

# Safe at Home

## Family Violence – Children & Young People

Sep 2015

### **Children and Young People as Witnesses to Family Violence**

Children and young people are present in approximately 60% of homes where family violence occurs. They witness acts of violence in the home as well as the aftermath of violence, such as injuries to the victim and destroyed property. Children and young people may also hear verbal abuse and acts of violence from another room in the house. As a result, they live in an atmosphere of fear, tension, and confusion.

### **Child Abuse and Family Violence**

Witnessing family violence is now part of the legal definition of being subjected to child abuse in Tasmania. Research has demonstrated that the impact of witnessing family violence has almost the same impact on children and young people as direct physical abuse. It is also recognised that children and young people from homes where family violence occurs are more vulnerable to being subject to physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect.

### **Impact of Family Violence on Children and Young People**

Children can show they have been affected by family violence in a number of ways:

- Learning that violence is an acceptable way to control others in a relationship.
- They often assume a care-taking role in the family beyond their years, taking responsibility for parenting and care for parents. With the sense of responsibility can come strong feelings of guilt around not being successful in stopping or managing the violence. Guilt can also be associated with confused feelings in relation to care-givers.
- Children exposed to family violence are at increased risk of developing a range of negative emotional, behavioural, social and cognitive outcomes including generalised anxiety and depression, poor coping skills, eating and sleeping problems, sensation-seeking, hyperactivity, impulsivity, aggression, delinquency and concentration problems.
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has been identified as a common indicator of family violence in a child's life. Signs of this disorder include acting in ways that show excessive wariness or watchfulness, difficulty in concentrating, very 'busy' behaviour, having nightmares, and having invasive thoughts related to traumatic incidents.

Not all children and young people respond to family violence in the same way. Contributing factors vary widely and impact differently over time and in different situations. If a child has a strong support network, close relationships with non-abusive family members and opportunities to reflect on their abilities, the impact of the violence may not be as long lasting, or as damaging.

### **Safe at Home's Response to Children Affected by Family Violence.**

Children and young people have been invisible victims of family violence. One of *Safe at Home's* primary goals is to respond to children's experience of family violence.

*Safe at Home* provides a counselling service for children affected by family violence and a court support service for children involved in legal proceedings as a result of family violence.

The principles underlying these services are:

- Children and young people need to be listened to and believed. If a child wants to talk about what is happening at home, it is important for that child to be heard. A child's feelings should not be overlooked or devalued.

- The behaviour of children and young people needs to be understood in the context of their reactions to family violence. Often behaviours that are interpreted negatively are actually practices of survival in the context of family violence.
- It is important to be aware that some children and young people do not show any of the behavioural or psychological reactions listed above. Their stories still need to be heard and their support networks strengthened. Each child's experience of family violence is unique to them, and responses need to be flexible to adjust to the different ways that family violence affects the child.
- All responses to children and young people who have experienced family violence need to take into account the realities of the child's world, and be sensitive to the way a child sees and makes sense of events and relationships.
- In all responses, the safety of the child must be given equal priority with the safety of other family members affected by family violence.

<b>Organisation/Name</b>	<b>Services</b>	<b>Contact details or sites</b>
<b>EMERGENCY</b>	<b>Ask for police</b>	<b>000</b>
<b>Safe at home</b>	Information sheets	<a href="http://www.safeathome.tas.gov.au">www.safeathome.tas.gov.au</a>
<b>Safe at home</b>	Family Violence Response and Referral Line	Ph: 1800 633 937

Safe at Home

Phone: (03) 6165 4988

Email: [safeathome@justice.tas.gov.au](mailto:safeathome@justice.tas.gov.au)

Web: [www.safeathome.tas.gov.au](http://www.safeathome.tas.gov.au)

