Slow down and listen: Improving children's and young people's safety during periods of violence, separation and reunification

Practice Brief

Background

Family and domestic violence is an issue that affects large numbers of Australian women and children. Most often violence is used by men, and women and children are most likely to be harmed. [1]. Rather than just being 'passive witnesses' to the violence, studies have shown that children and young people 'experience violence': they are often direct victims, play a part in protecting their parents (mostly mothers) and siblings and actively help them to manage the impacts that violence has on their lives [2].

These experiences of family and domestic violence can have life-long ramifications for children and young people, with many having physical, emotional, educational and social impacts that take a toll on their health and wellbeing and their ability to cope with challenges throughout their lives [3]. However, research also shows that if a child is provided the right support and assistance to overcome the impacts of violence, they can cope and develop resilience in later life [4].

In an attempt to protect them from further harm, Australian child protection systems often intervene and remove children and young people from unsafe family homes. In some cases, this intervention improves children and young people's physical safety but being separated from family members, particularly those who are non-violent and supportive, can compromise their emotional safety and wellbeing.

This brief provides young people's accounts of their experiences of violence and reunification and what they need to be safe and feel safe as they journey towards recovery. It aims to inform practice and highlights ways that the needs of children and young people might be central to responses to families experiencing violence. It draws from interviews with young people who participated in a study conducted by researchers from the Australian Centre for Child Protection, the Positive Futures Research Collaboration and the Schools of Social Work from the University of South Australia and Curtin University.

Preferred Citation

Moore, T., Arney, F., Buchanan, F., Chung, D., Chong, A., Fernandes, C., Hawkes, M., Meiksans, J., Moulding, N., Martin, R. and Schulze, D. (2O2O) *Practice Brief - Slow down and listen: Improving children's and young people's safety during periods of violence, separation and reunification*. Adelaide: Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia

The study

Alongside interviews with mothers and fathers and focus groups with workers [5, 6], 11 young people (from 9 families) aged between 12 and 27 participated in face to face interviews where they were given an opportunity to share their stories of living in families affected by violence and separation and to consider what they needed to experience safety. They reflected on the ways that organisations and systems working with them fostered or compromised their physical and emotional safety, their experiences of safety at different points in their lives and how they believed organisations and systems might be improved.

The study was conducted with approval from the South Australian Aboriginal Health Research Ethics Committee, the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee and ratified by the University of South Australia and Curtin University. It was designed to provide Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young people and parents with the opportunity to participate safely and contribute to discussions about how the service system might be improved. Further detail about the study can be found in our report: (see Moore, et al, 2O2O).

Children's and young people's experiences of violence

Young people in this study all experienced violence in their families, most often as direct victims (n=7). Young people reported on combined or singular forms of abuse, including:

- **Physical abuse:** where they were physically assaulted and punished in ways that caused physical injury
- **Emotional abuse:** where they were threatened, intimidated or experienced emotional distress
- **Neglect and deprivation:** where their parents or caregivers did not provide them with necessities and deliberately kept them from having food, shelter and/or social interactions as a way of controlling them
- **Sexual abuse:** where their parents or caregivers sexually assaulted them
- **Poly-victimisation:** when children and young people experience various forms of abuse

Violence was most often perpetrated by young people's biological fathers and their mothers' partners (n=8). Young people were sometimes abused by multiple caregivers (including mothers) (n=6) or in a small number of instances just by their mother (n=2). When the young people were direct victims of violence, in all but one case, their siblings were also victims and their mothers were victims of partner violence (n=7).

The violence... started in there: mild violence with my sisters' dad smacking me and pushing me around and dragging me around. I remember being dragged a lot... [I was put in] locked rooms... I copped most of my violence from my mum. My mum was the one that used weapons against us: like belts, wooden spoons, spatulas, metal spatulas not plastic spatulas
(YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25, #YW7)

Young people in our study believed that their parents and services were not always aware of how family violence affected children or young people or that these people downplayed its impacts and their safety needs.

Children and young people were rarely passive witnesses to violence within their families, reporting they adopted active roles to prevent, manage or respond to violence within their families including:

- **Monitoring their family's safety.** Young people often observed their parents' interactions and identified tell-tale signs that a family member might use violence.
- **Pacifying violent family members.** Young people often saw it as their role to try to calm or de-escalate a parent who was threatening violence or who they believed would use violence imminently. Sometimes they distracted, sometimes they calmed, and sometimes they tried to give

the perpetrating parent different options to violence (e.g., asking their fathers to take them for a drive to calm down).

