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Domestic violence

An important social issue for schools

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Teachers and school communities can have a positive impact on the lives of students who live in homes where domestic violence occurs. By understanding the dynamics involved and the impacts of domestic violence on children and young people, teachers and schools will be better equipped to deal with this important social issue.

“*Any pattern of behaviour that is used to dominate or control another, most commonly by inducing fear, is domestic violence and constitutes abuse*”

Prevalence

Domestic violence is not a new social issue. Studies estimate that 23% of Australian women who are married or live in a de facto relationship have been exposed to domestic violence at some point in the relationship (ABS, 1996). Even more disturbing is that 61% of women who reported violence by a present partner also reported having children in their care (ABS, 1996; Laing, 2000). Internationally, it is estimated that one in three to one in ten families experience domestic violence (Tomison, 2000).

Mistakenly, there is a widespread belief that if a child or young person lives in a household where domestic violence exists, they are not harmed unless physical abuse is extended towards them. This assumption is incorrect and it ignores the devastating effects that can occur when children are exposed to such violence (Laing, 2000; Tomison, 2000).

Domestic violence: What is it really?

Domestic violence does not just include physical assault. In fact, physical assault usually only occurs late in the cycle of violence and in some circumstances partners have never actually physically assaulted their spouse. To understand the impact that domestic violence can have on children, young people and women, in the absence of physical assault, it is important to note that domestic violence is essentially about power and control.

An abuse of power perpetrated mainly (but not always) by men against women in a relationship and after separation. It occurs when one partner attempts physically or psychologically to

dominate and control the other. Domestic violence takes a number of forms. The most commonly acknowledged forms are physical and sexual violence, threats and intimidation, emotional and social abuse and economic deprivation. (Bullen, 2003, p. 25)

This means that domestic violence includes physical violence such as hitting, punching, choking, kicking, inflicting burns or using weapons. However, it can also incorporate being raped, being forced to perform humiliating acts during sex (sexual abuse), having to beg for money for basic necessities, withholding money or assets (economic abuse), limiting a partner's ability to access and spend time with friends and family, constant questioning about where a partner has been (social abuse), belittling and humiliating, threatening violence and intimidating behaviour (psychological abuse). In essence, any pattern of behaviour that is used to dominate and control another, most commonly by inducing fear, is domestic violence and constitutes abuse.

Domestic violence as a gendered crime

It is impossible to understand the impact of domestic violence and ways to combat it unless we acknowledge that this is usually a gendered crime where the majority of perpetrators are men (Bullen, 2003; James, 1996; Tomison, 2000; Weeks, 2000).

Despite its explosive nature, men are often not afraid of women's violence and may mock and laugh at their wives' aggression...Women, however do fear male violence. Apparently, it is clear to many men that they are ultimately in control, even when their wives are violent...While violent women experience themselves as out of control, violent men experience themselves as asserting the ultimate control over their partners. (James, 1996, p. 123)

Thus, domestic violence is not an anger management issue as is often mistakenly believed. Domestic violence is violence that is used by someone who is in control of his or her anger and

uses a pattern of behaviour to extend power over another in an intimate relationship and is more often used by men in this context (James, 1996). For example, a man who shuts every window in the house so that his neighbours do not hear him assaulting his wife, would demonstrate that he is in control of his anger and is deliberately using his physical strength to control his wife's future actions, and thus would be guilty of domestic violence. However, if this same wife hit back at her partner to protect herself or hit back in anger and frustration at her mistreatment, she would not be guilty of perpetrating domestic violence.

Weeks (2000) asserts that domestic violence is a gendered crime due to underlying beliefs in wider society that see men in a position of entitlement. Widespread gender inequality still exists and is often seen as normal or viewed as acceptable. This is evidenced when men are seen as the head of the home and entitled to extend control over other family members (Armstrong, 1986; Ranke-Heinemann, 1991) or when bullying is overlooked when perpetrated by men and boys as it is seen as 'normal' behaviour and as a masculine trait (Mills, 2001).

Christians and domestic violence

Christian families in Christian schools are not immune to experiencing domestic violence or other forms of abuse. We know that domestic violence transcends the boundaries of economic status, religious beliefs and cultural background.

In fact, Christianity can increase the likelihood that women and children will experience violence from a partner, as historically, the church has viewed women and children as subordinate (Armstrong, 1986; Ranke-Heinemann, 1991), and even now, women are not viewed as equal in many of the church structures. Oppressive behaviour towards women is usually justified by Biblical passages such as Ephesians 5:22–24, often with instruction by Paul in verse 25 for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church being forgotten or neglected.

The importance of the nuclear family within western Christian communities means that attitudes towards the marital relationship can see the marital relationship valued above the wellbeing and ultimate safety of women and children. These beliefs can expect women and children to remain in an abusive relationship no matter what the circumstances or personal cost (Livingstone, 2002; Wendt, 2008). Even the more liberal Christian leaders and communities often misunderstand the dynamics of domestic violence; believing only physical violence constitutes abuse and thus gives reason to separate from a spouse. Most underestimate the huge impact

and devastating effects that non-physical forms of domestic violence can have on women, children, young people and even the men who abuse.

