



The Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia (CAFWAA) is the national peak body representing community service organisations working with vulnerable children, young people and families, including those experiencing neglect and abuse and those living in an Out of Home Care environment.

Since incorporation in 1995, CAFWAA has taken a leadership role in advocating for improved public policy at a national level. In particular, CAFWAA has sought policy responses that strengthen the capacity of families and communities to care, nurture and protect children and young people and to ensure assistance is afforded to children and young people when adequate care is not provided.

CAFWAA is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the National Strategy on Domestic and Family Violence. CAFWAA knows strongly the links between domestic and family violence and child protection. Since 2000/01 we have seen an increase of substantiation rates of child abuse across the country to 55,921. In State systems that have mandatory reporting of police we know that up to 30% of substantiation rates in child protection relates to children living in households with domestic and family violence experiencing emotional abuse. This is an unsustainable increase and requires a coordinated effort across federal government departments and state jurisdictions to address this national crisis.

CAFWAA believes that Violence in the family is one of the greatest challenges facing our society. Across Australia it is only in the last 25 years that we have been actively working to address the issue. The affects of violence in our community both on children and adults is becoming more far reaching. The instances of school bullying are rising, road rage and unsolicited aggression are on the rise across own community.

Early Intervention research has provided us irrefutable information that we learn our patterns of relating to others and our understanding of how to build relationships early in life. Latest research from Dr Fraser Mustard of Canada is indicating that many of our understandings of the world and each other are pathways laid down in our brain between 0-3 years.

The child populations which statistically do not fare well in Australia are:

Indigenous children and young people

Children with a disability or children who live with parents with a disability

Children living in families affected by mental illness

Children living in poverty

Children in situations of social isolation

Children with a history of neglect

Children of single parents

Children who experience or witness domestic violence (PADV, 2003)

UNICEF research indicates that Australia ranked 11<sup>th</sup> out of 24 'rich nations' in a league table of "relative poverty", defined as households with incomes below 50% of the national median income (UNICEF and Innocenti 2007: 4).

Infants from the least advantaged socioeconomic areas (including most Indigenous communities) are:

twice as likely as those from the most advantaged areas to die before they reach their first birthday;

more likely to have lower birth weights than other Australian children;

less likely to be immunised;

more likely to have mothers who smoke tobacco during pregnancy;

more likely to die from injury (AIHW 2005: ES xiv);

more likely to experience mental health problems (AIHW 2005: 27);

less likely to attend preschool;

more likely to be overweight or obese; and

more likely to smoke tobacco and take part in risky drinking, and are more

likely to begin this behaviour at an early age.

CAFWAA is committed to enhancing the social, physical, emotional, intellectual and economic wellbeing of Australian children, young people and their families. In particular, CAFWAA is advocating for those who do not have access to the essential resources that support healthy development and resilience.

## Domestic Violence

Over the past two decades, the extent and nature of relationship violence has increasingly become a focus for government intervention. Growing interest by governments is seen as the result of both increased awareness and sensitivity to violence, and recognition of gender inequality (Indermaur et al 1998). Violence has come to be seen as a public health issue and children and young people may experience domestic violence in a number of forms, circumstances and environments. Over 50 000 Australian children are estimated to accompany their mothers to refuges annually and Women and children seeking escape from Domestic and Family violence account for 22% of all the homelessness figures in Australia.

There is increasing recognition of the needs of children and young people who live with domestic violence and of its effect on their physical, emotional, social and psychological development. Research demonstrates that exposure to family violence threatens the emotional, cognitive and social development and growth of children (McIntosh 2000).

Childhood and adolescence are critical points at which to ensure that issues of domestic violence are addressed so that the possibility of intergenerational violence is lessened, resilience is enhanced, alternative means of dealing with stress and anger are learned and communication skills are enhanced and strengthened. What is concerning is the emerging statistics about young people's experiences of violence. In 2005 the ABS personal safety survey found that 26% of young women aged 18-24 had experienced an incident of violence in their relationships. The latest Caledonian 2008 report on Youth Homelessness also discovered that domestic violence in the home was one of the major reasons for young people finding a pathway to homelessness.

For Indigenous children, the breakdown of Indigenous culture has limited the way in which their communities can respond to and prevent family violence, and has led to an increase in exposure to family violence trigger factors such as substance abuse.

We are pleased as the national body in relation to representing the needs of vulnerable children and families to suggest a focus on the following areas and links to the National Strategy on Child Protection that the Federal Minister for Families, Children, Housing and Aboriginal Affairs is championing.

**The rise in socio-economic disadvantage, domestic violence and substance abuse will see associated increases in child abuse and neglect.**

## **Key Principles**

We would encourage the following key principles be incorporated in the strategy

- ✚ that every women, child and young person in Australia has the right to live free from violence and abuse
- ✚ that a robust early intervention and prevention service system is the key to providing support and protection to families and will reduce both violence and increasingly statutory responses to domestic and family violence.
- ✚ that a coordinated approach to domestic and family violence across agencies, government departments and the states is the key to the reduction and the way forward for our nation in providing better well being for children and young people.

