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## Child-focused work with families affected by domestic violence: Skills, values and knowledge requirements for social work students

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### Key Messages

- Child-aware approaches to work in the contexts of family and domestic violence (FDV) offer a specific and beneficial framework to social work practice and acknowledge the impacts and effects of FDV on children.
- Being child-led requires drawing from knowledge about child development and FDV and synthesising these in practice.
- Child-centredness in working with families in the context of FDV requires agile and adaptive communication styles and approaches.
- Social work students should be encouraged to reflect on their knowledge and skills.

### What is this resource about?

This paper outlines the skills, values and knowledge required for social work students to work effectively with children in families affected by family and domestic violence (FDV). This paper uses a child-aware lens to guide practice and outlines the core requirements to working empathically and effectively with children aged 0-12 and non-perpetrator family members.

### Who is this resource for?

This resource has been written for social work students and their educators and supervisors. The purpose of this resource is to bridge gaps between FDV knowledge and trauma theory, and knowledge about developmental theories in which childhood is understood. It may be beneficial to students in supervision and organisational settings in which their skills and knowledge are reflected upon and developed.



### Introduction

Family and domestic violence (FDV) is an enduring social problem in Australia and has been defined by the World Health Organisation in the following way:

*Domestic violence refers to acts of violence that occur between people who have, or have had, an intimate relationship. While there is no single definition, the central element of domestic violence is an ongoing pattern of behaviour aimed at controlling a partner through fear, for example by using behaviour which is violent and threatening. In most cases, the violent behaviour is part of a range of tactics to exercise power and control over women and their children, and can be both criminal and non-criminal. Domestic violence includes physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse.*

*Family violence is a broader term that refers to violence between family members, as well as violence between intimate partners. It involves the same sorts of behaviours as described for domestic violence. As with domestic violence, the National Plan recognises that although only some aspects of family violence are criminal offences, any behaviour that causes the victim to live in fear is unacceptable. The term, 'family violence' is the most widely used term to identify the experiences of Indigenous people, because it includes the broad range of marital and kinship relationships in which violence may occur.*

(COAG, 2010, p.2)

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FDV occurs across all socioeconomic, cultural and age groups but overwhelmingly affects women and their children. Given that around 1 in 4 women in Australia are likely to have experienced FDV (Cox 2016) many human service and health organisations will encounter people experiencing FDV. However, workforce capacity to respond appropriately to people experiencing FDV varies. For example, one recent study found that most Australian health practitioners held low levels of confidence in exploring, supporting and referring people in FDV situations (Soh, Grigg et al. 2018).

Historically social workers' knowledge about FDV was limited to FDV-specific services. For example, almost two decades ago there is some evidence that child protection social workers did not have enough knowledge about FDV (Douglas and Walsh 2010) to recognise and respond to domestic violence. It is now recognised that all social workers, regardless of their practice focus, ought to have general knowledge and skills to work with FDV situations (Crabtree-Nelson, Grossman et al. 2016).

Social policy has helped to highlight the need for coordinated approaches to reducing FDV. In 2010 the Australian Government initiated The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022 (2010) in which workforce, systems, evidence and performance are highlighted as focus areas for reducing both FDV as well as sexual violence towards women. Social work, as a profession has formalised the requirement for specific knowledge about FDV in its training programs. In 2018 the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) released the Family Violence Curriculum Best Practice Guide. This guide signals an important step for the profession as it places knowledge about FDV in the context of social work education and practice.

Children's needs in the context of FDV are traditionally viewed through the lens of parenting (see, for example, Austin, Shanahan et al. 2017), without consideration for the challenges faced by mothers who are also FDV survivors (Buchanan, Power et al. 2013). Contemporary approaches to child wellbeing offer an alternative framework, in which children's needs are at the forefront and interventions are shaped by a focus on the 'voice of the child' (O'Reilly and Dolan 2016). In FDV this kind of child-centred social work practice (Barnes 2018) offers a unique opportunity to support and advocate for the needs of children while at the same time recognising the effects FDV has on them.

This paper considers child-aware social work in the context of FDV and asks the following questions:

- What is child-led social work in the context of FDV?
- What skills are required for social workers to work effectively with children in this context?

- What knowledge about FDV can social work students draw from when working in a child-centred manner?
- How can social work students ensure their work in the context of FDV is child-aware?