Effects of domestic violence on children and young people

The effects of exposure to domestic violence on children and young people are often brought to the forefront at school. Domestic violence can have a range of effects from decreased educational performance and behavioural problems towards teachers and other students, to internalised and self-destructive behaviour (Johnson et al., 2002; Kitzmann et al., 2003; Laing, 2000; Tomison, 2000).

Laing (2000) states that children and young people who live with domestic violence, consistently display a range of behavioural and emotional problems when compared to children who do not live with domestic violence. These include aggression, acting out, antisocial type behaviour, depression and / or anxiety (Humphreys, 2007; Johnson et al., 2002; Laing, 2000; Tomison, 2000). It is important to point out that depression and anxiety are often overlooked in school settings, as they may not present behaviour management problems in the classroom or the playground (Laing, 2000).

Longer-term implications of exposure to domestic violence can be profound. Children learn from the behaviours displayed at home, with exposure to domestic violence being a strong indicator of violence in adolescence and adulthood. Witnessing domestic violence teaches children that violence is an acceptable means of conflict resolution and is part of family relationships (Osofsky, 1995). Furthermore, since perpetrators often avoid punishment or consequences, children may interpret violence as an acceptable way to control or manipulate people (Osofsky, 1995). In addition, witnessing domestic violence as a child increases the likelihood that the child will form adult relationships that are violent. Boys who observe a male parent / caregiver perpetrating domestic violence have an increased likelihood of becoming perpetrators themselves in adulthood.

It is imperative that teachers never underestimate the impact of domestic violence, as outsiders are never able to ascertain the full extent of any given situation. For example, just because a child or young person does not witness the violence being extended towards the mother does not mean that the child or young person does not hear the screams, hear the destruction, see weapons in the home or cognitively understand how these are used. The impact on a child living in an environment where tension exists, where intimidation and control are continually exerted, where isolation is likely and

“Witnessing domestic violence teaches children that violence is an acceptable means of conflict resolution and is part of family relationships”

where the likelihood of other abuse occurring to the child is increased should never be minimised, and should always be taken seriously (Humphreys, 2007; Laing, 2000; Tomison, 2000).

It is important to flag that not all children or young people are affected in the same way and that there is a danger of over-pathologising (Humphreys, 2007). Some children and young people do manage relatively well living in a traumatic environment. The discrepancy is often attributed to differences in severity and contexts within which children and young people live (Humphreys, 2007; Laing, 2000).

Why women don't leave

The reality is that women do leave violent relationships; however, significant barriers make leaving difficult. The biggest barrier is that leaving is often the most dangerous time for a woman and her children (Humphreys, 2007). Humphreys (2007) reports that 76% of homicides related to domestic violence occurred at a time that involved separation. Studies show that the time of separation is a time where violence and sexual assault increase dramatically (Humphreys, 2007).

Other reasons that women stay in violent relationships may include limited access to money or resources that would enable a woman to leave, low self-esteem, perceived dependence due to years of abuse, social stigma, questions about the custody of the children, and feelings of powerlessness (Humphreys, 2007; Laing, 2000).

Laing (2000) suggests that communities need to shift the focus away from 'why a mother does not leave' to, 'why a man uses violence which harms all members of a family' (Laing, 2000, p 22). The underlying belief that women are primarily responsible for the welfare of children and for family difficulties also needs to be challenged (Laing, 2000). This belief actually aids and condones violent behaviour and renders invisible perpetrators of such violence (Laing, 2000; Weeks, 2000).

Recognising signs that a child may be exposed to domestic violence at home

Children respond to domestic violence in different ways, with some appearing relatively unaffected and others displaying a range of psychopathology or adjustment issues (Horner, 2005). Generally, the impact of domestic violence on a child will vary according to the child's developmental level, the frequency and severity of the violence, the availability of the mother or other support and the relationship of the perpetrator to the child (Baker et al., 2002; Horner, 2005; Osofsky, 1995).

Some indicators that a child is experiencing domestic violence may include:

- Frequent or extreme anger for no apparent reason, or anger that does not match the

severity of the situation. Children are rarely angry for no reason; however, their anger may be expressed at a superficial cause;

- Sadness or depression;
- Passivity;
- Avoiding going home, spending extended hours at school or at friends' homes;
- Lack of concentration at school;
- Constant tiredness in the classroom;
- Attempts to intimidate or control other students or teachers (bullying behaviour);
- Physical injuries;
- Changes in behaviour;
- Difficulty focusing on tasks in the classroom;
- Constant worrying over the safety of people they are close to;
- Withdrawal from friends and activities;
- Complaining of vague somatic symptoms such as stomach ache or headache;
- Strong stereotyped beliefs of masculinity (aggressor) and femininity (weak / victim).

(Baker et al., 2002; Horner, 2005; Osofsky, 1995).