- **Provoking violent family members.** Young people sometimes "picked fights" with their violent family members to move the focus of their parents' anger towards themself, thus protecting their mothers and siblings.

"Sometimes when Dad was angry, I'd get in the way so he couldn't hurt my brothers. It was dangerous and I got hurt. One time I thought "he could hurt me real bad" and then I thought "if I get hurt real bad, like end up in hospital, then maybe someone will do something".
(YOUNG WOMAN, aged 15-18, YW#4)

- **Protecting mothers and siblings.** Young people shared stories of things that they did when they were concerned for their family's safety. This involved hiding siblings in cupboards, taking their family members to other locations and, in a small number of instances, calling police or child protection to intervene so that their families were not harmed.
- **Caring for family victims of violence.** Young people saw it as their role to provide emotional support and reassurance to their parents (mostly mothers) and siblings who had been harmed.

The roles that children and young people took on often changed over time and siblings in the same households often responded to (and were affected by) violence differently.

Personally, I didn't stay safe, I kept the younger ones safe, so I bore the brunt of the aggression so that they didn't cop it, because I didn't want them to have to go through what I went through.... I would get them to go play quietly, "don't come out, stay away", and my big brother and I would wear the aggression and the brunt of the moods that would come along. So, my brother was trying to protect my mum and I was trying to protect my brother and the younger ones
(YOUNG WOMAN, aged 19-25 #YW7)

Young people talked about how looking out for, protecting and consoling their families became a role that they took on and became part of their identities and how they saw themselves.

Even when young people didn't take on these roles, they felt that they were rarely bystanders. Instead, they took steps to protect themselves physically and emotionally by retreating, hiding or running away.

Most young people reported that they were often hypervigilant: watching out to see whether there were risks of violence and preparing to assume one of the strategies for minimising violence or responding. This hypervigilance was sustained, even when the risks were low and, for many, after they were separated from their families.

Being exposed to and directly experiencing violence took its toll on young people's physical and emotional wellbeing, on their relationships with family, friends and extended support networks, on their education and on their sense of identity and hopefulness for the future. For a summary of the impacts of family and domestic violence on children and young people see: Noble-Carr, et al, 2020 The ongoing need for hypervigilance appeared to be particularly detrimental [7, 8].

As many of the young people had experienced violence over long periods of time and because they did not see other adults or workers acknowledging or responding to their needs during periods of violence, they started believing that it was 'normal' and 'inevitable' within families and in their future adult relationships, as can be seen below. Others reported that they had been diagnosed with anxiety, depression and, in three cases, Post-Traumatic Stress disorder.

PRACTICE NOTE:
Appreciating how children and young people manage violence

When working with children, young people and families, it is important to appreciate 'how young people respond to and manage violence, and how this impacts their safety and identity. Acknowledging and validating these roles, believing children and young people's accounts, and thinking about what their experiences mean for practice is vital.

Although sometimes parents can provide some insights about how young people experience violence, our research shows that their observations are often different to their children's accounts. Sometimes this is because children hide their thoughts and feelings from adults.

If a child feels safer when they can monitor their parent's behaviour and see it as their role to calm violent family members down, they may experience relief but also fear, anxiety, guilt and frustration when they are living away from home. They need to be reassured that adults that they trust are taking an active role in protecting mothers and siblings left at home.

Services working with children and young people need to recognise that hypervigilance or a sense of responsibility can take its toll on their emotional mental health and can find it difficult to modulate their arousal [7].

If siblings rely on each other for emotional support and comfort, these relationships need to be fostered through ongoing contact, particularly if they are separated.

Organisations working with children need to be patient and provide supports if children and young people use the coping strategies that they have used to protect themselves: such as running away, hiding or 'shutting down' emotionally.

Not all children experience and cope with violence in the same way. Understanding, from the child's view, what they experienced and how they managed during periods of violence is essential in violence-informed work.

What young people told us they need to be safe and experience safety during periods of violence

Young people often reported minimal interactions with services during periods of violence. Often coached not to say anything to others or to reach out for help and fearing the consequences of disclosing their circumstances, young people felt incredibly alone.