## How can family and domestic violence affect a child?

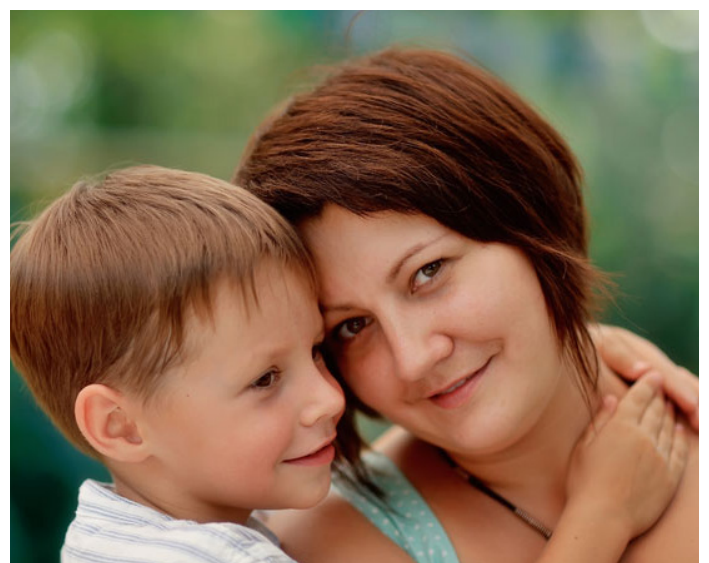
FDV negatively impacts children in many different ways (Callaghan, Alexander et al. 2018) and the effects of FDV on children's wellbeing have been highlighted in multiple scholarly studies (Holt, Buckley et al. 2008, Izaguirre and Calvete 2015). Research shows that:

- children who live with FDV are at risk of other forms of abuse such as sexual, physical and emotional abuse
- FDV can negatively impact on children's emotional, behavioural and social development
- FDV can negatively impact on children's mental health and wellbeing.

Prioritising children's perspectives in the context of FDV means acknowledging the complex and multi-layered effects of FDV on their social, emotional, behavioural and physical development.

Child-centredness refers to being child-focused in work undertaken in the context of FDV. Social work with children and their families that is child-centred:

- prioritises the safety and wellbeing of the child
- sees the world from the child's perspective
- positions the social worker as someone who works alongside the child
- understands the complexities of working with children who want to have relationships with their abusive and non-abusive parents.



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## Values, Knowledge and Theory

Developmental theories are foundational to a child-focused practice in the context of FDV. They can help workers to understand aspects of children's identities and to explore the effects of trauma. Developmental theories are also useful in that they provide an overview of 'normative development' according to age. However, such theories should not be used in a prescriptive way, nor should they be used to 'diagnose' children. Use of developmental and other child-focused concepts such as attachment should be taken alongside an appreciation for cultural, social, familial and gender differences (Walsh and Slettebø 2017).

Developmental theories can assist with understanding a child's social and communicative skills (Ruch, Winter et al. 2017); their behaviour in different settings; their physical and cognitive development as well as their emotional and social development. The task for the social worker in applying developmental theories is to make tentative assessments; consider the child's world and the social, cultural and familial contexts that surround them.

Working with children in the context of FDV requires knowledge about FDV's effects on child development and parenting, and the use of a trauma-informed framework (Tseris 2018). When the worker understands the prevalence and seriousness of FDV, and the climate of fear that perpetrators create through control, violence and abuse, subtle changes in child development can be understood. These changes can then be seen through a lens that notices environmental contexts, not just individual, biological, or pathological contexts of a child. Explanations for changes in child development can be understood as a consequence of trauma on the child. In using knowledge about FDV and its effects on children, social workers use a lens to see children's behaviour differently, allowing them to move beyond diagnosis of the child to the broader context of the environment in which they are living.

Trauma theory acknowledges the effects of abuse on children and trauma-informed social work seeks to focus on the individual while maintaining an environmental, social and cultural focus (Tseris 2018). The effects of trauma can manifest in children in ways that can be challenging, requiring knowledge about FDV and developmental theories as well as the effects of trauma in order to be fully understood. The combination of these three lenses (FDV, development, trauma) allows the social worker to open up broader conversations and assessments of safety and wellbeing of the child, which ought to be at the forefront of any work with children in the context of FDV. Core social work skills such as empathy, adaptive

communication techniques and assessment are also essential when working in this context.

## Conclusion

FDV has serious and long-lasting impacts on children. Social work with children in the context of FDV needs to be informed by specialist knowledge about FDV, developmental theories as well as knowledge about the effects of trauma. The safety and wellbeing of the child is at the centre of social work with children who have experienced FDV and a child-focused lens should shape the social work intervention. Social work students should be encouraged to reflect on and synthesise their knowledge about FDV, child development and the effects of trauma when considering their work with children.

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