Adolescents may display behaviours that reflect their feelings of rage, shame, betrayal and powerlessness. These are often manifested in rebellious 'high risk' behaviours such as:

- High levels of aggression;
- Criminal activities;
- Alcohol and illicit drug abuse;
- Truancy and / or leaving the home;
- Dating violence;
- Suicidal thoughts.

(Baker et al., 2002; Horner, 2005).

It is important to note that these indicators are general and may indicate the student is experiencing other problems such as separation of parents or other types of trauma. Therefore, it is important not to assume what is happening but to either speak with the student or refer them to someone, such as a school counsellor, who may be able to assist.

What should teachers do if they suspect a student is experiencing domestic violence?

Teachers, as primary caregivers, are in a unique position to assist with identifying students who are experiencing domestic violence and in offering appropriate interventions and referrals to services that can minimise the impact of domestic violence on the student (Horner, 2005).

Every context will be different and appropriate action will depend on the signs the teacher notices, the student's age and behaviour, the relationship the teacher has with that student and the particular skills of the teacher. However, if a teacher suspects something is not right for the student, it is generally acceptable to talk to the student and ask what is troubling them. Genuine concern and a safe environment (private space) will make it more likely

“Communities need to shift the focus away from 'why a mother does not leave' to 'why a man uses violence which harms all members of a family'”

a student will disclose abuse (if this is happening for them). Keep in mind that the student may not reveal the situation the first time you speak with them; let them know that if they need to talk in the future, you will listen.

Given the dynamics of domestic violence and the fear that goes with it, it is important that the student feels you are not only a safe person to tell but that you will be able to deal with the information they disclose in a way that is respectful, non-judgemental and that will not put them in danger.

Teachers need to be upfront and explain that there are times when information must be shared with others. Mandatory reporting requirements / obligations vary across States and Territories so it is important that teachers contact their governing body to determine their legal obligations and responsibilities in accordance with each State / Territory's legal requirements. Teachers will also be guided by school policy guidelines.

Finding out that a child is experiencing domestic violence at home can leave teachers feeling an overwhelming need to save the child from the situation. However, it is not the teacher's role to end the violence or conduct any investigations into the allegations.

Supporting the student

Despite not being able to stop the violence, the teacher's role is vital in promoting healing in the student. A willingness to listen to a student's story without judgement can offer a sanctuary where resiliency and personal strength can begin to be reconstructed. One of the most important ways teachers can offer assistance is to provide a safe and supportive place for the student to openly discuss their fears (Kearney, 1999).

Teachers may feel that the school counsellor is best equipped to deal with supporting a student who discloses they are experiencing domestic violence and referring the student to the school counsellor is often a good option. **If a student discloses abuse, the best course of action is to consult a professional who is trained to deal with these situations.**

Kearney (1999) suggests that teachers can support the child by:

- Being aware that students feel they have no power to control the situation. Increasing their sense of control by offering some choices in the classroom can build their sense of security and safety.
- Allowing alternative ways for children to complete work.
- Encouraging cooperation and participation and minimising the use of competition.
- Modelling non-violent and pro-social behaviours in the classroom and pointing

out strategies for problem solving that do not involve violence.

- Rejecting the use of fear or punitive punishments as disciplinary measures.

Below are some suggestions based on my own experience of working with those living in situations of domestic violence or other forms of abuse. (Since each context is different, these suggestions should be used as a guide only.)

- Respect the information the student has given you and do not tell those who do not need to know; however, secrecy on behalf of the teacher does not aid in 'helping' the student. Appropriate 'others' will need to be told / consulted according to your school's policies and procedures and legislative requirements.
- Depending on the student's age and maturity, let them know what you need to do with the information they have given you (eg. mandatory reporting). This shows respect and will ultimately build trust.
- Ask the student what they would like to see happen; however, do not make promises you cannot keep. The student may discover that simply sharing this 'secret' is enough for now.
- Do not feel you have to 'rescue' the student or stop the abuse. Never underestimate the power of a student being able to 'just talk' to someone who does not judge.
- Always re-enforce that violence or abuse is not their fault.
- If you feel comfortable enough, discuss a safety plan with the child or enlist other members of staff, such as a welfare or social worker, to assist you and the student in making the plan.
- Offer to link them in with the school counsellor. If your school does not have one, find out what is available in your community (contact the Department of Community Services).
- Address practical issues, you may be able to arrange a 'tension free' place to study.
- Use your judgement to make allowances regarding extensions for assignments.
- Ensure your school has a zero tolerance to bullying and address bullying at school appropriately. Do not dismiss bullying as 'typical masculine behaviour'.
- **Never approach the parents, particularly the offending parent without consulting a trained professional as this could place your student and the partner in greater danger.**

Domestic violence will be present in the lives of some of the students at your school. Therefore, it is vital that teachers be able to recognise and respond to domestic violence in ways that will assist in the protection of students and enhance their ability to learn and reach their full potential. **TEACH**

“It is important that the student feels you will be able to deal with the information they disclose in a way that is respectful, non-judgemental and that will not put them in danger”

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This article is not intended to provide case specific advice or take the place of professional advice. Readers are advised to consult a qualified professional regarding specific responses to individual cases.

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