Although young people often did not actively tell outsiders what was going on at home, they deeply believed that others were aware of their situation and did not intervene. When they did have contact with adults at school, in the community and with community organisations, they felt as though these adults ignored, downplayed or disbelieved them. They felt that adults didn't care, thought they were stupid or were dismissive of their needs or that their attempts to respond were ineffective. Young people gave examples of things that they believed adults should have noticed and then acted upon.

I wasn't stupid, like, I think a lot of people don't give kids enough credit for that though so they don't try and explain stuff because they think they're too stupid to understand or they're not old enough.
(YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 19-25 #5)

This required these adults and organisations to observe, to ask, to acknowledge and to respond.

I felt responsible a lot of the time. When I was living with Dad I felt so responsible for [my sister] and like, I don't know, I think it would have been really handy if someone had have stepped in and been like, "Hey, this isn't the way it's supposed to be." Or if school had have done something, I don't know.
(YOUNG MAN, aged 18-24, YM#5)

Analyse the situation and the family. Because if they are acting sad or weird and quiet, then they are not talking because they are scared that they don't get hit for saying something... And keep checking up on them. Regularly. See how things are going.
(YOUNG MAN, aged 15-18, YM#3)

Well, from my case I would say [we needed] a lot of understanding, it is a very traumatic time for everyone... [a good worker] they just seem more understanding, some people and they care more and that they realise that it's actually a really hard time whereas you get some people where it's not much more than that.
(YOUNG WOMAN, AGED 19-25 #5)

Some had come across workers and organisations who involved them and helped them to raise their concerns and respond to their needs. However, they also encountered those that were ineffective and unsupportive. Their access to supportive adults and services was also restricted when organisations required parental permission before offering supports.

They also needed:

- To know that violence is not 'normal', 'inevitable' or ' acceptable' — many felt that because of their experiences they thought that most families experienced violence and needed to be reassured that this was not the case. They also stressed the need for other young people and the broader community to know that violence should not be tolerated and that it is OK to seek support.
- Adults, who were workers or members of their families, communities and support networks to be able to identify if families were experiencing violence and to step in and stand up for those experiencing it.

People knew, everyone knew. They knew Mum and Dad were using. They knew about the fights. They knew we didn't have food and that we needed help but, I dunno why, they didn't do anything about it.
(YOUNG WOMAN, aged 15-18, #YW5)

- To have access to trusted adults who they could talk to, raise concerns with and who would advocate for them, regardless of whether their parents knew or consented
- For those children, young people and parents who don't use violence to be given choices and support to leave violent family members safely
- For those who work with children and young people (including teachers, coaches, counsellors, youth workers etc) to appreciate what it is like to live in families affected by violence, how it impacts children, their relationships and their wellbeing and to respond to their needs — in what they do and how they do it

- For workers and organisations working with families to always be aware of and prioritise the safety needs of children and young people, to not "look the other way" or pretend that they haven't seen and think about how what they do with parents and families affects children and young people in the family

I would have liked to know, to be reassured that [violence is not ok but that] it's a thing that can happen and it's happening to me. And I would have liked to have just learnt that that wasn't normal, like the way that Mum acted [her violence] wasn't the normal way to act, a lot earlier, because it took a long time to realise that.
(YOUNG MAN, aged 15-18 #YM5)

PRACTICE NOTE: Assessing and Responding to Safety Needs

When working with children and young people and families, it is essential to understand what children and young people need to be safe and to experience safety. This requires workers to engage directly with children and young people and to help them talk about what they want and need.

When planning supports and interventions, it is important to consider whether what you do and how you are doing it:

- Reduces threats of violence
- Helps families manage underlying issues
- Supports positive and caring relationships
- Incorporates what children and young people want and need
- Demonstrates to children and young people, and builds their confidence, that you have a shared responsibility for their safety and are invested in meeting their needs
- Responds to the reality that being exposed to family violence is traumatic and acts to deal with the impacts of violence
- Fosters a sense of stability and predictability: in relationships and in supports, and provides enough information to help children and young people have confidence in your efforts

It is likely that no single worker or organisation can meet all of the safety needs of children and young people — so working with collaborators may be needed to support children's and young people's physical and emotional wellbeing. Together, workers and organisations can meet the needs listed above.

How children and young people understood safety and their safety needs during periods of violence

Young people were asked to consider what safety meant to them and their families during periods of violence. Safety was often about either being safe or experiencing safety and, preferably, both.

