Domestic and family violence and parenting: insights from practice and research

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This paper will provide insights from a mixed-method project examining the impact of domestic and family violence on parenting. Supported by an advisory group including agencies who provide services to women and children affected by family violence, the project has three main strands: a literature review (the State of knowledge paper was published in January), a quantitative element based on analyses of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and the Australian Institute of Family Studies’ (AIFS) Family Pathways suite of studies and a qualitative element based on interviews with mother who have used services in relation to parenting and family violence. This paper is based on insights from the State of knowledge paper, some of the early analyses of the Family Pathways data and the issues and challenges identified by the practitioners in the Advisory Group.

The State of knowledge paper establishes that family violence is a complex phenomenon and that more research is required to understand the dynamics of mothering and fathering in the context of family violence. The research demonstrates that the capacity of men and women to be effective parents may be diminished where family violence occurs. There is some evidence that indicates that some violent men use a range of tactics to directly or indirectly undermine mother-child relationships as part of their use of family violence. Some evidence also indicates that fathering styles of some violent men are those associated with unhealthy parenting behaviours, including authoritarian parenting styles and inconsistent approaches to discipline.

A range of interventions are applied to support the restoration of mother-child relationships after family violence but the evidence base on the effectiveness of different approaches requires further development. The Family Pathways data suggests that experience of family violence/abuse is associated with poorer parent-child relationship among separated parents.

Insights from practitioners who participate in the Advisory Group for the project reinforce earlier research findings that some violent men misuse post-separation systems and processes to maintain control over their ex-partners and children and that the development of strategies to militate against this is a practice imperative.

The Chief Investigator for this project is Dr Rae Kaspiew from the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Partner Investigators are Dr Lixia Qu (AIFS), Professor Angela Taft, Professor Jan Nicholson and Ms Leesa Hooker from the Judith Lumley Centre at La Trobe University and Professor Cathy Humphreys from the University of Melbourne with Dr Fiona Buchanan from the University of South Australia. Advisory Group members include National Network of Women’s Legal Centres, South Australia Uniting Communities, No to Violence, DV Victoria, Anglicare Western Australia, Women Legal centre Victoria and representatives from the Commonwealth Attorney General’s Department and the Department of Health and Human Services (Victoria).