

Submission to Vulnerable Children's Enquiry

Eastern Region Family Violence Partnership

Introduction

The RFVP was established in 2008 and is a partnership of funded family violence organisations in the Eastern region to provide integrated service delivery to respond to women and children who have experienced violence and to make hold men who use violence accountable.

Purpose of submission

This brief submission argues specifically for increased resources:

- To develop an integrated service response for better meeting the needs of children who have been affected by family violence.
- To provide a range of protective and treatment responses, often working together, for children affected by family violence

Our submission addresses questions 3 and 4 as outlined the Guidelines for Submission to Vulnerable Children's Inquiry.

Preamble

We know violence alters the developing child. We know that lack of critical nurturing experiences and excess exposure to traumatic violence will alter the developing brain of the child, predisposing to a more reactive, impulsive and violent individual.

We know what a traumatised child needs and mostly we know how this can be best provided. What we don't have is a coherent service wide identification, protection and treatment response for children experiencing family violence.

Extent of problem

The extent of the family violence epidemic and the impact of this epidemic on children are becoming increasingly evident in the numbers of children presenting to a variety of agencies with learning difficulties, social and emotional distress and poor self regulation. Often these children remain untreated and/or continue to subsist in violent households. The trauma these children carry spills into our education and mental health services. (Some are seen, often too late, in our out of home care services.)

Integrated service response

The development of a system wide consistent service response to children requires development of common understanding, common language and effective intervention approaches. A consistent response requires attention to risk to children as well as support to protective carers in their support of children. Criminal, legal and protective responses to children need to be strengthened. These responses need to focus on the protection of children over time, hence acknowledging the damage cumulative harm does to children.

Effective responses to vulnerable children require joined up cross sector activity. These activities are time intensive and require resources for program development work, training both within and across sectors, back fill to allow this training and familiarity development to occur. Much service integration activity is occurring within each of our service silos. Much of our activities are duplicated. There must be a whole of government response at a statewide, regional and local level that co-ordinates and direct these activities. This is a government and a departmental responsibility.

Protective and therapeutic responses

A co-ordinated response to children experiencing family violence requires the capacity to share information and to work with consistent standards relating to risk and need that are shared between child protection, family services, family violence services and treatment services. Currently these standards do not exist leaving many children with unaddressed risk.

An effective protective response will require child protection to recognize that risk to children is not only about the child's immediate safety Child protection need to look beyond an approach that focuses solely on an episode of abuse. Child protection needs to develop an understanding of the risks to children of accumulating harm.

An effective treatment response to children affected by family violence must recognize the importance of the mother-child relationship. Research strongly suggests that supporting and strengthening this relationship in the aftermath of family violence is a critical factor in maintaining the mother's parenting capacity and can moderate the impact of abuse on the child (Humphrey, 2010).

Recognition of the importance of this relationship has significant implications for the broad service systems response to children who are affected by family violence; not just for the specialist family violence services and specialist children's counseling services. This will require joint work with both women and children.

Research suggests that joint work is the exception rather than the norm. (Humphries, 2010). Recognizing the value of joint work and the need for it to be imbedded into our service system will take time and resources. It will also take resources and time for staff across the service system to become comfortable and to be able to undertake this joint approach in a timely and effective way.

References

Perry, B. Incubated in Terror: Neuro Developmental Factors in the "Cycle of Violence"

Humphries, C., Thiara, R. and Skamballis, A. "Readiness to Change: Mother-Child Relationship and Domestic Violence Intervention" in **British Journal of Social Work** (2010) 1-19