Being safe related to:

- **Lack of violence and threats of violence:** for young people individually and within their family as a whole
- **Family challenges being managed:** young people felt that issues such as parental alcohol or other drug use, mental illness and social isolation affected their safety and the likelihood of violence and that these issues and the violence should not be considered in isolation of each other

Experiencing safety was more about the feelings and relationships that they had within their families during periods of violence. For young people, safety was experienced when:

- They were with members of their families who did not use violence and who were safe, loving, caring and protective
- They were able to protect, comfort and take care of their mothers and siblings and were not concerned about their safety or wellbeing
- They were supported by protective adults, in and outside of their families, who would not cause them harm but encourage, challenge and mediate to ensure that their families were not only surviving but thriving
- They had enough information to feel safe and confident that adults were providing assistance to meet their family's needs and responding to their concerns

- They felt 'visible': that adults and organisations saw them as individuals with needs and concerns within but also independent of their families
- They had a voice — they were heard and believed — and felt like they had some influence in what was being done within their families
- They and their families were provided the space, opportunities and support to be able to deal with challenges, to overcome the impacts of living in a family affected by violence and to achieve their goals for themselves and their families
- Things were stable, predictable and they were able to relax and feel comfortable within their own homes

[Safety is when] things are calm and stable. My parents aren't using and they are actually acting like parents… There is not much to worry about.
(YOUNG WOMAN, aged 15-18, YW#4)

Children's and young people's experiences of separation

All the youth participants had left or were taken from their families during or after periods of violence. This occurred in several different ways, including:

- Being taken into kinship, foster or residential care (n=5)
- Running away or moving out of home to escape (n=4)
- Escaping violence with their mothers and siblings (n=4)
- Having a violent parent or step-parent taken into prison (n=2)
- Being separated from siblings when they and their mothers escaped violence (n=2)

In many cases, children and young people were separated from their families, their parents or siblings on a number of occasions and in different ways. In our study, those placed in care reported multiple placements.

When separated from their families, young people had the same safety needs as when they were living at home. They needed to be safe and experience safety. Some young people reported that being away from violent homes was 'a relief' and that they could finally relax.
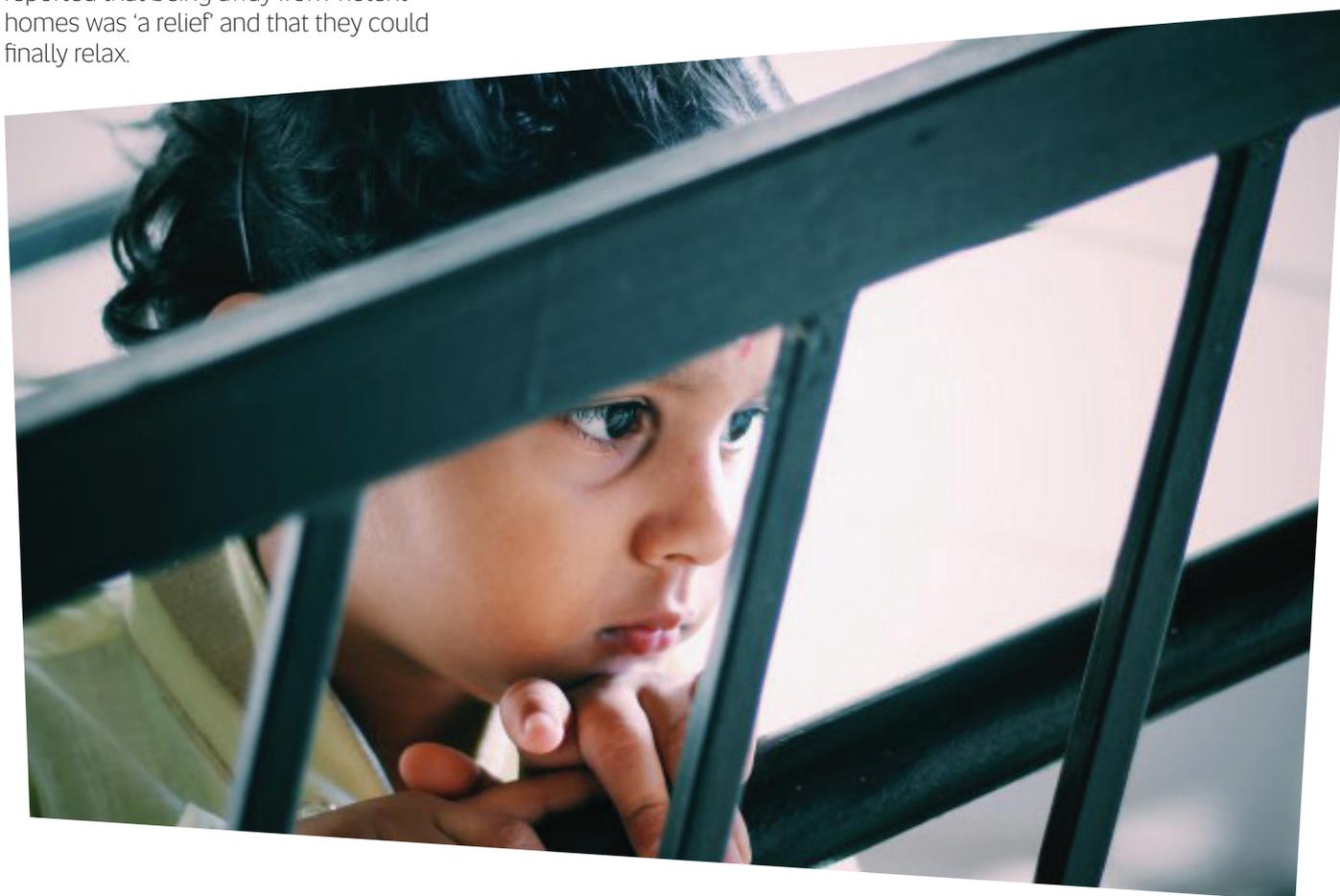
[I felt] Just relief to get out of there. [I thought I] Don't have to be so scared… it was like the best time of my life.
(YOUNG MAN, aged 15-18, #YM2)

