leaving their home.

The prompt is broad and allows the child to explore the aspects of moving which affect them directly. Practitioners often find that children experience a wide range of emotions at this time. Sometimes they are relieved, and glad to be away and other times they may be fearful that they may be found by the perpetrator, scared of their unfamiliar surroundings or missing their father even if he is the abuser.

Practitioners may be able to offer practical assistance to the child. For example, the child may be distressed because they have had to leave a familiar or treasured toy or teddy behind, or they may sleep with a lamp on, or have a special friend they miss. In many cases practitioners may be able to access the resources necessary to comfort or reassure the child during this transition time. Refer to the “Working with children: A practical perspective” module for information regarding the transition to refuge life.

All people have rights:

The prompt says – “All people have rights protected by laws in Australia”

One of the issues that came out in the focus group phase of the Diversity Training Project was that many immigrant / refugee families face barriers in accessing legal information in Australia. Many people do not know that domestic violence is against the law in Australia.

This prompt allows for a discussion with the child and/or parent/care giver about how they can find out more about the law, what their rights are, where they can get assistance and the types of services that can assist them. The services listed are national services that can be accessed by phone.

