

“If you ask, clients will tell you” – the case for universal and holistic screening in family relationships services

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Abstract

Women seek help from family relationships services when they really need it. According to previous Australian research, 67.3% of those who experienced physical harms before or during relationship separation said they had used a family relationships service (Kaspiew *et al.*, 2015). This means service providers can potentially intervene to prevent or minimise violence-related harms for women and children. However clients are far less likely to name FV as an issue unless service providers specifically and sensitively ask them. Yet in routine practice, service providers may not do this – against many peak body recommendations. Unless we ask, clients may not tell us about FV or any other potential harms facing women and children.

Aim

Many barriers are preventing service providers from implementing universal holistic screening in practice, namely screen all clients for risks in families (Todahl and Walters, 2011). We aimed to explore barriers for practitioners.

Objective

To test 1) the belief that ‘FV is not an issue for my clients’ in routine practice; and 2) that clients will be offended by being asked about risks such as FV.

Methods

1) File review of client responses on 1,413 family relationships screening forms in 2014; and 2) an anonymous survey from a subset 94 family relationships clients’ attitudes to screening at intake in May 2014.

Results

We found 20.9% of clients identified a significant violence safety risk on their screening form that needed immediate attention. 13.1% of clients said *they themselves* were a significant safety risk to others, showing that perpetration risk was also worth screening.

The anonymous client attitudes survey showed that screening was overwhelmingly accepted by clients in good faith, even when a majority faced no significant FV risk. 99.0% of clients surveyed said they were honest in their responses to screening and 89.3% saw it as a benefit to themselves to complete these forms. Conversely, only 5.4% said they were suspicious of the forms including screening.

Outcomes

When clients attend family relationships services and complete screening forms, they report significant risks from FV both as potential victims and perpetrators. FV is a daily issue that practitioners cannot discount. Clients’ experience of being asked about FV, among many other risks, they are not offended by being asked questions about risks.

Conclusions

We discuss how screening has been implemented with virtually no extra administrative load for workers. We conclude that as service providers with a responsibility to responding to family violence promote safety for women and families, we really ought to know.

References

- Kaspiew, R., Carson, R., Dunstan, J., De Maio, J., Moore, S., Moloney, L. et al. (2015). *Experiences of Separated Parents Study (Evaluation of the 2012 Family Violence Amendments)*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Todahl, J., & Walters, E. (2011). Universal screening for intimate partner violence: A structured review. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. 37(3), 355-369. DOI: 10.1111/j.1752-0606.2009.00179.x.

Learning objectives

Readers and attendees will understand beliefs of workers about universal holistic screening for risk in family relationships services; they will learn that these beliefs should not act as barriers to implementation of screening.

Research Themes

3. Service responses and interventions

Key Words

Innovation, Quality

Service Delivery

Implementation

Referees

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