However, many reported that they never felt safe during periods of separation while some recalled that they felt safer when they were living within violent families – mostly because their needs to experience safety (as described above) were not met. A summary of their safety needs, what happened and what they believed could help them be safe and experience safety are included in Table 1.

As an adult I just don't understand why you would take kids out of a really shitty situation and put them in a high stress situation
(YOUNG MAN, aged 25+, #YM1)

Children and young people's (CYP) safety need	What happened	What helped or could have helped
BEING SAFE		
Lack of violence and threats of violence and for some intervention	Some CYP felt less afraid when living away from violent homes.	CYP were reassured when workers and organisations were holding violent family members to account and had safety plans in place to protect mothers and siblings.
	When mothers or siblings were left in violent situations CYP often felt more anxious and concerned than they did living at home.	Those who had a worker or organisation who acknowledged the violence and facilitated support were described as much more positive than those who felt that violence was ignored, downplayed or dismissed.
	CYP were often unaware of supports being provided and felt that organisations were not helping their families to deal with or be protected from violence.	
Family challenges being managed	When families weren't supported to deal with underlying issues CYP were afraid that violence would occur.	CYP felt more assured when they could see that their parents were involved in programs to deal with issues such as AOD use and mental health issues. They recognised that their safety could only be improved if support was being provided to help their families manage these challenges.
	When living away from home they could not determine whether their parents were managing their problems and sometimes assumed the worst.	
To be connected to members of their families	When siblings weren't placed together and CYP didn't have contact with family they worried about them.	When siblings were placed together when it was safe to do so, when they were in kinship care and when they had regular contact with protective parents they felt safer and more connected.
To protect, comfort and take care of the mothers and siblings	When CYP were separated they felt guilty that they couldn't protect or comfort and were frustrated when workers didn't appreciate these important roles.	When services appreciated the roles that CYP took on and gave them opportunities to continue to care for and protect their mothers and siblings, CYP felt more 'in control' and less fearful.
To be supported by protective adults	When CYP were moved from one placement to another and had a high turnover of staff it was difficult to make connections with adults that they could trust.	CYP appreciated having workers who took on the role of advocate and gave them opportunities to have their say and to deal with their fears and concerns.
To know what is happening and how their families are being supported	When CYP were excluded from family meetings, case planning sessions and were not briefed about how their families were being supported they often assumed that nothing was happening and that there were ongoing risks. This caused them anxiety, stress and guilt (that they were relatively safe while their families were not).	CYP valued participating in family group meetings and planning sessions, and/or having advocates keeping them informed and representing their thoughts and wishes.
To feel 'visible' and have some influence	When decisions were made about CYP without their involvement they continued to feel invisible.	CYP felt worthy of support when workers and organisations took their needs and wishes into consideration.
To be able to deal with challenges	CYP were sometimes confronted by new threats including bullying, harassment, unsafe carers and siblings	CYP were happier when workers listened to their concerns and made efforts to ensure that they were safe and experienced safety in their care arrangements.
To overcome the impacts of exposure to violence	CYP were not often given access to counselling or supports that understood the impacts of FDV, particularly their emotional wellbeing. They were frustrated when supports focused on dealing with emotions but failed to reduce the things that caused them fear and concern.	CYP needed opportunities for adults to specifically acknowledge and respond to the ways that violence had affected their lives. This required them to know that they and their families were safe for supports to beneficial.
For stability, predictability and being able to relax	Some CYP felt safer when living away from violent homes, however most said that they felt less safe because their other safety needs were not met. This meant that things were unpredictable and unsettling.	When CYP were aware that their mother's and sibling's safety needs were met they felt less anxious and concerned.
	When plans were changed and periods of separation were extended CYP felt less stability and predictability	When CYP were in stable placements, when they had carers they could trust, when they believed their workers appreciated their safety needs and kept them informed things were more predictable and they could relax.

