



Causes, Consequences, and Recovery for Children with Experiences of Domestic and Family Violence

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Introduction

The visibility of children and young people and their experiences of living with domestic and family violence (DFV) has increased exponentially over the last number of decades. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) has keenly influenced this increased visibility, with a developing appreciation of children's experiences of living with DFV considered central to a child-centred and rights-based approach to working with children in this context. No longer the forgotten victims of DFV, children are now positioned in research, policy and practice as integral to the family's experience of living with DFV and are considered agentic individuals who are actively making sense of their experiences whilst also capable of providing important insights into those experiences.

Children's resilience as survivors of abuse, the long-term consequences for so many of them of their destructive experiences, and their pathways to recovery are all brought to light in this double volume of articles from long term researchers in the field, as well as new and emerging authors. Thoughtful invited commentaries from key experts are inserted into this special issue to offer additional richness, critique and contribution to the discourse on children and DFV which continues to emerge and change. Alongside extending the boundaries of our knowledge on and understanding of the causes, consequences and recovery issues that children and young people who live with DFV encounter, the 23 papers and five invited commentaries in this special issue reflect

global reach, a robust commitment to including the voices of those less heard, and a strong focus on healing and recovery.

While many terms are employed interchangeably and synonymously in the international discourse on this topic, perhaps influenced by conventions in different jurisdictions, we use the term Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) in this editorial to refer to a global public health issue and violation of fundamental human rights. Appreciating that DFV is of particular concern for women and children, we also view this issue through both an intersectional and life course lens, highlighting its influence across the lifespan and intersecting with sexual orientation, culture and family relationships (Devaney et al., 2021; Meyer & Frost, 2019).

Several decades of research about children experiencing DFV has unequivocally identified the harm to children and the abuse of their human right to be brought up safely and without fear (Jaffe, Scott & Saxton; Jenney & Nyirinkwaya). Jaffe et al. (2012) point out that on average, more than 400 articles a year are being published. There is no shortage of evidence! In this special issue we continue to identify the patterns of children's experiences while focusing more on the issues of recovery, early intervention and children's participation in research.

Attending to the Structural Context

The structural patterns emerge consistently in the research identifying the causes and consequences for children living with DFV. The gendered pattern is ubiquitous with all articles in this special issue noting that coercive control, violence, and domestic homicide are perpetrated predominantly by men towards women and this includes in the articles on child to parent violence (Young, Venables, O'Leary, Fannon & Walter; Young, Venables, O'Connell & O'Leary; Tambasco; Weir, Adisa, Blom, Hadjimatheou, Lamarre, Carlisle & Barrow-Grint). By contrast, the research samples in the articles across the special issue tend to show relatively equal numbers of boys and girls living with DFV. Bhandari and Liu, in their

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research focused on South Asian women and children in the US, note that the South Asian fathers had a strong preference for their sons, particularly post-separation, though the consequences of this preference requires further research.

Attention has been given to children with disabilities noting that their needs are consistently overlooked in the response by the family court in the post-separation context (Gregory, Elliffe, Holt, Donnellan & Cahill), and to children with experiences of intimate partner homicide (Kurdi, Devaney, Houghton, Eastwood, Frederick, Joy & Alisic). The Commentary by Flynn and Maher provides an insightful critique which highlights the value of the social model of disability and the strategies that could and should be expected to respond to the safety and pathways to recovery for children with disabilities in the context of DFV. The experiences of children with disabilities draws attention to the wider issue that children's experiences and responses to living with DFV are characterised by diversity rather than predictability. The case file analysis drawn from the official domestic violence agency in the Netherlands (Van Baak & Eichelsheim) identifies clearly the heterogeneity of the consequences for children living with DFV which are dependent upon factors such as age, proximity to the violence, developmental stage, and protective factors. The study by Van Baak and Eichelsheim is a classic, descriptive study of the characteristics and impact of living with DFV on children. These impacts are comprehensively addressed in the narratives and data on recovery strategies and therapeutic interventions in the articles that follow.

Early Intervention and Recovery

Unsurprisingly, an important theme emerging across articles in the special issue lies in the call for earlier intervention. While the majority of papers point to the need to intervene earlier, we highlight a group of papers drawn from diverse sources: 735 young people incarcerated in Chinese juvenile justice institutions (Zang, Zhao & Yao); the biographical accounts from 16 young people in Germany (Quinten & Wehner); and four articles which draw out different aspects of child to adult violence and abuse and adolescent domestic abuse. These latter papers include: two articles by Young and colleagues that highlight the siblings of young people in Australia involved in adolescent/child to parent violence (Young et al(a)); and the strategies for engaging the 12–17 year old sons of survivors (Young et al(b)); an article by Tambasco; and also Weir et al. which emphasise the early onset of child to parent abuse and adolescent domestic abuse. In different ways, they highlight the importance of attending to children's early childhood experiences of abuse. Zang et al. for example, note that incarcerated young people had much higher numbers of ACES compared to children in the community, and that particularly child sexual abuse and emotional abuse

impacted in different ways on the young people in juvenile detention. Tambasco notes the very early indicators of child to parent abuse by young children, with the experiences of victimisation often beginning early in their life-course. She advocates for the terminology of child to parent abuse rather than adolescent to parent abuse to emphasise the need of very early intervention when abusive behaviours first arise in the family. A different lens is taken by Young et al(a) who emphasise the neglect and abuse of siblings when child to parent abuse is identified, while Quinten and Wehner highlight the narratives in their interviews with young women who draw attention to hearing their current stories and recovery needs to prevent the impact of inter-generational violence.