## **Women Children and Families**

Many women and children experience the system that seeks to support them live free from violence as punitive and adding to their distress through the increased risk of statutory intervention into their lives.

Currently across the country many child protection workers receive limited or no training in relation to domestic and family violence. They are entering into assessment of issues with no gendered perspective of violence and continue in their work to perpetuate the silent responsibility of women through their practice of often forcing women to leave as the only alternative to resolving the child protection issues. Rarely are issues of violence that may be assessed and ascertained in an investigation referred to the police or the courts for the breaching of orders that may already be in existence.

Women are forced into refuges that have had no significant increase in funding for over 15 years and have often been provided limited funds to provide specialist programs for children and young people in these circumstances. There is significant correlation within domestic and family violence, drug and alcohol abuse and mental health and yet no coordination of service delivery between these systems.

Further to this many refuges due to a lack of funds have not been able to develop outreach programs to keep women within their homes, there by stabilising children and increasing the economic opportunities for families. Trial programs such as the NSW study of Staying home leaving violence have shown promise in this area and should be replicated nationally.

Supporting women to care safely for their children and to have adequate access to resources and support is imperative.

#### **Recommendations:**

- ✚ An increase in early intervention and prevention programs especially family support programs that provide non-stigmatising forms of interventions**
- ✚ Training for child protection workers, and police in responding to violence**
- ✚ Increase in the SAAP money for domestic and family violence refuges to assist in the development of new models to respond to women's safety**
- ✚ Increased funding for specialist support for children and young people including therapeutic programs.**
- ✚ A coordinated approach in mental health and drug and alcohol services to domestic and family violence including specialist teams in these areas to manage this issue**

#### **Perpetrator Programs**

There is significant international evidence to suggest that mandated perpetrator programs for male perpetrators of violence are the most effective in sustaining change and impacting on the reduction of violence. To date there has been such limited investment in this area it is criminal. Our responses have been to jail men with no service delivery or support to assist men to build alternative responses to violence. Alternatively many jurisdictions especially the family courts have allowed men to use violence and have not held them to account for the impact of this on their children and young people.

#### **Recommendations**

- ✚ Mandated Perpetrator programs are explored across all states and territories and funded in long term strategies**
- ✚ Training for courts in how to implement these strategies is undertaken.**

#### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities**

The number of reports into violence in ATSI communities are now so numerous that it has become distressing to list these. At last count there were over six reports that have been undertaken in this area with limited enacting of the recommendations. This is a national and international disgrace and requires no more research to be undertaken. Children and young people living in

communities are not just subject to family violence but exposure to community violence that individual families cannot be held accountable for.

In many jurisdictions we are now seeing the development of Safe House models in Indigenous communities being rolled out with limited program development attached to them therefore providing immediate safety but no long term strategy for the reduction of violence or means to address this.

### **Recommendations**

- CAFWAA urges the immediate implementation of the recommendations of the various reports into violence in Indigenous communities to ensure the future health and well-being of Indigenous children and young people.**
- The implementation of funding for programming attached to safe houses that provide service provision for children, women, men and communities to address violence its causes and impacts.**

### **Family Law and Judiciary**

The numbers of children that are dying as a result of homicide at the point of separation in this country is tragic. Homicide is the ultimate act of violence against women and children and the worst form of child abuse. Research across the world is emphatic that women and children are at greatest risk upon separation.

Our Family law responses in this area are grossly inadequate. Father's that have threatened to kill their wives, and have harmed their children are still enabled to have access to their children and considered good father's regardless of the impact of violence on children and young people. We would suggest that this is a systemic abuse of children.

### **Recommendations**

- Implementation of fatality reviews nationally where children have been killed to ensure appropriate responses are being undertaken in our country**
- Specialist family courts to hear matters where domestic and family violence are present and a change to the Family Law act that more thoroughly investigates issues of domestic and family violence when they are raised in the system such as occurs in New Zealand.**

**🚩 Adequate training and accountability systems are implemented for magistrates and judiciary in relation to domestic and family violence.**

## **Conclusion**

Early intervention and prevention programs aim to build upon and create positive relationships for parents and their children. This is imperative if we are to counteract violence – that is programs that provide alternative problem solving experiences and positive interaction and reinforce experience for children and young people that may counteract things that happen in their daily lives.

Grant Sarra an Indigenous Man from Queensland offers the following wisdom “My work passion, which I have come to realise over time, is all about change, dignity and integrity. Changing the way we think, feel and behave toward each other to become good human beings and in doing so, having the dignity and the integrity to know what it means to become a good human being, To me this is critical if we are to develop a greater awareness, understanding and compassion between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians and genuinely improve the social, cultural and economic circumstances for Indigenous people”. CAFWAA would argue that this is true for how we interact with all children, young people and families in Australia.

It is our responsibility as a nation to provide services and opportunities to have a world free from violence and the strategies we implement now to assist this will affect the future generations of our children in how they can participate in our nation and aid with its growth.

We commend this National Strategy on Domestic and Family Violence as opportunity to provide a pathway for our children to have health and well-being and reduce the child abuse and neglect for our country.