Children and young people's experiences of reunification

For young people in our study, reunification occurred at different times, in different ways, and with both positive and negative outcomes for children and young people. In some cases, young people didn't want to return home and either chose to remain in care or to find other accommodation.

Other young people voluntarily returned home after care orders were completed – sometimes because they felt like they had no other options or often because they hoped that "things would be different this time". For some, reunification was well planned and children and young people were prepared to return home but for many it occurred with little warning and before they were ready.

Challenges in reunifying

Young people reported that reunification was often challenging and complex. When they chose to return home they sometimes were surprised to find that things had changed and were now less predictable than before. Some, for example, noted that as they had lived with violence for so long it was strange for there to be no risks, leading to a sense that the situation was more unpredictable than before. Some found it hard to readjust, needing help to reconcile their family relationships and find new ways of interacting with parents and siblings while managing the ongoing impacts of living with violence and being separated.

In several cases, young people reported that their families held them responsible for child protection intervention which took its toll. They reported that relationships were strained, they felt blamed and were made to feel like they were a 'traitor' to their families.

At the same time, relationships with mothers, in particular, were often damaged when violent family members blamed mothers for violence and when young people believed that their mothers had not protected them (even though this was often not possible).

Others had challenges at school and with friends. Many young people reported challenges when it came to forming and maintaining intimate relationships. Commonly, this reflected their diminished self-worth and the enduring impacts of violence and trauma. Some talked about how their familial experiences of violence led them to wonder if they could "expect anything better". They reported:

- **Pessimistic Identities** – during periods of violence and separation young people often formed the view that they had little value, that they were not worthy of care or protection and that they could not expect better for themselves or their families.

PRACTICE NOTE:
Planning for reunification

When supporting children, young people and families who are reunifying it's important to:

- Determine whether, when and how children and young people want to reunify and what expectations they have.

- Challenge 'mother blaming', reassure children and young people who have disclosed concerns that this was appropriate and, through family mediation, restore protective relationships within families.

- Consider how children and young people might be prepared and equipped to return to families that might have changed.

- Understand how violence and separation has affected relationships (particularly between mothers and children) and help reconcile these relationships when safe and sought.

- Assess how the child or young person is affected by trauma, violence and separation and ensure that adequate supports are available to help them recover.

- **Difficulties readjusting** — the longer children and young people were away from their families the more difficult it was to reunify. During separation they and their families had changed and it was not always easy returning home. This was made more difficult when their trauma came to the fore and they lashed out, were resentful and had little trust.

- **Difficulties in relationships with parents and siblings** — during periods of violence and separation, young people sometimes felt let down or betrayed by their family members, guilt and shame. They needed support to name their feelings and reconcile with their families.

- **Unresolved trauma experienced during violence** — some young people talked about suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, had emotional problems and found it difficult to cope. They needed support to understand and manage 'big feelings' and to be supported to cope and recover.

- **Unresolved problems experienced during separation** — some young people felt that their time away from the family was traumatic and traumatising. They lacked trust, they felt angry and when they had been harmed, had new issues to manage and overcome.