While perhaps not considered 'early intervention', time spent in refuge/shelter is nevertheless considered a 'window of opportunity' for intervention and recovery by Overlien and Selvik. Conceptualising children as rights holders and directly capturing children's voice, Overlien and Selvik's article illuminates the significant changes in provision for children in shelters in Norway over the last 15 years. Also engaging directly with children and young people in refuge, Thibault, Lapierre and Molgat's report on what children say is important to them in their recovery – playing without fear and having access to support. Focusing specifically on recovery, emerging from this study and from Morrison's paper is a key finding on the importance of groupwork interventions. These interventions can reduce children feeling that they were the only ones living with DFV, while also maximising the therapeutic power of groupwork in fostering universality or a sense of belonging to others with similar stories (Yalom, 1985). Four decades ago, Yalom (1985) underscored the critical role of the skilled groupwork leader/facilitator in creating supportive and transformative environments for healing and recovery. This fundamental role of skilled and trusted professionals also emerges across numerous papers in this special issue. Costello and Holt's paper for example reports on a participatory project for children who have lived with DFV and identifies safe spaces and trusting relationships as key to facilitating and fostering participatory practices. In a similar vein, the findings from Barter, Howarth, Richardson Foster and Stanley's mixed methods evaluation of an intervention for mothers and children, position the process of recovery occurring in the context of trusting relationships. To that end, Barter et al. highlight the critical role of professionals and parents supporting children's readiness to engage in interventions.

A number of papers in this special issue also express caution about the concept and process of recovery. Drawing on Herman's (1992, 2015) work on pathways to recovery, Morrison for example contests the notion that recovery is linear, with the journey from family violence to recovery at times undermined and potentially stunted by many issues. Concurring with this

note of caution, Heward-Belle and Hughes assert that while holding perpetrators to account is a vital aspect of practice responses, it is often neglected and with negative implications for the recovery of mothers and their children. Women in Heward-Belle and Hughes's study are reported to reject the term 'recovery', preferring the term 'journeying away from family violence', a journey described as 'ongoing'. This journey away from violence is reported on by a number of papers who focus to varying degrees on post-separation contact arrangements acting as a block to recovery. While Gregory and colleagues provide insights into the challenges mothers and their children can experience at the intersection of disability and DFV, Costello and Holt caution that living with the legacy of DFV can continue long after separation and be compounded by both unsafe and unwanted contact. For some children, unsafe contact can also be occurring simultaneously with ongoing civil and criminal proceedings (Morrison). Morrison further cautions that the evidence base on children's recovery from DFV is limited, not least she argues due to the vulnerability of many of the interventions themselves which makes the task of evaluation and research more challenging. This point is also taken up by Diemer, Hammond, Absler, Spiteri-Staines and Humphreys who reflect on the poor funding infrastructure on which these interventions and services rely.

While the interventions to support children's recovery and healing are generally positive, the response of statutory child protection and family law to children experiencing DFV, while a ubiquitous theme across the special issue, is much more problematic. The Commentaries by our experienced researchers (Jaffe et al.; Meyer; Jenney & Nyirinkwaya; Flynn & Maher) add a particular richness to the collection of articles on this theme. Their insights amplify the findings from the many articles that touch on the intervention by child protection and the post-separation issues that arise with the family court. Articles are careful to highlight areas where adult and child survivors experienced positive responses from well-trained workers who were able to hear and understand their experiences, provide appropriate support, referrals and safety, and recognise that progress had been made in the response by child protection organisations (O'Connor, Alaggia & Nixon; Loncar & Scott; Hale, Bracewell, Bellussi, Jenkins, Alexander, Devaney & Callaghan; Vatnar, Dahl, Kristiansen, Leer-Salvesen, Nordby, Vostad & Douglas). However, the consistent finding is that the history of poor and sometimes harmful practices continues with the same issues that have always been problematic repeating themselves (Humphreys & Absler, 2011). As Peter Jaffe et al. eloquently point out in their commentary, the directions for strengthened practice are well known and documented in recommendations from most child death reviews. It is the leadership and resourcing for implementation that is consistently lacking. Heward-Belle and Hughes highlight the lack of policy leadership to outline

and identify accountability in the context of DFV, recognising that accountability is a responsibility for the organisation as well as for practitioners. Others continue to draw attention to the tendency towards mother-blaming rather than partnership with survivors; failing to train and resource the workforce to work with the person using violence; continuing to resort to the 'leave ultimatum' assuming that separation is conflated with safety; the lack of attention to diversity and the fear of minority groups that child protection involvement will be harmful (O'Connor et al.; Hale et al.; Vatnar et al.). While new frameworks for working are available and implemented in a number of jurisdictions (Mandel, 2024; Weir et al.; Jenney & Nyirinkwaya), strengthening the evidence base and creating the leadership and infrastructure to address the continuing reports of poor practice and the preventable deaths of children through shifting the structure and cultural issues that have plagued child protection practice in the context of DFV remains a work in progress (Jaffe et al.; Meyer).