- **Challenges at school, in friendships and relationships** — many young people had missed lots of school, had not done as well as they had hoped and, in some cases, had dropped out. They talked about losing friends, finding it hard to trust others and, in some cases, formed their own relationships that were unhealthy and harmful.

- **Lack of trust in adults and services** — young people shared that after being ignored, mistreated or 'let down' by adults, services and systems, they had little confidence that these supports could help. This sometimes led them to being reluctant to seek or accept help, including when they themselves became parents and needed assistance to care for their own children.

- **Lack of services** — many of the young people, particularly those who were voluntarily returning home, were often exited from youth support and child protection services shortly after returning with no plans as to who would assist them as they readjusted. Young people often did not have an advocate or an independent person who "checked in" with them, who helped them determine what they needed and helped them with residual and new emotional problems and emerging challenges.

Supporting recovery

For many young people who experience violence and separation the impacts can be profound and long-lasting, influencing their future relationships and parenting. Recovery for young people in this study involved feeling safe, having some control over one's life, building confidence in their self, their families and the service system, and overcoming the trauma experienced when living with violence and during separation. Services play a key role in supporting children
and young people to recover, both in the short and long term through reunification and when transitioning in and out of care.

What children and young people want and need during reunification towards recovery

When asked what they wanted and needed for reunification to be safe and successful, young people stressed the importance of:

- **Options and choices** – as to whether and how they returned home or how else they might want to have relationships with parents and families. They believed that young people sometimes returned home even when it was not safe or not something they wanted because they didn't have other options.

- **Planning and preparation** – to help children and young people be ready for their return home and for supports to be in place to help them transition from care back to their families.

It just happened… we very much got told and we just had to accept it, kind of thing. [We needed to be able to prepare]… and get used to the idea of it… and to get settled when we finally got home
(Young woman, aged 18-24)

- **Understanding violence and its impacts** – young people felt that they, their families and those working with them needed to understand violence and its impacts. Some spoke about not being able to handle their emotions or relationships only to find later that it was due to their trauma histories. Similarly, they encountered services that didn't understand the causes of their ongoing problems and responded in unhelpful ways.

My brother, my younger brother … had anger issues, kind of thing. And, but like throughout care, and afterwards especially, he, like, some other issues really started to surface. Like, he eventually just stopped going to school and stuff, and then he started being really disrespectful, and like, he pretty much lost, like, a lot of sympathy and empathy and stuff. Like, I'd like, from my perspective, it just looks like he doesn't process emotions properly at all. I think he mostly just feels, you know, like, anger and stuff. I just don't think, yeah, he knows how to process emotions properly and stuff… [For me,] Like, most of the time, I thought I could just like, kind of, take it on and deal with it as it comes, kind of thing. So, I guess that's just how I deal with most things. And then it wasn't until much later on that I realised that it was really negatively affecting me, kind of stuff… that it was because of what happened to me… No one put two and two together and worked out our problems were because of what we faced and no one helped us deal with it
(Young man, aged 18-24, #YM4)

- **Reconciliation and healing in relationships with parents and siblings** – although young people had often been hurt or harmed in their families, they still had a fierce loyalty to parents and siblings. They needed help to reconcile with family members they wanted to be re-connected with and opportunities to "start fresh" or heal.

- **Someone to talk to whom young people trust** – having adults and peers whom they trusted who understood their experiences and provided them with emotional support, advocated their needs and were available were essential for many young people.

They advocated for:

- **Peer support:** where they could meet and learn from other young people who had survived periods of violence and separation and could provide emotional support and guidance

I've been through a tough time, but when I signed up for [peer support] I also was, well, my life isn't that bad, until I obviously went to therapy and was, like," well, it could have been better" … So, I went and met with others like me and I could talk about things, deal with them… So, I think, yeah, peer support and it doesn't even have to be peers that have gone through, just more support
(Young woman, aged 25+, #YW7)

- **Programs that they could access independently and without the knowledge of families:** that could provide confidential advice, could champion their needs and be a sounding board as they worked through their challenges.

- **Psychological support and mental health programs** – were advocated for all young people who had unresolved mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder. They also spoke about depression, anxiety and suicidality. Young people felt that psychological support should be offered to all young people who had escaped FDV and who had lived in care.

Ask the questions, don't take no for an answer because that's – I got very good at hiding myself until I met my psychologist who saw right through me, but if someone had asked the questions earlier on and not just taken, "I'm fine," as an answer I think it could have been a lot different… Most young people have PTSD and they don't know it. It should be offered to everyone and they can say "no" rather than assuming that they don't have it until they ask.
(Young man, aged 25+, YM#5)

- **Support with education and employment** – which they often felt would help them be independent, to make up for missed opportunities and to prepare them for adulthood.

I'm not stupid but it's taken me so long to get back into a place where I can actually focus on moving forward because of the amount of damage my schooling did to be able to get anywhere was astronomical… I think that's one thing that I would love to see actually take effect is actually having some consideration of how to navigate the decline in educational prosperity of kids that [have been exposed to violence and whose education has suffered]
(Young man, aged 25+, #YM1)

- **Healthy relationship and parenting education:** that they could use to prepare for and foster good partnerships with boyfriends and girlfriends and children of their own. Young men and women were keen to break the cycle of violence and separation and had hopes for their future children. They needed help to achieve these goals.

Engaging children and young people

When asked how the system could be improved for children and young people – during periods of violence, separation and reunification – most young people argued for greater engagement and participation.

They wanted:

- To be seen, heard, believed and given opportunities to help decide what and how supports are provided to them and their families

- adults in the community to be encouraged to actively ask children and young people if they are OK, especially if they have concerns about them

- to know when concerns about a family were being raised with child protection and be assured that other adults were watching out for them

- to be asked about what they wanted and needed to be safe and for their families to be safe, particularly by services working with their parents or siblings

- to be given choices and feel like they had some influence in what was going on for them and their families

- to play a part in informing the child protection, family support and family violence systems to ensure that they were meeting children and young people's needs and responding to their concerns

Young people want to play an active part in informing how families might be better supported when they experience family and domestic violence. They believed that unless those working with families listened to young people and respected their views, families would continue to be unsafe and experience a lack of emotional safety.

I know when I was going through a lot of [violence], [there was] this mentality of "you're a child, you don't know well enough", and I think that's really damaging... I would recommend they slow down and listen to what these kids want... As a decision maker unless you have specifically been in that situation ... it doesn't matter how much research you do or how many studies you involve yourself with you will never be able to get that first-hand experience ... unless you've been in it for yourself you just – you cannot possibly fathom the fear or the terror or the overwhelmingness of anxiety attacks that sometimes seemingly come out of nowhere....and it is that first-hand experience that qualifies us regardless how young we are to make the decisions that we feel will benefit us and help people in the future to cope with the situations that we didn't have the support for. Slow down and listen to what the people who have experienced it have to say"
(Young man, aged25+, #YM1)

References

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019). *Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: Continuing the national story*. Canberra, AIHW.

2. Noble-Carr, D., T. Moore and M. McArthur (2019). "Children's experiences and needs in relation to domestic and family violence: Findings from a meta-synthesis." *Child & Family Social Work*.

3. Hillis, S. D., J. A. Mercy and J. R. Saul (2017). "The enduring impact of violence against children." *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 22(4): 393-405.

4. Alaggia, R. and M. Donohue (2018). "Take these broken wings and learn to fly: Applying resilience concepts to practice with children and youth exposed to intimate partner violence." *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 88(1): 20-38.

5. Moore, T., F. Buchanan, D. Chung, A. Chong, C. Fernandes, M. Hawkes, J. Meiksans, N. Moulding, R. Martin and D. Schulze (2020). *Fostering safety in families reunifying after violence: Findings from a participatory study with young people and families*. Adelaide, Adelaide: Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia.

6. Moore, T., F. Arney, F. Buchanan, D. Chung, A. Chong, C. Fernandes, M. Hawkes, J. Meiksans, N. Moulding, R. Martin and D. Schulze (2020). *Enhancing safety in work with families affected by family and domestic violence: findings from practitioner focus groups*. Adelaide, Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia.

7. Arai, L., A. Heawood, G. Feder, E. Howarth, H. MacMillan, T. H. Moore, N. Stanley and A. Gregory (2019). "Hope, agency, and the lived experience of violence: A qualitative systematic review of children's perspectives on domestic violence and abuse." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*: 1524838019849582.

8. Horn, S. R., L. E. Miller-Graff, M. M. Galano and S. A. Graham-Bermann (2017). "Posttraumatic stress disorder in children exposed to intimate partner violence: the clinical picture of physiological arousal symptoms." *Child care in practice* 23(1): 90-103.

Contact: Associate Professor Tim Moore

Tim.Moore@unisa.edu.au