The Power of Children's Participation

Concurring with Arai et al.'s (2019, p.9) assertion that 'children and young people relate powerful accounts of the everyday, lived reality of DVA in many forms', several papers in this special issue lay testament, not only to children's capacity to contribute to debates about these lived experiences, but also underscore the empowering and healing potential that giving voice to these experiences has for children. Robust and evidence-based arguments are evident in contributions by Beckett, Warrington and Bracewell; Costello and Holt; and Quinten and Wehner for the inclusion of children and young people in both research and participatory projects focused on DFV. Quinten and Wehner's discussion on using reconstructive biographical approaches to capture biographical narratives is compelling, as control over what is told (or not) by the interviewee, remains in the hands of the interviewee. Marinkovic Chavez, Joy, Frederick, Eastwood, Morrice, Sakthiakumaran & Alisic's paper on children bereaved by parental intimate partner homicide also underscores the importance of children being empowered to take control of their stories by 'crafting subverses' in order to make sense of and share their experiences of trauma. Challenging notions of vulnerability while creating safe and trauma informed spaces for children and young people to contribute to the research debate, Beckett et al. assert that such approaches recognise children's accounts as important, with the process of recognition experienced as validating. While focused on participation and not research, the experiences of children and young people in the Empower Kids Project (Costello & Holt) highlighted that they felt part of a 'movement' that was influencing and creating change. They provide testimony to the capacity of meaningful participatory experiences to both validate experiences, while also supporting recovery.

Overview of the Double Special Issue

The first volume of this double issue contains papers that primarily focus on engaging directly with the perspectives of children and young people on a range of issues related to their experiences of living with DFV. Prioritising children's voice, these papers reflect on the impact of their experiences (Chavez et al.; Kurdi et al.; Quinten & Wehner; Zang, Zhao & Yao), their views on a range of interventions (Barter et al.; Diemer et al.; Morrison; Overlien & Selvik; Thibault, Lapiere & Molgat), and their experiences of being heard and of participation in various contexts (Costello & Holt). This volume is expertly bookended by three invited commentaries. Beckett et al. assert that trauma-informed approaches to conducting research with children can open up safe and meaningful spaces for children to contribute to, and influence knowledge creation on DFV. Jaffe et al.'s invited commentary is a salient reminder that the journey to recovery for some children ends with their homicide, with the authors raising questions about the capacity of child protections systems to detect and respond effectively to the risk and vulnerability of these children and their families. Finally, Jenney and Nyirinkwaya take an historical overview to then highlight the central importance of children's perspectives in the development of current interventions and policies.

The second volume in this double special issue focuses on a diverse range of victim-survivor experiences in addition to papers that are concerned with child protection responses. Two papers in this second volume continue the focus also on children's experiences, but from the perspectives and voice of their mothers (Bhandari & Chun Liu; Gregory et al.). Three further papers report on the still emerging issue of child to parent violence (Young et al(a); Young et al(b); Tambasco) while a fourth investigates domestic abuse in adolescent relationships (Weir et al.). Aspects of child protection and welfare policy and practice responses to DFV are the focus of the remaining papers in this volume (Hale et al.; Heward-Belle & Hughes; O'Connor, Alaggia & Nixon). The rich content in volume 2 is anchored by two invited commentaries that illuminate some of the challenges and opportunities for child protection responses to children living with DVA (Meyer); and some unique challenges for children and their mothers at the intersection of disability and DFV (Flynn & Maher).

Conclusion

The 28 papers contained in this double special issue collectively reflect the depth and breadth of global research on, and with children and young people. While we celebrate what has been achieved in this special issue, we of course also

acknowledge the work not included and perhaps yet to be done. To that end, while articles were drawn from researchers in a wide range of countries (Australia, Canada, China, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, UK, US), the experiences of Minority Ethnic and First Nations children are not specifically drawn out in most of the articles. Our double volume also highlights the gaps in knowledge on the experiences of children with disabilities and indeed on the diversity of children's experiences.

While this publication acknowledges certain gaps as limitations, these very gaps point to exciting frontiers for future exploration. At a time when there is growing recognition of children's voices, capacities, and rights, these areas offer rich opportunities for deeper engagement. Researchers and practitioners alike are increasingly equipped to ethically and meaningfully involve children, not just as subjects, but as active contributors. A powerful message emerging from this special issue is clear: children are not only capable of participating in research—they are essential to it. Their lived experiences and first-hand perspectives are not optional extras; they are integral to shaping research informed policy and practice that truly reflects their lived realities.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors have no competing interests.

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